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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 14 September 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 14 September 2023*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Mr Speaker:** I wish to inform the House that I have received a letter from the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) informing me of his resignation as Chair of the Defence Committee. I therefore declare the Chair vacant. I will announce the arrangements for the election of a new Chair in due course.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### BUSINESS AND TRADE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Levelling Up

1. **Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of her Department's implementation of policies supporting levelling up.  
[906364]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch):** I warmly welcome the new shadow ministerial team—it is a slimmed-down team from what we have been used to, but I welcome them all. My Department is focused on growing the economy by attracting global investment, promoting exports and creating the right regulatory business environment. Over the past five years we have supported more than 6,000 foreign direct investment projects, creating more than 280,000 new jobs across the UK. Just last week, the Department for Business and Trade supported Stellantis's £100 million investment in an electric vehicle production plant in Ellesmere Port, showing the direct role we play in helping to level up across the regions and nations of the UK.

**Jon Trickett:** Like many hon. Members, during the recess I visited various sites in my constituency, including Langthwaite business park, which is an immensely successful business park with more than 50 businesses now employing almost 2,000 people. It is adjacent to two former pit villages, South Elmsall and South Kirkby, where deprivation is still deeply rooted. The people who live in those villages are not able to take advantage of the jobs created by Wakefield Council, Mohan De Silva and Karen Harrison. What Government programmes has the Secretary of State put in place, or can she put in place, to ensure there is a linkage between areas of deprivation and new jobs?

**Mr Speaker:** I think you need an Adjournment debate.

**Kemi Badenoch:** There is a lot that we are doing, and I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman feels that villages in his constituency still are not able to access much of what we have given. The West Yorkshire devolution deal provided about £1.14 billion of investment and we also had a shared prosperity fund across West Yorkshire. I urge him to speak to his local council, because that is the vehicle through which many of these opportunities will be provided, but if he has a specific business issue that he thinks is affecting those companies and those villages, we are happy to look at it in more detail.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My home city of Manchester was built on export and trade, but, as a result of the Tories' mismanagement of the economy, apathy towards the export industries and neglect of everywhere outside the M25, the value of exports from London is more than three times that of the north-west. Does the Secretary of State honestly believe that she and her colleagues are committed to levelling up the whole of the UK, or will she admit that the Tories do not care about the benefits of trade reaching everyone in the United Kingdom?

**Kemi Badenoch:** I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman. He mentions Manchester; since October 2022 we have invested £2.6 billion into projects across England and agreed landmark devolution deals for Greater Manchester. He should be speaking to the Mayor of Greater Manchester to find out exactly why all that we are doing is not reaching the people in his constituency.

#### Steel Industry

2. **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the steel industry.  
[906365]

**The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I am in constant conversations with specific companies to do with steel, including British Steel in my hon. Friend's constituency, but of course those conversations are often commercially sensitive. I was delighted to speak at the event she hosted in Parliament to celebrate the launch of the Government's updated steel procurement policy note, which will help to make opportunities more visible and maintain a level playing field for UK steel producers. In the financial year 2021-22, relevant public procurers bought around £365 million-worth of UK produced steel. Furthermore, the Government have provided around £730 million in energy costs relief to the sector since 2013.

**Holly Mumby-Croft:** Can my hon. Friend set out specifically what is being done to ensure the continued production of virgin steel in the UK?

**Ms Ghani:** Steel is vital to the UK, but we know that the industry needs to decarbonise for a sustainable future. The Paris agreement made it clear that the sector had to reduce its global emissions by 93% by 2050. The Government are actively engaging with the sector on

how best to achieve that, but decarbonisation pathways for specific sites will be commercial decisions for individual companies. Industrial sectors, including steel companies, can bid into Government funds worth hundreds of millions of pounds to help them go green. As I mentioned, we have done a huge amount to support energy intensive industries.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The UK is the only major steel-producing nation where production is falling, but the Minister and her colleagues have been telling us for months that they cannot guarantee the use of UK-made steel in Government contracts, especially in the military. The thing is that the steel producers say that they can make whatever their customer asks by changing the production line. Will the Minister confirm that the reason we have a problem with steel in this country is the Government's refusal to view it as a strategically important industry? The Conservatives' sticking-plaster politics have failed steelworkers, as we have seen at Port Talbot.

**Ms Ghani:** I fundamentally disagree with the question—well, it was more of a statement. I made it clear when I took on this role that we would assess the level of steel in procurement contracts, and we have put together the steel procurement policy note, which will address how much steel is being procured in our contracts in the UK. We are doing a huge amount to ensure that the different types of steel that are needed are produced. We know how valuable the sector is, which is why we provided support with high energy costs and why we have a decarbonisation budget that the industry can link into. I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman's proposition.

**Mr Speaker:** I call shadow Minister Sarah Jones and welcome her to her new position.

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): In Wales, it is reported that this Government will spend half a billion pounds to make thousands of Port Talbot steelworkers redundant. Head north to Derby to a train assembly plant, where thousands more jobs are under threat because this Government bungled High Speed 2. Head around the UK coastline and the Government have managed to misjudge industry so much that they secured zero offshore wind contracts. That is a UK tour of almighty Conservative incompetence. Labour will harness this country's talent. Will the Minister explain how many jobs the Government are losing us at Tata Steel, how many jobs they are losing us in Derby, how many jobs they are losing us in offshore wind, and why they are so intent on levelling down our great British industries?

**Ms Ghani:** I welcome the hon. Member to her post, but I suggest that leading on stories in the paper is not a good way forward. That is all speculation; we do not comment on commercial decisions. The reality is that there is £730 million in support with energy costs and more than £1 billion of support with decarbonisation. She talks about plans. Well, I am not sure if the Labour party's plan stands for anything because it flip-flops so often. It is not just me who says that; let us reflect on a statement made by a union leader. They said that Labour was not only just an '80s tribute act, but that it tends to sit on a "wobbly fence". Who knows what Labour will say tomorrow after a statement made today?

## Shipbuilding

3. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the shipbuilding sector. [906367]

**The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** My hon. Friend asks a timely question, because this is London International Shipping Week, and I have engaged with the UK Chamber of Shipping and Maritime UK. This week, I was at the International Maritime Organisation, which was hosting an exhibition called "Rewriting women into maritime history", sponsored by the Lloyd's Register Foundation—I mention in particular Nicola Good and Erne Janine, who made me this scarf reflecting on women in maritime. We are doing a huge amount, including launching the shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme to support our shipyards here in the UK.

**Peter Aldous:** I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. The disappointing outcome of last week's contracts for difference auction in respect of offshore wind was a wake-up call that clear strategies are required if we are to retain our position as a global leader in that industry. That includes support for the supply chain, of which service operation vessels are a vital component. Can she confirm that the national shipbuilding strategy will be reviewed to fully take into account this great opportunity?

**Ms Ghani:** We are proud of the UK's reputation as a leader in the offshore wind sector. Together with industry, we have delivered the four largest operational wind farms in the world. The National Shipbuilding Office has done a huge amount of work in that area and will do even more with the new shipbuilding guarantee scheme. I think my hon. Friend's other question relates to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. This is London International Shipping Week, and our offshore wind farms and all our vessels are being promoted heavily.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): May I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that the three fleet solid support vessels for the Royal Navy are massive—equivalent to two aircraft carriers? Has she discussed with the Ministry of Defence why they will be built mostly in Spanish shipyards, rather than in British shipyards by British workers to sustain our shipbuilding industry? Does she know of any other shipbuilding country that behaves like this?

**Ms Ghani:** I have indeed discussed it with the Ministry of Defence and the National Shipbuilding Office. We want to make sure not only that the contracts for the work are managed here in the UK, but that we are using UK steel.

## International Investment in Northern Ireland

4. **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase international investment in Northern Ireland. [906368]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch):** Just yesterday I was in Belfast, where my Department delivered the Northern Ireland investment

summit in partnership with the Northern Ireland Office and Invest Northern Ireland. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Secretaries of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and for Northern Ireland for their support in making it a success. Five hundred delegates, including investors from 24 countries around the world, attended to see at first hand the unique opportunities for inward investment in Northern Ireland across a range of sectors, including life sciences and advanced manufacturing.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to creating an investment zone that covers the whole of Northern Ireland to bring much needed investment to that much loved part of the United Kingdom?

**Kemi Badenoch:** It is a very interesting idea. Investment zone policy is owned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, so I will raise it with the Secretary of State there and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Officials from the UK Government and the Northern Ireland civil service continue to work closely to explore developing investment zone policy in the country. The lack of a functioning Executive there has, of course, limited the scope and nature of engagement on investment zones. If the Executive is restored, we will work together to progress an investment zone at pace, and if it is not formed, we will set out different plans in due course.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Secretary of State and the Government for the investment conference they held in Belfast over the last two days. It clearly shows a commitment to Northern Ireland, and I am very pleased to see that. When it comes to international investment, we are happy to see in Northern Ireland that Harland & Wolff, which has specialised in ship repair and shipbuilding for some years, has recruited almost 1,000 people in the last few months. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the relevant Department back home to ensure that Northern Ireland can play its part in the UK shipbuilding industry and therefore benefit from that investment?

**Kemi Badenoch:** The hon. Gentleman is quite right: this is an area where Northern Ireland has a comparative advantage. As we hosted the summit, we all looked out on the docks, and we could see that shipbuilding is integral to the country. UK Export Finance is supporting many of the companies that build ships and want to export this magnificent UK product all across the world. My hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Economic Security spoke about the UK shipbuilding guarantee. We have been talking about this all week. Maritime investment is key, and if the hon. Gentleman would like further details on what we are doing that has an impact on his constituency, we can provide him with that information.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome the shadow Minister to her new position.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Business investment is lower in the UK than in any other G7 country and we rank 27th out of 30 OECD countries, ahead of only Poland, Luxembourg and Greece. More than half a trillion pounds-worth of

under-investment by Government and business has left our economy trapped in a growth doom loop. What is the Secretary of State doing to undo this damage?

**Kemi Badenoch:** What the hon. Lady did not say is that business investment is increasing at a faster rate than in other countries. She is right that investment has been lower here, but that is why the Chancellor brought in policies such as full expensing to tackle this issue. She also did not mention the fact that we are the top destination for investment across financial services and many other areas. The UK is actually doing very well when it comes to inward investment, and we will continue to create policies that ensure we stay at the top of the pack.

### Regulatory Reform

5. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What recent progress she has made on regulatory reform. [906371]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** My Department is making it easier to do business every single day. Our smarter regulation programme—which includes implementation of the reforms recommended in the report by the taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform, co-authored by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers)—is reducing regulatory burdens for business and reducing costs for consumers. We have announced reforms to employment law, wine regulation and product safety regulations, and further reforms will be announced soon.

**Theresa Villiers:** I thank the Minister for his answer, but can we have more urgency across Departments on regulatory reform? Using our Brexit freedoms to modernise our regulation is a key way to grow the economy and raise living standards, so can we see more progress on reforming regulation in areas such as personal data, clinical trials, agri-tech and satellites?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet is absolutely right to push us on this issue. We are working across Government to implement reforms. So far, we have delivered 10 of the 69 recommendations identified in the TIGRR report, in areas such as offshore wind and reforms to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Delivery of a further 49 is ongoing, in high-profile areas such as artificial intelligence reform, easing clinical trials, pensions, the ability to invest in venture capital, the General Data Protection Regulation and the seed enterprise investment scheme, all of which is saving businesses billions of pounds. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will shortly write to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet to confirm all those points.

### Business Exports

6. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support business exports. [906372]

8. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support business exports. [906374]

12. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support business exports. [906380]

**The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Businesses are at the heart of the Government's export strategy, "Made in the UK, Sold to the World", and of our shared ambition to reach £1 trillion in annual exports by 2030. In the past year, the UK has become the fifth largest exporter of goods and services in the world. Just last week, I personally led a delegation of 20 businesses to the Three Seas summit in Romania, connecting with over 1,500 representatives to help secure contracts, work and export opportunities in the region's 13 member states.

**Andrew Selous:** In my constituency, companies such as EyeOL, Lindal Valve, Peli BioThermal, Friction and Signature Flatbreads all export globally, along with 198 smaller businesses that export through Amazon, yet apparently only 10% of companies export. What more can we do to get businesses to export, not just to Europe but globally? Apparently, businesses that export pay higher wages, so this is part of levelling up, too.

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for his businesses and helping them to export. He is absolutely right that free trade agreements and memorandums of understanding are opening up new markets for us, but of course we want to make sure that everyone makes the most of those opportunities. That is why we are ensuring that UK exporters have the skills they need through our innovative export academy; the information they need to capitalise on new deals through the FTA utilisation strategy; the advice they need through the export support service; and the financial backing they need through UK Export Finance. My hon. Friend also made the very powerful point that companies that export pay higher wages.

**Virginia Crosbie:** Anglesey's freeport is a fantastic opportunity to boost the economic prosperity of my constituency of Ynys Môn. Working with the Institute of Export and International Trade, Bangor University and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, our Anglesey freeport is set to create the first Welsh trade centre of excellence. Does the Minister agree that that trade centre is central to local people having the skills to take advantage of the high-skill, high-wage employment opportunities that the freeport will deliver, and that it will be the start of Anglesey's economic renaissance?

**Ms Ghani:** I think we can all agree that my hon. Friend has campaigned powerfully to secure that freeport and the opportunities it will create for many of her constituents. Good news is already coming in, with Westinghouse saying that it will headquarter there, creating jobs and opportunities. Of course, we are looking forward to getting more details and ensuring that the trade centre for excellence is located there too, which will provide another win for my hon. Friend.

**Andrew Jones:** I ran export programmes in my business career before coming to this place, and I always talk to the companies I meet about whether they are exporting and what more can be done.

**Ms Ghani** *rose*—

**Andrew Jones:** Steady—I haven't asked my question yet! The message from that experience is that perceived barriers can deter activity—perhaps perceived risk or complexity. What more can be done to link potential exporters with mentors who can share their experience, overcome those perceptions and get more companies exporting?

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend has a huge amount of experience in this area, and I am very grateful for all the advice he provides. He makes a very good point. That is why our campaign, "Made in the UK, Sold to the World", uses localised marketing for small businesses across the country to help them make the best of their abilities. To my hon. Friend's point, we have a growing cohort of over 360 successful champions across the UK—entrepreneurs and business leaders who can share their experience and inspire new firms to become exporters.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): New analysis from the House of Commons Library that I am publishing today shows that since 2010 our trade with dictatorships has grown by over £135 billion and that it is growing twice as fast as our trade with the free world. Trade dependence on dictatorships is a risk, so when will the Minister set out a plan to define and de-risk our critical supply chains and begin growing our trade with nations that are free?

**Ms Ghani:** I am responsible for supply chains and critical minerals too; several months ago, I refreshed our critical minerals strategy. We are looking at how we ensure that we are building resilience and ensuring that our supply chains are stable.

I am also working with a number of industry representatives to put in place an import supply chain strategy as well. We know that there are kinks in supply chains and that there are issues of economic coercion around the world. We want to ensure that we have stable supply chains to protect our advanced manufacturing sector. [*Interruption.*] From a sedentary position, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State points out that I am also the sanctions Minister. We are ensuring that that work is now co-ordinated, not only across Whitehall but internationally.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Those of us on the Business and Trade Committee are very much aware of the sterling work done by officials in furtherance of the trade deal with India. However, in the revelation at the G20 summit of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment—the counter to China's belt and road project through a US-backed trade corridor to speed up links between Europe, the middle east and India—there was no mention of the UK. Did our Government decline to be involved or were we not invited?

**Ms Ghani:** I was in front of the Select Committee; that session would have been afterwards. I have just been informed that the Prime Minister is very much focused on securing a trade deal and on the other details that the hon. Gentleman raised. Because it is a Select Committee issue, I will make sure that he gets all the details in writing.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): During the recess, I visited Heathcoat Fabrics, an innovative export business in Tiverton; its achievements include selling to NASA a device that helped land the Mars rover on the surface of Mars. Earlier this year, HMRC rejected Heathcoat's research and development claim without so much as a meeting. Will the Minister talk with colleagues at the Treasury to establish why Heathcoat Fabrics and other innovative export businesses are having R&D claims rejected this year?

**Ms Ghani:** I say simply that yes, I will.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the shadow Minister.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): According to the International Monetary Fund, British exports to France and Germany since 2019 are down—by 14% to France and 17% to Germany. US exports to both are up by 20%; Canada's are up by 23% and Italy's are up by 29%. Ministers will not back an industrial strategy, have cut funding to get businesses to trade shows and will not negotiate a veterinary agreement. Why does this Minister think that everyone else has got so much better recently at selling things to our nearest neighbours?

**Ms Ghani:** Members choose which numbers they want to throw out, but those do not necessarily reflect reality. I thought it was fantastic that we are now the eighth largest manufacturer in the world; I believe that we leap-frogged France—leap-frogging the French is always good to get on the record.

Actually, exports are most definitely up. In the 12 months to June 2023, UK exports rose by £139 billion, an increase of 8% once adjusted for inflation. In the same period, goods exports reached £428 billion, an 11% increase when adjusted for inflation. Perhaps we should reflect on the opportunities for all the businesses in our constituencies.

#### Trade Negotiations: Human Rights

7. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): What recent discussions she has had with (a) NGOs and (b) charities on the inclusion of human rights considerations in trade negotiations. [906373]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** The Government are committed to universal human rights, the rule of law, free speech and fairness. Those values guide all aspects of our international policy, including our approach to trade.

**Kenny MacAskill:** As trade talks continue with many countries that have deplorable human rights records and as discussions continue with India, will the Minister ensure that we receive binding commitments on human rights—particularly in relation to labour practices—rather than simply warm words, and that discussions continue with NGOs, which are well placed, and often better placed than the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, on what is going on?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The UK will continue to show global leadership in encouraging all states to uphold international human

rights obligations and to hold those who violate or abuse human rights to account. The UK has successfully included labour, environment and gender provisions in the free trade agreements that we have signed—with Australia and New Zealand, for example. Those both contained dedicated chapters on trade, gender equality, labour and the environment. They uphold human rights but, crucially, also level the playing field for our UK businesses.

#### Trade Policies: Cost of Food

9. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the impact of her trade policies on the cost of food. [906376]

**The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Food prices are driven by many pressures, including the global economic climate. We recognise the important role that trade can play in improving food security through diversification of supply chains. Our programme of free trade agreements is securing access to global supply chains, removing barriers and lowering costs for traders. Furthermore, in 2022, 84% of agricultural and food imports entered the UK tariff-free. By delivering trade deals and working with international partners, we are ensuring that British consumers have access to good-quality and good-value food.

**Patrick Grady:** Will the Minister explain how the Government's plans for a £43 inspection fee on each consignment of food imported from the European Union represent barrier-free trade? Can she tell small food retailers, restaurants and their customers in Glasgow North when or whether they will have to pay this Brexit tax and the higher prices it will lead to? Can she also remind the House whether higher food prices as a result of Brexit were part of the Leave campaign prospectus?

**Ms Ghani:** I know the hon. Member wants to put all these anxieties on Brexit and forget about all the opportunities we are securing with trade agreements around the world. The issue he raises fundamentally sits at the doorstep of the Cabinet Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and we are working very closely with them to resolve it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): As if the future stoking of inflation through extra Brexit red tape was not bad enough, businesses are already having to cope with uncertainty, the lack of a level playing field and the threat to our own food safety and security through the failure to introduce checks of our own. Given that Ministers were saying as recently as April that those checks will begin on 31 March, can the Minister explain how businesses are expected to get to grips with all this turmoil in Government policy given their tendency to keep kicking the can down the road over border checks?

**Ms Ghani:** Food inflation is a global issue: it is not a problem just here in the UK. Many factors influence food prices globally, notably energy costs. Global wholesale food prices have been falling since March and sometimes

that can take time to reach consumers. In July, UK food inflation was just over 14%, down from 17%. The hon. Gentleman did not specify which issue he was touching on, but if it was to do with sanitary and phytosanitary controls for goods from the EU, that will be introduced and in place by 31 January 2024.

**Richard Thomson:** The Government could stop making existing global problems even worse when they apply to the UK—I was following up on the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) about the cost of checks on imported food—but the only thing worse than bad border checks is no border checks at all. We are no longer imposing SPS checks on food coming in from the EU. Is the Minister proud that, under the guise of taking back control, she is part of a Government who have given away control instead?

**Ms Ghani:** I referenced in my previous response the SPS controls; they were not in place when we were in the EU so I am not sure exactly what the hon. Gentleman's anxiety is.

#### Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

10. **John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): What plans she has for accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. [906377]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch):** I signed the UK's accession protocol to the CPTPP in New Zealand in July. We are now taking the necessary steps to ratify our accession agreement at the earliest opportunity. We expect it to enter into force in the second half of next year.

**John McDonnell:** I thank the Secretary of State for her response. The CPTPP contains investor-state dispute settlement provisions which allow corporations, as she knows, to sue national Governments through a largely secretive parallel legal system if they consider that Government policies threaten their future profits. Of the new agreement member states, Canadian countries have used the ISDS particularly aggressively, bringing 65 cases, the majority of which have been brought by mining and fossil fuel firms against the energy and environmental policies of various Governments. Will the Government consider negotiating a side letter with Canada, as they already have with New Zealand and Australia, to disapply the ISDS provisions in order to ensure the UK Government's right to regulate is not constrained by powerful investors and corporations?

**Kemi Badenoch:** We have passed the stage where we will be making any changes; we are now trying to ratify the protocol. But the right hon. Gentleman should be reassured: the Government have always been clear that when we negotiate investment protection we do so in a way that does not hinder our right to regulate in the public interest. The UK already has investment agreements containing ISDS provisions with seven of the 11 CPTPP countries and we have never received a successful claim from any investors of CPTPP countries, or in fact investors of any other country with which we have ISDS commitments.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress made with CPTPP. Can she outline what plans the Department has to make UK companies aware of the opportunities that the agreement opens up for them?

**Kemi Badenoch:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, because most of the time, people ask me what CPTPP stands for, let alone what it is and how they can use it—[*Interruption.*] Well, not my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). We would like to make sure that people are aware of it, so they can utilise this free trade agreement as soon as it is on our statute book and ratified across the 11 countries. That is something that our export commission and support service in the Department for Business and Trade will be carrying out, and we will also be supporting MPs in their constituencies during International Trade Week to highlight opportunities that come from all our free trade agreements.

#### Business Exports: US

11. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support business exports to the US. [906378]

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch):** [*Interruption.*] Pardon me for one second; there is a technical failure. The US is our largest trading partner, with trade reaching more than £290 billion. We have already succeeded in agreeing a solution to the section 232 tariffs on UK steel and aluminium and removed the long-standing US ban on UK lamb. In fact, just yesterday, I was speaking to President Biden's special envoy Joe Kennedy about how we can increase trade and investment in Northern Ireland. We also have an SME dialogue next month between our two countries, supporting UK and US businesses to find export opportunities in each other's markets.

**Michael Fabricant:** That is really good news, actually. In other good news, I learned this morning that Britain has overtaken France as a manufacturing country. In order to take full advantage of that, how can we use the nine trade representatives in the United States at our embassy and our consulates even more to encourage bilateral trade?

**Kemi Badenoch:** My hon. Friend is right. We have trade ambassadors and trade envoys working to ensure that we are fully utilising the opportunities that exist across our relationship with the US. In fact, our envoy to the US has been helping and supporting with a memorandum of understanding with Florida, which we are hoping to conclude shortly. If there are specific things he thinks we can do to assist, I would be happy to meet him and organise even more engagement that will help facilitate UK-US trade.

#### Trade: Europe

13. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase trade with European countries. [906381]

**The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Europe remains a vital destination for British exports. UK businesses exported more than



£416 billion in the year to March 2023, up 24% in current prices on the previous year. We are engaging extensively with key European partners. This weekend, my right hon. Friend the Trade Secretary will attend the annual UK-Italy bilateral conference to advance the landmark ministerial dialogue on export and investment promotion launched in February, the first agreed between the UK and any EU country.

**Jeff Smith:** Here is an issue that could be discussed at that meeting: the youth group travel sector is worth £28 billion to the UK economy, but that two-way trade has collapsed since Brexit. The Prime Minister made a vague commitment in March that there would be an agreement for French school groups to visit the UK. We have heard no more details, and anyway we need a wider agreement to include other countries. When will the Government sort out this problem?

**Ms Ghani:** I think this matter sits not just with our Department, but with the Department for Education. If the hon. Gentleman will allow, I will write to him formally and make sure he gets an update on this issue.

### Hospitality Sector: Scotland

14. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Whether she has had recent discussions with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on support for Scotland's hospitality sector. [906384]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** As the hon. Member will be aware, hospitality support is devolved. We continue to provide energy support via the energy bills discount scheme, benefiting hospitality businesses across the UK. I would be happy to meet her and any of her colleagues to see how we can help hospitality businesses across the whole UK.

**Deidre Brock:** That is excellent to hear, because the hospitality sector plays a crucial role in Scotland's economy, but it has consistently been let down by the UK Government, who repeatedly fail to support the industry with the unique challenges it faces. Businesses across Scotland are grappling with inflationary pressures, labour and skill shortages and the ever-increasing complexity of trading rules with 27 countries we once traded with freely. Why will the Minister not accept that Brexit lies at the heart of these problems?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** If the hon. Lady looks again, she will find that the Scottish Government lie at the heart of these problems. In England, all eligible businesses can get 75% relief on their rates, subject to a cap of £110,000, while in Scotland, rates relief is available only to small businesses and could be as low as between 25% and 0% for individual properties with rateable values from £15,000. There is far more support available for English businesses than for Scottish businesses. I think she should go back and look again at the facts.

### Courier Services: Rural Areas

15. **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Whether she has had discussions with courier services on deliveries to isolated rural areas. [906385]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):** I appreciate the hon. Member's interest in ensuring a fair deal for his constituents. The Government's universal service obligation on Royal Mail guarantees delivery of parcels at uniform rates throughout the UK, without any geographical restrictions. Where other courier businesses decide to serve should be a commercial decision for them.

**Jonathan Edwards:** A constituent who visited my surgery recently complained that one courier service in particular would not deliver to his isolated rural property. The choice of courier is, of course, currently a matter for retailers. Do the Government agree, though, that there is a case for saying that large retailers could offer the consumer the choice of which courier service should be used? That would empower consumers and hopefully improve performance via competition.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Member raises a very important point. Competition plays a role in this, of course. It is absolutely right that retail business should look at this and try to get the lowest cost for their customers in terms of courier charges. It is, as he acknowledges, a commercial decision for individual retailers, but I absolutely applaud the points he raises. These businesses should be aware of those costs, because they can add significantly to the costs of the products they are selling.

### Topical Questions

T1. [906388] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch):** The Windows update is now complete at the Dispatch Box, Mr Speaker!

As Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my priority is to support inward investment into all regions and nations of the UK. This week the Department for Business and Trade, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Office and Invest Northern Ireland, delivered the investment summit, which I referred to earlier. This momentous event showcased to more than 200 international investors the wealth of opportunities and talent that exist across the breadth of Northern Ireland. A young and talented workforce, competitive operating costs and unparalleled access to global economies make it an exceptional place to grow a successful business. I met representatives from US-owned aerospace manufacturer Spirit and several financial services companies that have established a base there. From Derry/Londonderry-based tech firms to Belfast budding creative companies, we boast a thriving ecosystem of world-class businesses across numerous sectors.

**Chi Onwurah:** This weekend, like most weekends, I will visit Wilko in Newcastle city centre. Should I explain to the fantastic staff there and their appreciative customers that mass redundancies and empty shopfronts is what the Conservatives mean by levelling up?

**Kemi Badenoch:** We are all very sad that a well-known business such as Wilko, with a strong presence on many high streets across our constituencies, has had to enter administration, and my thoughts are with employees

who have been made redundant. Our Department has been not just supporting the business but discussing the best way forward with unions. We have been supporting by helping to find bidders. The fact is that sometimes these things do happen. It is not a reflection of the Government. In fact, making sure that people have somewhere to go to is how this Government are providing support.

T2. [906389] **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Do Ministers agree that delegates to the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, which was set up under the trade and co-operation agreement with the EU, should be there to promote Britain's interests overseas, and that those who do not want to do so and who simply want to be apologists for Brexit and to act against the UK's interests should leave the PPA?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake)**: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. The Parliamentary Partnership Assembly created under the trade and co-operation agreement is a parliamentary body independent of Government. The Government value its work and its role supporting a mature and constructive relationship with the EU, rooted in shared values and delivering on shared interests. She is right that we should look forward, not backwards.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The loss of Wilko is a significant blow to the nation's high streets. However, more concerning is that no rescue has proved possible because several bidders have said that town centre retail is no longer a viable business model. In the light of that, do the Government really believe that their current policy environment is sufficient for British high streets to thrive?

**Kevin Hollinrake**: We are very concerned for the families affected by Wilko's demise. The world of retail is a very competitive marketplace. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's premise that the high street is dead—not at all. It is reshaping itself, and while it does so we will help it, such as with the £13.6 billion of rates relief over the next five years.

**Jonathan Reynolds**: Ministers' answers do not match the scale of the problem; 12,500 Wilko workers alone are at risk of redundancy. Labour's plans for the high street are about reforming business rates, tackling late payment, cracking down on antisocial behaviour and stopping premises being left empty, with councils having more powers. The problem demands a response from Ministers. Based on their answers today, this Government have simply given up on the British high street.

**Kevin Hollinrake**: That is complete nonsense. This week, I met Helen Dickenson from the Retail Sector Council to discuss this matter closely. There are certain situations in certain companies of course. I guard the hon. Gentleman against political opportunism on the back of those 12,500 jobs, many of which have been picked up by other retailers such as Poundland in rescues of stores. On his point about business rates, which I hear time and again, all the Labour party has

done is say that it will cancel £22 billion of business rates, without saying how it will replace those taxation receipts. Where is the money coming from?

T4. [906391] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have both been in India recently and had the opportunity to negotiate further on the wonderful trade deal that we wish to do. Her predecessor but one or two promised a trade deal with India by Diwali. Of course, they did not mention which year. Diwali this year is later than normal; what confidence does she have that we will have it in place by Diwali this year?

**Mr Speaker**: With a question that long, we will be celebrating the next one.

**Kemi Badenoch**: My hon. Friend is keen for a deal by Diwali, but as the Prime Minister and I have been at pains to say, it is about the deal, not the day. We are working as much as we can to get a deal, but we will not do so by sacrificing British interests. The deal has to work for both the UK and India. I met the Indian Commerce and Finance Ministers to ensure that we create a mutually beneficial deal.

T3. [906390] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Recent figures show that small businesses in the UK are owed more than £32 billion in late payments. When coupled with a 40% rise in energy costs and other inflationary pressures that I mentioned before, that is making running small businesses in my constituency impossible. On Tuesday, the EU set out its SME relief package, which will help to tackle the problem. What is the Minister doing to combat late payments for SMEs?

**Kevin Hollinrake**: The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is why we launched a payment and cash flow review earlier this year, which is due to report very shortly. We are ambitious to make sure that small businesses get paid more quickly through putting more pressure on larger companies, the results of which will be announced very shortly.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): In August, I was lucky to be invited to the 70th anniversary of Caterpillar being founded in my constituency. It was the first place outside the US it set up a base in, and it now employs 1,300 people, making things such as the electric backhoe loader. Will my hon. Friend congratulate Caterpillar on its investment here, from where it exports across the world? Would she like to come and see exactly what it does in Bosworth?

**The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: I join my hon. Friend, a great champion of Bosworth, in congratulating Caterpillar on 70 years and 1,300 employees. That is fantastic. I look forward to going along and having a go on the electric diggers.

T5. [906392] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): The loss of Wilko is devastating, in particular for the thousands of workers who will lose their livelihoods. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she will seek answers from Wilko management about why clear warnings were ignored and the business was driven into the ground, at the same time that shareholders collected

hundreds of millions in dividends? Will she meet me and the GMB trade union to assure us that those basic failures will not be repeated?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Member raises an important point. There is certainly, as part of the administration process, an obligation on the administrators to look at the circumstances that led to the demise of that company and report to the Insolvency Service. I am sure that she, like I, will be very interested in the outcome of that investigation.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for events, can I highlight the huge benefits the sector brings us in promoting trade, exports and inward investment? Will the Department do more to promote the UK worldwide as a great place to bring international events, business meetings and conferences?

**Kemi Badenoch:** My right hon. Friend raises a good point. The events industry is often overlooked, yet it is a great export opportunity. Those are some of the things I am going to raise with the Board of Trade, which is meeting next week. It is about promoting the best of British internationally. Events is one of the areas we can take a closer look at.

T6. [906393] **Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Airdrie and Shotts is home to some fantastic local businesses. Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting Christie's bakery and sampling some of its delicious domino cake. I also met Angela from Gin Blossoms, a florist on Alexander Street. Small businesses across Scotland play a vital role in the local economy, yet many are feeling the brunt of the rise in prices of raw materials caused by increasing import-export costs. To be frank, this is another direct impact of Brexit that Scotland did not vote for. Can the Minister outline how the UK Government will compensate businesses for the damaging losses that Brexit continues to cause?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Member raises an important point about the cost of living impact on businesses. These are global issues, not domestic issues, and she should be clear on that with her businesses. As I said in response to the question from her hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), the Scottish Government might look at increasing the generosity of the business rates relief scheme, as the rest of the UK has.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): In the period leading up to 2021, sector deals were a very effective means of boosting productivity, innovation and skills in such sectors as aerospace, AI and offshore wind. What plans are there to review, revitalise and extend those effective public-private sector partnerships?

**Kemi Badenoch:** My hon. Friend raises a good point. Those sectors are critical for the UK economy. While we did have plans around sector deals, I would focus on the Chancellor's five sectors that he thinks will drive growth in the UK. I am happy to write to my hon. Friend specifically about what impact those sectors will have in his constituency.

T7. [906395] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): We know that phoenixing, unpaid-for services rendered, puts a burden on legitimate SMEs, but it also puts a burden on the taxpayer through unpaid taxes. That is acutely felt by all hard-pressed local authorities which have significant unrecoverable debt owed. Given that the Minister did not accept my amendment to the Economic Crime and Transparency Bill, can he explain what the Government are actually doing to prevent this practice?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I am happy to engage with the hon. Member. I missed the earliest part of his question, but we are providing an awful lot of support for small businesses in various ways. I cannot remember his amendment to the Bill, but I am happy to engage with him to see what we can do to help.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an update on our proposals for a carbon border adjustment mechanism?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The Treasury published a consultation in March on a range of measures to mitigate carbon leakage. Potential policies include a carbon adjustment mechanism on managing product standards. I am sure it will report shortly.

T8. [906396] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Yesterday, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on the all-party parliamentary group on music for the launch of UK Music's impressive "Manifesto for Music". The opportunities and risks of AI are a key issue for the industry. Will the Government commit to musicians having a voice and a place at the table for the AI summit in November?

**Kemi Badenoch:** That is certainly something we can look to do. There are many concerns about what will happen to copyright and intellectual property once AI continues to advance in this area. The hon. Member raises an important point. If he writes to me specifically, I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology gets to see that so we can incorporate it.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I notice, by the way, that the Americans refer to it as the trans-Pacific partnership, which I think is actually a lot shorter and better than what we call it. Have there been any discussions at all with the United States Administration to ask whether they might eventually rejoin the partnership?

**Kemi Badenoch:** My hon. Friend is right. It used to be called the TPP, and it was the Canadians who added the "comprehensive and progressive" to make it quite a mouthful. The question of what the US wants to do on trade deals comes up time and again. The US has said that it will not sign any free trade agreements even though it was initially considering the TPP. That is why the announcement of the Atlantic declaration by the Prime Minister and President Biden is key. That is our new vehicle to form a trade partnership, and my Department is working actively across Government and with our counterparts in the US to make sure that that delivers for the UK.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Many small businesses, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, still rely on high street banking. Earlier this month, the last bank in Denton town centre—the Halifax—closed. It was not just the last one in Denton but the last one in the Denton and Reddish parliamentary constituency, leaving small businesses without access to high street banking. It is not good enough, is it?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and we urge banks to listen to their customers about keeping their doors open. Of course, we have the banking framework relationship with the post office network, which provides deposit and cash facilities for small businesses on high streets in Denton and other parts of the country. We are determined to make that relationship more generous to the Post Office to ensure the sustainability of the post office network.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Over the recess, I had the pleasure of visiting the historic Harland & Wolff shipyard in north Devon, where we talked about the potential for UK shipbuilding jobs linked to the offshore renewables sector. Given last week's disappointing auction round, to put it mildly, what can the Minister say to convince the shipbuilding industry that there is a future for it in making those service vessels?

**Ms Ghani:** I was with Harland & Wolff just last night for London International Shipping Week, and the firm is really excited about the shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme, which provides Government-backed loans of up to £500 million to ensure that shipbuilding continues to thrive in the UK. That is a product for which the industry has been asking for many years, and we have been able to deliver it this year.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Ministers have spent the past hour or so telling us, in the face of overwhelmingly contrary evidence, that Brexit is just the most wonderfullest thing ever to have happened in the history of the entire universe. Will the Secretary of State level up with us for a minute and tell us whether there is anything at all about Brexit that she finds regrettable, disappointing or frustrating?

**Kemi Badenoch:** The hon. Gentleman is right—there is one thing that I find regrettable, and it is the fact that he continues to bang on and on about this even after the rest of the world has moved on post the referendum. The fact is that we have left the EU and we are not going back into it—certainly not under the terms that would require us to do so. He should be focusing on the benefits of Brexit, such as having more control over our laws, our borders and our money, as well as being able to deregulate, including through our smarter

regulation programme. If he looked at that, there might be opportunities he could deliver for the people of Scotland.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): As the UK automotive industry wrestles with the looming increase in the rules of origin thresholds, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has just announced a probe into the flood of cheaper Chinese electric cars coming into the market. Although there has undoubtedly been much for the UK to welcome, with announcements from Jaguar Land Rover and BMW, what additional measures are the Government taking to ameliorate the impact of cheaper and heavily subsidised Chinese imports?

**Kemi Badenoch:** That is an excellent question, because it raises something fundamental. The transition to net zero will change the nature of the UK supply chain and, as I said earlier this week, China poses a systemic challenge here. The path to net zero creates a risk of even greater reliance on China, especially when it comes to the battery manufacturing needed for zero emission vehicles. We cannot be naive about that. That is why I am working hard to ensure not only that business competitiveness is at the heart of our transition, but that British national interests come first. We cannot depend on a single country. We must protect our national security, so we are working with like-minded allies. My hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Economic Security has spoken about our critical minerals strategy and we are working to diversify and build those supply chains. That is what the Atlantic declaration, which I mentioned earlier, is also about. We are very aware of this point, but I think it is important to reinforce it.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for the encouraging positivity of her answers—[*Interruption.*] At least, most of us are encouraged.

Great Britain is Northern Ireland's main export market for agricultural goods, accounting for some 64.1% of all exports. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs back in Northern Ireland to ensure consistent, free-flowing agri-trade, given the complications caused by the Northern Ireland protocol?

**Kemi Badenoch:** The hon. Gentleman is right. The first thing we want to see is the restoration of the Executive. When I was in Belfast this week, I spoke to Members of the Legislative Assembly from across the parties, and this is something they repeatedly raise. Businesses are telling us that the Windsor framework is helping, and we are working closely with the ones that still have issues. Such discussions facilitate business conversations and encourage the restoration of the Executive, which would help to drive the changes the hon. Gentleman wants to see.

## Libya Floods

10.30 am

**Ms Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the floods in Libya.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley)**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue, which I know is a source of concern across the House. It is important that we discuss it today.

The situation is very concerning, and I send sincere condolences on behalf of the Government to the people of Libya. I am sure that is true for everyone in the House. On Wednesday, eastern Administration officials reported that the death toll had risen to at least 5,300, and newspaper reports this morning suggest the number could reach 20,000.

Storm Daniel hit Libya on Sunday 10 September after causing floods and chaos in Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, and then, early on Monday morning, two dams burst, which we know caused major flooding that submerged parts of the city and wiped out entire neighbourhoods. The attempt to recover the situation has been made worse by a lack of road access and by communication channels being down. We stand ready to help as best we can.

The UK has committed to supporting Libya following these devastating floods, and yesterday the Foreign Secretary announced an initial package worth up to £1 million to provide life-saving assistance to meet the immediate needs of those most affected by the floods. The UN central emergency response fund, to which the UK is the third largest donor, has announced that it will deliver \$10 million of support to Libya. We are also working with trusted partners on the ground to identify the most urgent basic needs, including shelter, healthcare and sanitation. We stand ready to provide further support.

The UK remains in close contact with authorities across Libya to help respond to this tragic crisis, and Lord Ahmad, the Minister for the middle east and north Africa, has reiterated the UK's commitment to Libya in a call with the chair of Libya's Presidential Council. UN officials have said that the western and eastern Governments are working together and communicating on this, which will be important, and we stand ready to help the people of Libya in these very challenging times.

**Ms Brown**: The horror of the catastrophic floods in Libya is hard to imagine: loved ones swept away within arm's reach, drowning in mud and crushed under rubble. The city of Derna has been utterly devastated and, as the Minister said, estimates now range above 20,000 lives lost. The grief and worry of those with no knowledge of their loved ones' fate must be simply unbearable. Our thoughts are with them and with all the people of Libya.

As the Minister said, assistance has struggled to reach the city, and the scale of urgency of need is immense. Many areas have reportedly received no help, and there is no hope of rescue for anyone left alive trapped under mud and rubble. There is obviously a terrible threat from disease, with authorities lacking enough body bags to cope with the scale of death.

In the Minister's estimation, how many people are now lacking shelter, clean water and medical care? I know the Government are supporting the United Nations central emergency response fund, but is the Minister confident that that will support co-ordinated efforts and reach those who are truly in dire need?

Surely the scale of this disaster is linked to Libya's many years of conflict and chaos, political paralysis, diplomatic failure and neglect. We know that climate heating is making extreme weather, such as Storm Daniel, more intense. We must help to prevent these horrors where we can, build resilience to a changing climate and support Libya on the path to stability and peace. That will take strategic action on diplomacy, security and development, and we must make sure the humanitarian response, which is desperately needed right now, is delivered.

**David Rutley**: As usual, the hon. Lady has made important points, with her characteristic compassion and passion. I reiterate that we share those sentiments and we are working hard to address the situation. Let me update the House by saying that the UN is currently finalising its needs assessment and we hope to see that this afternoon. The Foreign Secretary has already set out that we are ready to provide support, and we have put some initial support on the table. I reiterate to the hon. Lady and the House that we will continue to keep in close contact with the UN and we are reiterating our support to it. We will continue to monitor the situation on the ground and we stand ready to offer further assistance. The point she makes is crucial: this support needs to reach the people affected. Too often, in various countries, there have been blockages in getting support to the frontline. I understand that the two groups in Libya are working together or at least talking, which is encouraging. That is going to be crucial in making sure that there is a flow of funds and, more importantly, that support is provided on the ground. She also talks about future support. Clearly, we need to focus on the humanitarian issues right now, but, given the challenges of climate change, there will be urgent needs associated with infrastructure to address. However, that is for another day and I am sure we will continue that conversation.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): This is an awful situation, and both Front Benchers have got it absolutely right. One issue is that Libya is a country that has such an appalling history. When we give money, as a nation and as Government, we will have to be careful that the corrupting influences in that country do not siphon it off, as it is meant for the people who have suffered so badly. Will the Minister please assure the House that every effort will be made by his Department and the Government to ensure that that money goes to the people who need it now and that we help to alleviate their suffering?

**David Rutley**: My hon. Friend make important points, which I hope are listened to by those involved in the situation in Libya. The support absolutely needs to get to the frontline. If nothing else, we hope that this moment of severe crisis in that country will bring sometimes warring factions and groups who have different opinions together in common cause—that is vital. There comes a point where human interest and humanitarian concern is the most important factor, as is the case right now.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party spokes person.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Of course, we join both Front Benchers in sending our deepest condolences to the families of those who have lost loved ones in these devastating floods. The scale of the destruction is utterly unimaginable, and Libya needs international solidarity as it moves from the search and rescue phase to the recovery phase. As climate change bites harder and we see more fierce natural disasters, it will so often be the case that those least able to cope with the effects of climate change are impacted to the greatest extent. So will the UK Government invest much more in international loss and damage funding, as the Scottish Government have championed worldwide? Of course, we will support the Government in any support they offer Libya. However, given the drastic cut of 30% in the international aid budget and the catastrophic impact it has had on our ability to be a global player and react to the needs of countries hit by climate change disasters such as we see in Libya right now, what more support can the Libyans expect from the Government?

**David Rutley:** I thank the hon. Member for his support. The action that is being taken in the short term is the top priority right now. He makes important points about how we are working to affect those who are climate-vulnerable. We will continue to do that, but I reassure him that in this moment in time we have found support, we will continue to monitor the situation and we will provide whatever other support we need to provide. Our funding through the UN is pivotal at this time.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the update. Clearly, the most important thing right now is humanitarian aid, but there will be a requirement for long-term rebuilding of the structures that have been destroyed. The British people will want to be generous but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) mentioned, there is a risk that funds will be diverted to improper uses. When a fund is set up to which the British people can contribute, will my hon. Friend make sure that the British people know how to contribute to it and that it goes to the people who need it?

**David Rutley:** My hon. Friend makes a good point, which has been reiterated by other Members: the money needs to get to the frontline. We will do everything we can, certainly with those funds provided by the UK Government and through the UN; that will be a key focus. The fact that so many colleagues are raising the issue helps us to make that point with conviction.

On his wider point, the primary focus right now is humanitarian need, but going forward, Libya needs to move down a pathway to free and fair elections. That will help the country in the longer term, but humanitarian aid and support is our key focus right now.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I join colleagues in offering my condolences to all those who have lost loved ones in the devastation in Libya. In my constituency and in many other parts of the country there are strong Libyan diaspora communities watching on in despair, unsure about the whereabouts of their loved ones. Will

the Minister confirm what support is available to Libyan communities and others in the UK to gain information about friends and family in Libya?

**David Rutley:** Our embassy staff are working closely with people on the ground, keeping in touch with what is going on, and our consular support team is keeping in touch with dual nationals in Libya, providing the support they need. They will continue to do that. Our condolences go not only to the people of Libya but to the wider diaspora as well. We will continue to do everything we can, as hon. Members on all sides of the House have urged—that message has been well received today.

**Theo Clarke** (Stafford) (Con): I fully support the fact that the UK Government have provided international assistance to the people of Libya, but what are we doing specifically to ensure humanitarian assistance is urgently getting to people on the ground today?

**David Rutley:** As I say, we have made our initial offer of support. We continue to have an active dialogue with the Libyan authorities and the UN. As I said to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), the key thing today is that we are waiting for the UN needs assessment, so we can then give our best assessment of what sort of support we need to help to provide.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): The tragic scenes we are witnessing in Libya are utterly horrifying; my thoughts and prayers are with all those affected. During the earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, my noble Friend Lord Purvis asked

“why the Government’s humanitarian crisis reserve, which recently stood at £500 million, has now been depleted to only £30 million, which means that the UK’s response to any other emergencies or disasters will be greatly reduced.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 March 2023; Vol. 828, c. 642.]

Has that significant reduction in a crisis reserve for humanitarian assistance affected our ability to help those in Libya?

**David Rutley:** I think hon. Members will agree that we responded fast to the situation in Morocco. It is very sad that this tragedy follows so quickly afterwards, and we want to respond to it quickly too. Part of the challenge has been understanding the situation on the ground. We know the macro picture, but the exact detail that the Government and hon. Members want to see is difficult to ascertain because of problems with communication links and transportation, but we will get a better assessment this afternoon.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What has happened in Libya is an absolute catastrophe and it is awful for all those people who have been killed or affected. As well as lives lost, infrastructure has been damaged as well as heritage and culture. That part of Libya is home to a wealth of heritage and history, including the UNESCO site of Cyrene. Satellite images show that roads to Cyrene have been badly damaged and washed away. What assessment have the Government made and what conversations have they had with UNESCO about those world heritage sites, and what are the Government doing to protect and restore the world heritage sites that have been damaged?

**David Rutley:** I know that my hon. Friend has a real interest in the history and heritage of north Africa. Clearly, any damage to a UNESCO world heritage site would be a cause of great concern. Right now, as Members on both sides of the House have said, our focus has to be on what we can do to help preserve life and also to protect British nationals. None the less, we will work with partners through UNESCO on the matters that he has raised.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): This is a devastating tragedy, and it has unquestionably been exacerbated by Libya's poor warning and evacuation systems, and by its substandard planning and design standards. I welcome the financial support that the Minister has outlined, but can he assure me that we will also look to provide whatever technical expertise is necessary to bring about improvements in these areas for the rebuilding of Libya both now and into the future?

**David Rutley:** The hon. Member makes a really important point about the medium term, and we will certainly examine what technical support we can provide. That will be important given the infrastructure issues. I also gently urge all parties in Libya to recognise that this is about prioritisation. If they can move away from conflict and think about how they can work in the interests of their own populations, that would also help the situation. We stand ready to help, but once we get through this immediate humanitarian crisis, other parties will need to work out how they can help move the country forward.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I appreciate what the Minister is saying: the humanitarian response to what have been described as apocalyptic scenes has to be the priority. I went to Kashmir in my first term as an MP, following the devastating earthquake there, and saw how the way that school buildings had been constructed lent itself to roofs collapsing on children and other horrific scenes. We talked about how the UK could lend its expertise in that area to make sure that, following the reconstruction effort, Kashmir would be more resilient to future shocks. Are we still involved in such programmes? Can we use that expertise to ensure that, when it comes to rebuilding Libya and other affected countries, they are far more resilient?

**David Rutley:** I recognise the hon. Member's interest and expertise in this area from her previous visits and through her work in Parliament. She makes an important

point, similar to that made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). We do need to look at what technical expertise we can provide. I will take that away and work on it with Lord Ahmad. It is a good point.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The scenes coming out of Libya are just horrific. My thoughts and prayers are added to those from across the House to all the families affected. The Minister, in response to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench, said that communications had been taken out and that that is hampering efforts to get humanitarian aid to where it is needed. What can the UK Government do to help get those communications back up and running?

**David Rutley:** That is a really important point. Hopefully, our expertise can help there. We need to see what the UN wants us to do in a co-ordinated way. We will play our part, and the calls from Members in this House will spur us on and help us in our negotiations to get urgent access to do what we can to help. I wish to thank all Members for their contributions today. It has been an important conversation and call to action.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his deep and sincere interest and for his commitment, which is what all of us in this House wish to see. Our Government and our Ministers have never been found wanting when it comes to helping, and we appreciate that. He has outlined the devastation and loss of life from Storm Daniel. Like others, my thoughts and prayers are with those families who have lost loved ones. Charities such as Christian Aid, alongside church groups in my constituency of Strangford and across Northern Ireland, are already setting up a page. It is clear that there is a desire to help. How can the Minister and the Government work alongside the charities and the churches to get aid to the right place as soon as humanly possible?

**David Rutley:** The response from UK charities, including those that the hon. Member has mentioned, is always greatly valued, as is their expertise and capability to deliver. We need to get the impact assessment from the UN today. Let us then co-ordinate our efforts with partners, not just across Governments but with non-governmental organisations, to get the best possible outcome. The call to action is clear and we need to move fast.

## Voter Identification Scheme

10.49 am

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make a statement on the voter identification scheme.

**The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean)**: We were pleased and encouraged by the first roll-out of voter identification at the local elections in England in May. The data gathered in polling stations showed that the vast majority of electors—99.75%—were able to cast their vote successfully and adapted well to the roll-out of the changes. We are grateful to local authorities and other partners for their work to deliver the change in requirements.

The Government committed in legislation to conduct an evaluation of the implementation of voter identification at the local elections in May and at the next two UK parliamentary general elections. Our intention is that the first of those reports, evaluating the implementation at May's local elections, will be published in November 2023. Yesterday the Government published two documents that demonstrate that we are making clear progress with the evaluation, and that provide more detail on the evidence upon which it will be based. We are determined to ensure that we fully understand how the policy has operated in practice, what has gone well, and any ideas for improvement.

There are few tasks more important in public life than maintaining the integrity of our democratic processes and the British public's trust in them. We are not just committed to doing so; we are acting to achieve that. The Government have taken seriously the important recommendations made by the independent Electoral Commission, by international electoral observers and by Sir Eric Pickles—now Lord Pickles—in his report into electoral fraud, and we have been committed in the years since to addressing what has been a staggering vulnerability in our electoral system. It was previously far too easy to commit the crime of electoral fraud in the polling station and almost impossible to detect it. I am immensely proud that we have now delivered this new process and fulfilled our manifesto commitment.

**Wendy Chamberlain**: I suspect that the Minister and I were reading different reports, because the first report cards on the roll-out of voter identification in England are out, and they are not good. The Electoral Commission's report—the result of extensive work monitoring and analysing the recent elections—warned that disabled people and the unemployed found it harder to show accepted voter ID, as well as younger people and people from ethnic minorities. It also reported that on average more deprived areas had a higher proportion turned away compared with less deprived areas. The Local Government Information Unit reported that approximately 14,000 voters were not given a ballot paper because they could not show an accepted form of ID and significantly more were deterred from voting because of the ID requirement.

This is not just about England, because the next election is UK wide—it will affect my constituents in North East Fife. Hundreds of thousands of people risk

being turned away at the next election, at a cost to the taxpayer of £120 million over the next decade, and all of that to combat levels of voter fraud that, at the last election, stood at six cases—talk about using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. A general election is perhaps no more than a year away, but it is clear from reading the reports that we are teetering on the cliff edge of a democratic travesty, not just because the roll-out of voter ID has been botched—many of us believe that it should never have been implemented in the first place—but because of the Government's apparent refusal to listen to the concerns of members of the public and Members of this House. That was what they did in the run-up to the local elections, when take-up of voter authority certificates was pitiful and local authorities were warning that they were unprepared, and that is what the Government are doing now.

I was hugely disheartened that in both the Minister's response and the written statement published yesterday the Government seem to be taking a stance of blindly ignoring the warning signs. So far, I see no evidence to suggest that that stance will change in the Government's evaluation report in November. I hope that the Minister will use the opportunity to start setting things right. Will the Government ensure that the evaluation report in November is truly independent? What measures are under consideration to ensure that voters will not be turned away at the general election, as the LGIU report warns? How do the Government intend to expand the roll-out of voter authority certificates ahead of the general election, and will they expand the list of acceptable forms of identification?

**Rachel Maclean**: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, but I remind all Members in this Chamber that we have already passed the Elections Act 2022; it passed the scrutiny of both Houses and is now law. If she refers to the debates in *Hansard*, she has treated us to a compilation of the Liberal Democrats' greatest hits—and that is no surprise because, as always, they do one thing and say another. If she is so opposed to the principle of electoral identification and photographic identification, why did her party support its introduction in Northern Ireland? At that time, the Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesperson told Parliament that

“we accept the need for a Bill... The Liberal Democrats... welcome the Government's intention to introduce an electoral identity card”—[*Official Report*, 10 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 705-707.]

That legislation passed Second Reading without a vote. If we separate the points of substance and process from re-running the battles of the past, of course we take the recommendations of the independent Electoral Commission extremely seriously, as we set out in detail in the report and as I set out in my remarks earlier.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The Minister has rightly distinguished the political from the practical. The Electoral Commission itself recommended photographic ID, and it has now come forward with other comments.

We must recognise that the biggest deficit is the inadequacies in the completeness of the electoral roll, and the fact that one third of people do not vote in general elections and up to two thirds do not vote in local elections. We ought to spend as much time on that issue as we do on this.



We ought to consider the suggestion of attestation, where someone in a household who does not have voter ID can have their identity attested by a person in the same household who does. Perhaps neighbours ought to be able to do that, and other people with some kind of standing in society might be able to do the same thing for people who find they cannot vote on the day. It seems to me that we can improve what we have without throwing out the whole system of photographic ID, which, as the Minister has said, was supported by all parties when it was first brought in for Northern Ireland.

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend the Father of the House for those very sensible and proportionate comments. He is right that, as political parties, we all have a responsibility to ensure that our constituents and those voters take part in our democratic process. That is what this process is about. I am afraid that the kind of scaremongering comments that we have just heard from the Liberal Democrats, and that no doubt we will hear from all the other Opposition parties, are damaging the important cause that we all stand behind: ensuring the safety of our precious democracy, which now more than at any other time could potentially be at risk. I am proud to be part of a Government who are taking sensible steps to protect our democracy from the kind of interference that we all fear could happen in this day and age.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome the shadow Minister.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I echo the concerns raised by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) in her urgent question and by the Father of the House in his sensible remarks. The Minister should be promoting confidence in our electoral system and concentrating on getting the millions of people who are not registered to vote on to the register. Instead, she has tried to pull the wool over our eyes this morning by presenting the Electoral Commission's report as a ringing endorsement of her Government's dangerous policies.

The reality is far from that. This extremely concerning report brings into sharp focus the consequences of the Tories' failed photo ID regulations. By introducing such strict regulations, against the advice of experts and equality groups, the Conservatives have snatched away the ability of legitimate voters to have their say on services and society. One former Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), admitted that this partisan scheme was designed to rig the rules and lock voters out of democracy. The Minister claims that she is concerned with protecting our democracy, so will she agree to the entirely reasonable Electoral Commission reforms and the widening of the list of ID that people can use to vote, or will she commit to introducing a vouching rule for those without voter ID?

Given that the Electoral Commission said that the rules risk widespread disenfranchisement at the general election, will the Minister commit now to publishing the evidence to prove the commission wrong? That should not be a problem if she has nothing to hide.

Is the Minister concerned by the watchdog's findings that the laws could have a disproportionate impact on people from minority ethnic backgrounds? When the independent review concludes, will she commit to making a statement to the House?

**Rachel Maclean:** May I take this opportunity to warmly welcome the hon. Lady to her place and to thank her for her comments? On the substantive, non-political points that she made, I have been extremely clear, and am happy to repeat the assurance, that we are working carefully with the independent Electoral Commission, which itself recommended the introduction of photographic ID to safeguard our precious democracy. We are looking at all its recommendations. We will, of course, naturally come forward for scrutiny when the findings are published, as we do as a matter of course.

On the substantive point, is the hon. Lady really saying that the Labour party will repeal the Elections Act should it come into government? What exactly has the Labour party done to raise confidence among Labour voters? Or is this just a case of Labour Members standing on the sidelines making shrill, scaremongering claims? Time and again, Labour has made such claims ahead of the sensible and proportionate pilot schemes that we have rolled out, but none of the things that Labour Members have warned about has happened—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps she would like to listen to my remarks.

The new shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), warned of shortages of electoral staff, lack of venues and funding uncertainty ahead of the local elections in May 2021. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, warned that elderly people and ethnic minorities would not visit polling stations. None of those things has happened. The Electoral Commission—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members are chuntering from sedentary positions, but perhaps they should listen to the words of the independent Electoral Commission—not my words—which found that

“the polls were delivered safely and successfully”,

and that changes put in place by the UK Government, the commission and electoral administrators helped to “support and reassure voters” and campaigners.

I think it important to make this final point. The hon. Lady talks about ethnic minorities being disenfranchised and discriminated against, but we know from the type of heinous behaviour that we saw in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham that ethnic minority voters are most disenfranchised and disadvantaged by not having security in our elections.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The crime of personation has been notoriously difficult to prove. We have functioned on the basis of trust that people who go to the polling station are who they say they are. The sad reality is that when I was elected in 2010, we found after the election that scores, perhaps hundreds, of people who had voted in my constituency were actually abroad at the time. The police refused to do anything about it. People impersonated those voters. I do not how they voted, but clearly those votes were stolen from people. Voter ID ensures that that sort of activity cannot happen. Will my hon. Friend also take up the issue of postal and proxy voting to ensure that their proper policing is integral to our system?

**Rachel Maclean:** My hon. Friend is totally right. The suggestion from the Opposition parties is that we should just wait and see whether something bad happens, and then take action. That is the wrong way to go about safeguarding our democracy, which we should all be

[Rachel Maclean]

proud of. He makes the extremely valid point that it is impossible to detect impersonation. When it has been detected, such as in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham—the Opposition do not like me mentioning it—people have been taken to court and found guilty of these offences. He is also right to raise the issue of postal and proxy voting, and he will know that we are commencing provisions to safeguard some of those processes, which is the right thing to do.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** The incredibly hard-working team at the Electoral Commission are far too polite to say, “We told you so,” but that would be a pretty easy way to sum up most of what is in this report. Practically every concern about the introduction of photo ID that was raised during the passage of the Elections Bill has been borne out in the by-elections and local elections that have taken place since it became law.

The Government say that they want to increase democratic participation and not suppress turnout among minority and disadvantaged communities, but the evidence suggests that that is exactly what is happening—fewer votes from sections of society that it just so happens are less likely to vote Tory. What steps will the Government take in advance of the general election to remove barriers to voting established by the Elections Act 2022? Will they expand the list of acceptable ID? Will they make sure that, as the Father of the House suggests, people can vote on polling day through attestation? Will they make sure that the Electoral Commission and local authorities are properly resourced to fulfil their functions? They already have to deal with boundary changes and polling district redraws, and now they have to deal with the Elections Act. Will the Government look to Scotland as well, where with votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, refugees and EU citizens, we are seeking to expand, not restrict, the franchise?

**Rachel Maclean:** I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman listened to the response that I have given multiple times, but I am happy to repeat it, in case he was reading his brief at the time. We are working with the Electoral Commission on all the recommendations it has made. It made several recommendations, and we are looking closely at them. I hope that we all share the same objective of making sure that this change is rolled out successfully.

If the hon. Gentleman does not like our proposals—I am sure he does not, because he wants to break up the United Kingdom—could he explain why they are working so well in Northern Ireland? The incredibly hard-working people, as he puts it, from the Electoral Commission have observed there:

“Since the introduction of photo ID in Northern Ireland there have been no reported cases of personation. Voters’ confidence that elections are well-run in Northern Ireland is consistently higher than in Great Britain, and there are virtually no allegations of electoral fraud at polling stations.”

Why is it perfectly acceptable for us to listen to the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland, England and Wales but not in Scotland?

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con):** One of the problems was that people took ID that had run out, such as driving licences and passports. Does the Minister agree that if a document has recently run out, as long as it has a photograph of the person, it is admissible? Furthermore, could the amount of ID that can be shown be broadened slightly, so that people have a bit more choice in what they can use?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestions. It is right that we look at all the practical barriers that have been encountered at polling stations. That is why we are working closely with the sector to listen to its feedback and to representations from civil society, disability charities and others. We know that where voter identification was trialled in pilots, the proportion of people who agreed that electoral fraud was not a problem increased from 13% to 32%. We know that most people were able to vote successfully in both the pilot and the last local elections, but it is right to look at all the details, and we will be doing so, in line with the Electoral Commission’s recommendations.

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** If we are to have voter ID at the next general election, which we will, will the Minister seriously look at extending the amount of ID that is acceptable? It is unfathomable that a concessionary bus pass is acceptable, but an 18-year-old’s bus pass is not.

**Rachel Maclean:** I would like the hon. Gentleman to look carefully at the eligibility for 18-year-old Oyster cards and 60-plus Oyster cards, because they are different. Eligibility for the 60-plus card involves significantly more requirements, including a passport or driving licence. Of course, when we try to expand the forms of identification that can be used, we are going to say yes in some instances and no in others if the eligibility is different.

**Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con):** Despite what we are hearing from Opposition Members, my experience at the local elections in May was that when people were turned away, they did indeed return. They are used to providing identification when dealing with so many other services, and they found it quite acceptable. We need to recognise that the public at large are very supportive of the policy, but echoing other comments, could the Minister give an assurance that the postal vote system will be thoroughly examined? There are genuine causes for concern about that system.

**Rachel Maclean:** My hon. Friend makes an accurate observation, and he is right that the vast majority of the general public support the policy. I remind Opposition Members that we were elected on a manifesto commitment to introduce these measures. They have been thoroughly debated in both Houses and have received very serious parliamentary scrutiny. Opposition Members are asking the same questions that they have asked time and time again, and I remind them that prior to the introduction of this policy, it was harder to take out a library book or collect a parcel from a post office than it was to vote in someone else’s name. This Government do not agree that that is an acceptable state of affairs in Great Britain today, and I find it quite astounding that members of Opposition parties do.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): If we as a country truly value democracy, it should be in the interests of the state that as many people as possible vote, rather than deliberately turning them away as this Conservative Government have done. Since the Minister has chosen to attack the Liberal Democrats' legitimate concerns rather than answer questions, I will start again and ask her to answer a specific question: what measures are under consideration to ensure that voters will not be turned away at the next general election?

**Rachel Maclean:** For the hon. Lady's benefit, I will repeat the specific answers I have already given. We know that the vast majority of people were able to vote successfully, so I have nothing to do other than remind her that the Liberal Democrats, of which she is a member, supported the introduction of photographic identification in Northern Ireland. It is quite astonishing to me that the Liberal Democrats continue to oppose introducing sensible measures in England that they supported and voted for in Northern Ireland, which is part of our United Kingdom.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): On the day of the local elections, I remember knocking on the door of a constituent who told me that she usually votes, but was not going to because she realised that she did not have the necessary voter ID. That broke my heart: her democratic rights, which she has exercised time and time again, were taken away, and of course she will not appear in that figure of 14,000 people who were turned away.

The Electoral Commission says that ethnic minorities and unemployed voters were more likely to be turned away at the polling station. When we show our constituents around this House, we talk about the struggle for the universal franchise. Let us remember that the establishment that the Conservative party represents did not want women or the working class to have the vote. Will the Minister reflect on our journey towards increasing participation in democracy, and on how this rotten arrangement is robbing people of their hard-won democratic rights?

**Rachel Maclean:** I will respond to that by asking the hon. Gentleman to reflect on his comments. Is he seriously suggesting that the introduction of photographic identification is not suitable? Does he seriously think that it should be harder to take out a library book than to vote in his constituency today? If he is seriously suggesting that, that—more than anything else—gives us evidence that the Labour party is in no way ready for government. It is not a serious party: it does not take seriously the threat to our democracy from international actors, and would do nothing to tackle the very real issues experienced by ethnic minorities in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham, who are being systematically disenfranchised by the corrupt practices of certain people in their local areas.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I might be a lone voice on the Opposition side of the Chamber, but I reinforce what the Minister has said. The electoral voter ID system for Northern Ireland has been a tremendous success, as is proved at every election. It shows that the system can work.

A short time ago, along with my chief of staff, I visited the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to be constructive and suggest how we could perhaps do

some things better. The Electoral Commission is agreeing to set up hubs across Northern Ireland constituencies, giving people the opportunity to get their voter IDs in person. That has not always been possible in areas of my constituency, so I welcome that commitment, which will be announced, I understand, in early October. Will the Minister consider something similar for the United Kingdom so that everyone can have the advantage of getting their voter ID in person in their own constituency?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing his really practical and useful wisdom from the policy that has been rolled out in Northern Ireland—a valued part of our United Kingdom—where it has been working very well for many years. I note that a much smaller list of documents is used in Northern Ireland and that that has worked effectively. In the Electoral Commission's recent 2021 public opinion tracker survey, not a single respondent from Northern Ireland reported that they did not have ID and had found themselves unable to vote.

Of course, we must always look at the sensible and practical recommendations from the Electoral Commission. We will continue to do that. Before this roll-out, we put a significant amount of investment into working with civil society and charities. We have made funding available for communications campaigns. It is just a shame that the Labour party and Liberal Democrats did not take the opportunity to amplify our messages among their own constituents. We all have a shared responsibility in this place to amplify messages and communicate effectively, particularly to ethnic minority and disabled voters. I know that is what I did ahead of local elections; I wonder what they did.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Has my hon. Friend the Minister received representations from any colleagues in the House, particularly from Opposition parties, about the arrangements for voter ID in Northern Ireland? After all, those were introduced by the Labour Government of the time and the arrangement is used by Labour at its own internal elections.

**Rachel Maclean:** My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on, as always. If Labour Members now think that voter identification is so wrong, why are they not campaigning to repeal their own laws? Why should electoral fraud be tolerated in Great Britain but not in Northern Ireland? Do they really believe that most European countries, which require voter ID, engage in so-called voter suppression? They seem to want to take us back into the European Union across all areas of policy; perhaps this is their latest ploy to take us back into the EU.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): For all the bluster that the Minister is deploying, I am not sure that we are any clearer about what she actually thinks. A minute ago, she referred to "international actors". Which international actors are pretending to be Mrs McGlumpher from the high street, trying to vote? She is deploying a ridiculous argument. The reality is that the Electoral Commission's research has shown that younger people, ethnic minorities and unemployed people were all disproportionately disenfranchised by voter ID. Those are, of course, all demographic groups less likely than others to vote Tory. Does the Minister

[Kirsten Oswald]

understand that those of us looking at the issue with a perspective different from hers think that rather than safeguarding democracy, as she would suggest, it looks very much like voter suppression—“If you can’t persuade them, don’t let them vote”?

**Rachel Maclean:** No, I do not understand a single thing that the hon. Lady said, which is hardly surprising from the nationalists across there. She thinks this is voter suppression; her party is so keen to break up the United Kingdom and rejoin the European Union, but this is standard practice across the European Union in all manner of elections. The fact that the hon. Lady cannot take seriously the threats to our democracy shows the lack of seriousness that the Scottish National party—[*Interruption.*] She does not like what I am saying and is chuntering from a sedentary position, but perhaps she ought to listen to a serious Government about the serious actions we are taking.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Government have committed to an independent review of their voter ID changes. Can the Minister tell us who will conduct that review and what its terms of reference will be? If she is not in a position to do that today, can she confirm when she will be able to share that information?

**Rachel Maclean:** We will make further statements on that process in due course, and we will be subject to the usual parliamentary scrutiny.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Following on from the question of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), the Minister’s answers have taken sophistry to new levels. She said that 99.7% of voters were able to vote, but that is only of those who turned up to vote, and many will not have bothered to try and vote. The Government knew that young people, ethnic minorities and the unemployed would be disproportionately affected but they did it anyway. Incidentally, having tried to apply myself, I can attest to the fact that the Scottish young person’s concessionary travel card requires a lot more proof of ID than the London Oyster card for young people. Will she just admit that this Government’s version of voter ID is blatant antidemocratic gerrymandering?

**Rachel Maclean:** It is right that I put on record once again that everybody can vote across the UK. The methods that have been introduced are free methods available to everybody. On the hon. Gentleman’s other points, I actually take his comments as a compliment and refer him to my previous remarks.

## Business of the House

11.21 am

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** The business for the week commencing 18 September will be as follows:

**MONDAY 18 SEPTEMBER**—General debate on the UK automotive industry, followed by general debate on UK export performance.

**TUESDAY 19 SEPTEMBER**—General debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the conference recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 19 September and return on Monday 16 October.

The business for the week commencing 16 October includes:

**MONDAY 16 OCTOBER**—General debate on support for childcare and the early years, followed by general debate on knife crime. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**TUESDAY 17 OCTOBER**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 18 OCTOBER**—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Energy Bill [*Lords*], followed by debate on a motion to approve the draft Airports Slot Allocation (Alleviation of Usage Requirements) (No. 2) Regulations 2023.

**THURSDAY 19 OCTOBER**—Debate on a motion on birth trauma, followed by general debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week. The subject for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 20 OCTOBER**—Subject to the agreement of the House, private Members’ Bills.

**Lucy Powell:** Is that it—a general debate, Backbench Business, and rising again on a Tuesday? I wonder why that is: inaction man yet again swerving the parliamentary action. We have more general debates and statutory instruments on the Floor of the House when we return, and then we will be off again. We hear on the parliamentary grapevine that the Leader of the House wants a two-week Prorogation. It beggars belief. We have already clocked up 234 non-sitting days this Session—way more than in previous Sessions. Is this really the legacy the Leader of the House wants? Can she confirm today whether we will have such a long Prorogation? She said her role in Government would be to make this Parliament the most effective in the world; instead she has turned it into a zombie Parliament.

A part-time Government, devoid of any ambition for this country, want to avoid parliamentary scrutiny on the long list of things going wrong: crumbling schools, growing waiting lists, polluted rivers and coastlines, the rising cost of living, and illegal immigration out of control. People need answers and the country needs a plan.

We have also heard this morning that the Prime Minister has been found to have inadvertently broken parliamentary rules—again. Can we have a debate on the Prime Minister's interests? We all know what he is not interested in: accepting that he is to blame for the problems the country is facing. Talking of avoiding answers and accountability, next week marks the first anniversary of the Government's disastrous mini-Budget. Will Parliament get an update on the impact that is still having on the economy? Interest rates are up 3%, with mortgage holders paying thousands more. We have soaring inflation, with the weekly shop up well over 10%, and business investment is crippled by a so-called plan for growth. We need answers, and we need accountability.

The Leader of the House backed the former Prime Minister. She sat at the Cabinet table, and she approved those decisions. I give her the chance again today—one that she dodged last week—to apologise for her role in those decisions. Will she ensure that there is accountability and consequence? Government Members might not like it, but these are their decisions. Or is it just more honours for cronies, book tours and consequences only for the many, while the few show no contrition?

The Leader of the House is not the only one avoiding accountability. The new Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero failed to show up after the utter failure of the offshore wind auction. We did not have a statement; the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero had to be dragged to Parliament with an urgent question, which I thank Mr Speaker for granting. The Minister seemed to have no clue why it was such a historic disaster. Offshore wind auctions might feel like a technical issue, but the Government's failure to attract any bids will lock us into more expensive and volatile fossil fuels for years to come. No new projects can get under way next year.

There were warnings about this auction for months, and that is why the Irish Government adjusted their price. If our Government had done the same, new offshore wind could have saved £2 billion for families and increased our energy security. Why were those warnings ignored? The Government want to sweep this under the carpet, but families will feel the bite when their energy bills hit the mat. Offshore wind is supposed to be the UK's leading light. Some 80% of the jobs are outside London. What does the Government's failure say to those communities? All around the world, Governments are getting ahead in the race for green jobs; meanwhile, this Government have presided over inaction that is costing us jobs. We have a plan—our green prosperity plan. Perhaps the Government should take a look at it. It would slash energy bills for good, create well-paid green jobs, strengthen our energy security and make the UK energy independent.

This all speaks to a bigger truth: the Government are so out of ideas that they have nothing to keep the lights on in Parliament for, nor will they take accountability for their failures or decisions. Is the Leader of the House not as tired as the rest of us are, having to come here week after week with no real business to announce and more things going wrong? I know she will tell us how great everything is and how the problems are everybody else's fault but theirs, but quite honestly, that is getting boring too. I do not blame the 54% of people who say they would never even consider voting Conservative at the next election. What would they even be voting for?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I am sure I speak for the whole House in putting it on the record that our thoughts are with the people of Morocco and Libya in the wake of the recent tragic events? May I also wish shanah tovah—a very happy, healthy and sweet new year—to the Jewish community celebrating Rosh Hashanah?

I am a Conservative, and I am always happy to take personal responsibility, so let me respond to the points the hon. Lady raises. First, in regard to the Committee on Standards report, she will know that it did not recommend that any action be taken against the Prime Minister. I am happy to get that on record.

I remind the hon. Lady that the work rate of this Government and this Parliament has been to put through 16 Bills—13 of which have received Royal Assent—since the Prime Minister's tenure started, as well as a record number of private Members' Bills. In every area of Government, we are delivering. She mentions energy. We have decarbonised faster than any other nation and led the charge on that.

We have been extremely busy, particularly focused on the Prime Minister's five priorities, chief among them stopping the small boats. The hon. Lady is new to the post, but I remind her that her party voted more than 70 times against our measures to strengthen borders. We have been working very hard, and the Labour party has been frustrating us. Labour has consistently stood against any measures to combat small boats. Those measures are delivering. Crossings are down by 20%, and those from Albania are down by 90%.

The leader of the hon. Lady's party is today showing himself again to be Mr Open Borders. He wanted the Home Office to stop all deportation flights, he wanted free movement, he is mooted taking 100,000 illegal immigrants from the safety of the EU and bringing them here to the UK, and he is planning on reversing our ban on people claiming asylum if they have come here illegally. We are working very hard. We are putting Bills through, but the Labour party would unpick that legislation. Time and again, Labour is showing that it is not taking the tough decisions to stand up for the people of this country.

We have seen that in other areas as well. The hon. Lady invited me to look at her energy plan, but it would make this nation less energy secure. We have also seen it today with Labour's so-called new deal for working people, which I call the trade unions' charter. Labour says that it will ban unpaid internships, yet its MPs advertise them. Labour says that it will fight for equality, yet in Birmingham, where it is in power, it did not pay women a fair wage. Labour says that it wants homes for all, yet it blocks plans to build them. Labour is the party of ULEZ, the fuel duty escalator, the 20 mph default speed limit and soaring council tax, and every health board it oversees is in special measures. It is no longer the party of working people—we are.

The hon. Lady wants to examine our work rate and record. We are the party of free childcare, of 11 million workplace pensions, of 1 million new businesses, of doubling the personal allowance, of fair fuel and, at times of crisis, of furlough and loans to preserve the livelihoods and businesses of this country. We consistently take action to stand up for the interests of the people of this country.

The hon. Lady echoes the hilarious gag that the Leader of the Opposition made yesterday in his attempt to insult the PM by comparing him to a popular children's

[Penny Mordaunt]

figurine. I am happy to focus on that. I do not think that that line will survive contact with the Prime Minister's work rate, but let me rise to the bait and return the serve. I think that the Labour leader is beach Ken. Beach Ken stands for nothing, on shifting sands, in his flip flops staring out to sea, doing nothing constructive to stop small boats or to grow the economy. When we examine the Labour leader's weak record on union demands, border control, protecting the public and stopping small boats, we discover that, like beach Ken, he has zero balls. Further business will be announced in the usual way.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House arrange for the right person in government to contact me about the Afghan for whom I have been trying to work for the last nearly two years? I have approached the Foreign Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence, but have received nothing useful or helpful back, so could the right person approach me?

I have received the following endorsement from a former colonel in the International Security Assistance Force:

"Because of his service in support of the NATO Armed Forces in the Afghan Theater of Combat Operations,"

this person, whose name I will not give out in public,

"has suffered and continues suffering threats to the life and property of himself. To the best of my knowledge,"

he does not present a

"threat to the safety or national security of any Country of the NATO Alliance."

The person himself wrote to me today, saying,

"I am sorry bothering you"—

he always apologises for bothering me—and explaining again that his grandfather was killed for not disclosing his location. He writes:

"The Taliban trying everyday to kill me. I feel death every moment. My economy is very weak I can't longer continue to feed myself. I am hidden day and night...Please help me urgently. Please save my life urgently."

Could the right person please approach me to say how he and his wife can be extricated, exfiltrated or allowed to leave Afghanistan?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising again that case, which he has raised previously. I have written to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence, but I will happily do so again and I will ask that an official from one of those Department meet him. I know that the Veterans Minister is very aware of those who remain in-country or in third countries, and is focused on those cases.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

**Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** It is always revealing to hear the Leader of the House express her increasingly outlandish views of Scotland every Thursday morning. I expect today will be no

different. Her efforts last week had the feel of a fever dream, as she treated us to her thoughts on Mary Queen of Scots, the highland clearances and the hundred years war, all in some sort of answer to my comments about Scotland's remarkable progress on child poverty. Goodness knows what we will get this week, although once again I gently remind her that business questions is for Members of this House to ask about her Government and their policies. We all understand the difficulties of defending this tired, hollowed-out bunch on their last legs, but that is her job—for the moment, anyway.

I wonder, given her claim to have a keen interest in events north of the border, if she has had a chance to look at the report by the think-tank Institute for Public Policy Research on the state of the Union. It suggests that the kind of belligerent, muscular Unionism we see on display from her Tory Benches is now utterly counter-productive, and not just on Thursday mornings but day in, day out. The report highlights the brittle and contemptuous approach of Westminster to Scotland and its people. Professor Richard Wyn Jones of Cardiff University's governance centre, and co-author of the report, said:

"attempts...to champion a single version of Britishness, to buttress what some have termed 'the precious Union', are not only doomed to failure but are likely to be self-defeating."

Doomed to failure—a phrase that could be applied to so many of this Government's endeavours: Brexit, High Speed 2 and numerous defence projects such as the Ajax tanks debacle. I could go on. They never listen. They never learn. It might also help the Leader of the House to read an article by respected BBC financial journalist Paul Lewis of the "Money Box" programme, who recently wrote:

"I once coined the acronym Tabis – Things Are Better in Scotland – as a shorthand for the forward-looking social policies of that country. And it gets truer all the time."

Once again, is it not time for a debate, even in the dog days of this Government, to look at Scotland and learn how, as Paul Lewis said, to do things better?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I have always advertised the differences across the nations of the United Kingdom and regional differences in England as one of the strengths of the Union, as well as the things that we have in common. The hon. Lady accuses me of talking Scotland down and not celebrating it. Au contraire, if she looks back at my speeches from the Dispatch Box, she will know that is not the case. I am not talking Scotland down but about the SNP running Scotland down.

I am happy to compare our record of stewardship of public services against that of the SNP. Not a week goes by without the SNP messing up some particular sector or service. This week, highlights include the SNP pressing ahead with short-term lets licensing, which on 1 October will see thousands of businesses potentially close in Scotland and put some people in jeopardy of losing their homes, clobbering Scotland's tourist sector, too. It has also emerged this week that complaints about SNP-administered benefits have increased by 350%, and while the economy recovers and people still have to tighten their belts, the SNP Government think it is a brilliant idea to introduce a congestion charge.

Scotland deserves better than socialist separatist parties. Yet again, the hon. Lady has demonstrated that the SNP is yesterday's people talking about yesterday's grievances. It is yesterday's party.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend concerned, as I am, that the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, which was set up and agreed by this House in 2018 following careful cross-party working for more than a year, has not been implemented faithfully, and has had bits added on that are doing damage to the reputation of our politics? Does she agree that it needs a thorough review to get it back on track, so that everyone who works in this place can have confidence in the scheme, and so that it can restore the reputation of our democracy?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the work she did to ensure that this important step forward for the House was established. I agree that there are serious concerns about the timeliness and quality of investigations, and other concerns. I and other Commission members look forward to working with the new director and the new Parliamentary Commissioner to ensure that the system operates effectively and as it was intended to do. The Commission took some important decisions regarding the upcoming governance review at its meeting on Monday. I hope the review will also lead to some important improvements that will restore trust in the system. I encourage all colleagues to feed into the review and the Committee on Standards. I thank again my right hon. Friend for the attention she is still showing to this very important body.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): Following last week's business statement, I thank the Leader of the House for writing to the Secretary of State for Education on my behalf. I am really grateful.

The Backbench Business Committee has been accustomed over the years to managing demand for debates in the Chamber and dealing with a queue of applications. But due in the main to the Government's very welcome generosity in awarding Chamber time to us, as evidenced again this morning, we currently have no queue. We have one application where the applicants have asked for time in late November. As always, we will always welcome applications for debates here in the Chamber and for time we can allocate in Westminster Hall.

Lastly, will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the 60,000 entrants of the Great North Run, which took place last Sunday, many thousands of whom had to complete the race in absolutely torrential rain, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), who completed the race?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very helpful advert for Back-Bench time and the debates that hon. Members can apply for. I am very pleased to announce in the business a lot of time for Backbench Business debates. They are an important part of the work of this House. I am delighted, as I am sure all hon. Members are, to join him in sending our congratulations to the 60,000 runners in the Great North Run.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): As the Leader of the House will know, in a little over a month's time we will go through the unnecessary and archaic ritual of

putting our clocks back, thereby plunging the UK into darkness and misery by mid-afternoon for a period of several months. May we have a Government review on the desirability of using summer time in winter? It would cut the number of road accidents, boost tourism and cut energy use. Why don't we try it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** May I first congratulate my right hon. Friend on his cover story this week in *The House* magazine? It is very good to see the band back. He will know that this House has, under recent Administrations, debated these sorts of issues, but I will certainly make sure that the relevant Department has heard his interest. He will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Two months ago, one of my constituents had to be taken to accident and emergency with a fractured knee after she was mowed down on a path by a reckless e-scooter driver. As the Leader of the House is aware, although it is illegal to use e-scooters on public paths and highways beyond the designated trial areas, they are freely available to buy. They are known to reach speeds of up to 70 mph and have become a menace to drivers and pedestrians right across the UK. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the regulation of e-scooters?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about the incident the hon. Lady refers to and I hope her constituent is making a recovery. She will know she can raise this matter at Levelling Up questions on 16 October and Transport questions on 26 October, and she will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way. It is an issue of concern to many Members across the House.

**Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): We have not had a debate in this House specifically on the issue of sodium valproate since 2017—it has been debated combined with other issues—yet the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency recently issued guidance that shows that not only women of childbearing age need to exercise caution when prescribed sodium valproate but all children and, indeed, all people up to the age of 55. The pregnancy prevention programme is inadequate; it now needs to include men because men can also pass on birth defects. Still too little is known about the transgenerational issues regarding those children who have been impacted by valproate passing conditions on to their children. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we can have time in this House to debate the matter, or that we hear from the Department of Health and Social Care about how it is going to ensure there is clarity of guidance, so that everyone prescribed valproate recognises the risks associated with it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that important point. She will know that Health questions are not until 17 October, so I shall write on her behalf to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and let him know about her concerns.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Conversion therapy is an appalling and most cruel practice that is essentially aimed at changing who a person is. In the past five years, the Government have promised again and again to bring forward draft proposals to ban conversion

[Wera Hobhouse]

therapy, but so far nothing has come forward. Time is running out. Can the Leader of the House update us on whether draft proposals for a full ban on conversion therapy will come to the House before the next King's Speech?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. She is right that those are abhorrent practices that sometimes have lifelong impacts on those who have had to endure them. I take this opportunity to thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed so far to the work that the Department has done on the matter. She will know that I will say further business will be announced in the usual way, but I understand the concern that Members across the House have and want to see action taken on this matter.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): As part of my listening campaign, the excellent councillors Gill Mercer and Tony Spooner have warned me of a fly infestation in the Pemberton part of Rushden. I have surveyed the whole area and, sure enough, there is a problem. My excellent parliamentary researcher, Jack Goodenough, has plotted it on the map I am holding, and it is all around one area, right next to the Sanders Lodge industrial estate. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from the Fly Minister to swat this problem?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I might be testing the limits of the ministerial responsibility directory if I allocate a particular individual as the Fly Minister, but the normal procedure in such cases is to turn to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I shall certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard my hon. Friend's concerns, and I wish him and his councillors well in combating this problem.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My constituent, Judith, a cancer survivor in her seventies, has paid hundreds of pounds a month in energy bills for six years and been told that she is a high energy user. In June, Judith and I worked together to urge ScottishPower to investigate and it turns out that for six years she has paid the energy bills of a family of four next door—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It has been 14 weeks since ScottishPower found out that Judith's meter was crossed, and still no progress has been made. She is still paying her neighbours' bills. Does the Leader of the House agree that ScottishPower's delay in correcting that error is unacceptable and that no vulnerable person should be going to bed cold at night?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I hope the hon. Gentleman has seen from the audible response from Members of all parties that we all think that that is an appalling situation. Normally, I would be putting pen to paper to write to all relevant Secretaries of State to highlight poor business practice and poor customer service, but I cannot believe that having heard this case on the Floor of the House ScottishPower would not immediately—today—seek to rectify the situation, alter what is going on with his constituent's bill and make recompense for the overcharging. I would also expect some compensation for her. I will say to my officials in the Box that we will give ScottishPower until 3pm this afternoon before I get my pen out.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): In Bidwell West and Linnere, to the north of Houghton Regis in my constituency, we are building up to 8,000 new homes. Many residents are in those new homes, but we do not have sufficient section 106 money to increase general practice capacity in that area. There is no health centre going up with those homes, which is simply not acceptable. Health is again getting the short straw in the planning system and we urgently need to sort this out. I think the autumn statement would be a perfect opportunity to resolve the issue of the backlog: the deficit in primary care facilities across the country where they have not been built alongside thousands of new homes.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that again. Having campaigned on the issue, he will know that we are going to change local authority planning guidance this year to raise the profile of primary care facilities when planners consider how developer contributions and funds from new housing developments are allocated. I think that is a big step forward. He wants the situation in his constituency to be addressed. I will make sure that what he has said today is passed on to my Cabinet colleagues, and particularly the Chancellor, in advance of the autumn statement on 22 November.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): A single parent of two young children in my constituency could not afford the bus fare to her DWP appointment, so she has been handed a £280 universal credit sanction. Such sanctions do not deliver employment; they deliver severe anxiety, depression and hardship. Can we have a debate in Government time on the sheer inhumanity of their benefit sanctions regime?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I gently point out that, as I said earlier, the complaint rate has increased by 350% since benefits have been managed by the Scottish Government, so we will take no lectures on that.

If the case is as the hon. Gentleman says, and I have no reason to doubt him, it does not sound like a good outcome. If he gives the details to my office, I will be happy to assist him in getting this resolved for his constituent.

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): The Labour Government in Cardiff, supported by Plaid Cymru, will be introducing a blanket 20 mph speed restriction in built-up areas across Wales from 17 September. In many places, such as outside schools and hospitals, 20 mph is appropriate, but does the Leader of the House agree with many of my Ynys Môn constituents think that this blanket approach will impact main roads and the Welsh economy? Will she make time for a debate on how we should be supporting the Welsh economy, not punishing it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. This is absolutely insane, even by the standards of the Labour Welsh Government. They have ignored businesses and the public, and they are pushing ahead with this scheme despite huge opposition. The latest estimate is that it will cost the Welsh economy £4.5 billion. More disturbingly, it is going to increase individuals' fuel bills considerably and be harmful to the environment.



My hon. Friend is right that there are circumstances in which 20 mph speed limits are a good idea, but having them as the default for many roads is crazy. Instead of punishing motorists, Labour should focus on fixing public transport, and particularly the trains, as Wales has the highest cancellation rate in the UK. This situation is what the Labour party refers to as its blueprint for governing Britain.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Despite repeated assurances given in this Chamber and to his own Back Benchers, the Prime Minister has failed to protect our children from age-inappropriate sex education and the corrosive effect of indoctrination with gender ideology. Now the Secretary of State for Education has refused to make public the findings of the independent review of relationship and sex education in schools. What are this Government running scared of? I suggest it is the legitimate concern and anger of millions of parents and grandparents. So can we have an urgent statement by the Education Secretary in this Chamber, where she can be questioned and cross-examined on these important matters, and not merely another leaked press release to *The Daily Telegraph*?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I shall be happy to write to the Secretary of State for Education to raise the hon. Gentleman's concerns and the issues he speaks about. The next Education questions is on 23 October, so if he has not had a response from her office by then, he will be able to raise the matter directly with her then.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Can we have a debate or a statement before the House rises on Tuesday about the plight of thousands of residents who are adversely affected by RoyaleLife companies going into administration? Four of the 64 sites owned by RoyaleLife are in my constituency and my constituents living on those sites are finding that they have not got any of the basic services now. Rubbish is piling up. The administrators are not even ensuring that that is addressed. This is a really big threat to all those people who have invested their life savings in buying a park home. They are suffering, while they see that the proprietor and owner of that company was the second highest entry in this year's *The Sunday Times* rich list.

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am shocked to hear about the situation that my hon. Friend's constituents are having to endure. It sounds like an urgent one, so I shall raise it with the relevant Departments to see what advice they can provide to him about how to get it resolved. Pleas that I might make from this Dispatch Box for somebody to step up and take responsibility are likely, because of the situation, to fall on deaf ears, so I shall try to get him some advice about further steps he might take to ensure that the matter is resolved for his constituents.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) said, last weekend, I joined more than 40,000 people completing our Great North Run. This year, at the finish line in South Shields, we showed our great love and respect for honorary Geordie Sir Mo Farah as he completed his final professional race. Will the Leader of the House please put on record the Government's thanks to one of our greatest ever sportsmen, Sir Mo, for his contribution to sport and athletics?

**Penny Mordaunt**: First, let me say "good effort" to the hon. Lady for her impressive run. I thank her for the opportunity, which I am sure we all appreciate, to get on record our thanks to Sir Mo, not just for the amazing sporting events and achievements that we have been able to celebrate with him, but for all that he has done in his charitable work, in helping many organisations and in being an inspiration to many people around the world, as well as in this country. So, on behalf of us all, Sir Mo, thank you.

**Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): Active travel is an important policy for this Government and cycle paths are one part of that programme. However, when cycle paths are designed poorly, as is the case in Doncaster, they can be detrimental to towns and cities. May we have a debate on disastrous town planning and what can be done to reverse this trend, before cities such as Doncaster become ghost towns?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am sorry to hear about the situation in my hon. Friend's constituency. The Government are committed to ensuring that by 2030 half of all journeys in towns and cities are walked or cycled, and enabling more choice about how people get around. That is good for them and for the environment. We have invested more than £600 million in active travel since 2020. That is a record amount of funding, with further investment coming this financial year. Of course, that is a good thing only if local authorities are spending that money well and things are being designed well. I shall make sure that the relevant Departments have heard his concerns and, again, offer some advice as to how he can ensure that this situation is mitigated and in future years rectified.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Figures out this week show that the Government target for secondary school teachers entering training was missed by a whopping 48%. Schools are already struggling to find specialist teachers for their pupils and some schools, including the brilliant Turing House School in my constituency, have had to drop offering computer science at A-level because they cannot find a specialist teacher. The Prime Minister says that he wants our country to be a leader in AI, yet we cannot find the teachers to teach some of those skills. The figures are woeful; only three subjects met their targets—classics, physical education and history. I raised the issue with the Leader of the House back in June and asked for an urgent debate on the crisis in teacher training, recruitment and retention. Given that there is no legislation for us to consider, will she grant an urgent debate in Government time on the issue?

**Penny Mordaunt**: The hon. Lady will know that across all disciplines we have increased the number of teachers by close to 30,000. I am happy to raise the issue of specialist teachers in the specific disciplines she mentioned with the Secretary of State for Education, as Education questions is not until 23 October. We are introducing an enormous amount of legislation but we have given time to the Backbench Business Committee. She will have heard the advert that the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) gave earlier and she will know how to apply for a debate. I encourage her to do so, but I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Education has heard what she said.

**Theo Clarke** (Stafford) (Con): I am concerned about HS2's unacceptable behaviour in not paying my constituents in Stafford on time. I have heard that residents have had to pay their own surveyors, despite the fact that HS2 is meant to pay for them; local agents are waiting months for payment of bills by HS2; and some constituents have even paid HS2's outstanding bills in order to have representation. That is clearly outrageous, so can we have an urgent debate on HS2 compensation?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on her sterling work campaigning on birth trauma and on giving us all the opportunity to discuss that issue at a debate that has been secured, which I announced at the start of business questions.

I am sorry to hear about the situation that her constituents are in. Most compensation claims are resolved and paid promptly, but unfortunately there are some cases where that has not happened. The hon. Lady is clearly campaigning on behalf of her constituents to ensure that they are getting those claims paid in a timely way. I know she has raised the subject with Ministers previously, so I will ensure that the rail Minister has heard her concerns, as Transport questions is not until the end of October.

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Can we have a debate in Government time about the requirements on developers to fulfil planning obligations? In Ackworth, the leader of Ackworth parish council, Martin Roberts, took me to the community facility that has been built by Strata Homes as part of the planning conditions for a large housing development. There is deep frustration in the village that the developers seem to have walked away, left the community facility unable to be opened and have not finished surfacing the roads. Can we have a debate so that hon. Members can express the frustration that people feel about such issues in their area?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman will know how to apply for a debate, but he has accomplished his mission today and we are all disappointed to hear about the company walking away from its obligations. I hope it will make good on those obligations, but I will ask the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities whether it can provide the hon. Gentleman's office with any advice about how he can help the company to come to that conclusion.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that Birmingham City Council was the latest to have to declare an effective bankruptcy because of excessive debt and mismanagement. I have raised my concerns about borrowing at Warrington Council in this House many times. With its borrowing amounting to almost £2 billion—10 times core spending—Warrington Council is not just an outlier, but off the Richter scale in terms of the level of debt that the council has racked up. Is it not time that the Government stopped councils acting like hedge funds? Can we have a debate in Government time on what we can do to effectively manage this situation in local councils? Does the Leader of the House agree that it is time to send in commissioners when councils do not take effective action to reduce their indebtedness?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. He is right that, in Labour-run Birmingham, the council blamed everyone else rather than taking

responsibility for the situation. It blamed the IT system, the Government and women expecting equal pay. It really must stop passing the buck and take responsibility for its own mess. This comes as a stark warning to Labour-run Warrington Council, which I understand is in debt to the tune of nearly £2 billion and has just approved a £145 million loan to another council, despite that terrible financial situation. I know that my hon. Friend has raised this many times and that the Secretary of State has also asked for an independent review. With regard to other councils that are managing their budgets well, we know that there are still tough times ahead. There are many demands on their services, which is why we have confirmed an almost £60 billion package for local authorities this financial year.

**Ms Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): Women continue to contact me with graphic descriptions of their horrifying experiences of NHS hysteroscopies, enduring appalling and unnecessary pain as the medical establishment appears not to believe that any kind of anaesthesia is necessary. I have raised this issue 10 times in the House. I know that the Women and Equalities Committee is currently conducting a very valuable inquiry into women's health and I hope that it might consider this issue. Will the Leader of the House have a word with her colleague, the Minister responsible for women's health, to ensure that her response to that inquiry is as good as it can be and perhaps to push this issue up her to-do list. It is simply not good enough that women are continuing to experience this dreadful trauma.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising this very important matter, which will be of concern to many women across the country. I also thank the Women and Equalities Committee for the work it is doing in its inquiry. I will write on the hon. Lady's behalf to raise this specific issue with the Minister and ask that she contact her office to give her some assurance.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): Housing insecurity is not just a housing issue—I see that in my regular MP surgeries across Dover and Deal. It affects the welfare, health and educational outcomes of children. It affects finances and imposes other costs on adult tenants. It is urgent to bring forward renters' reform. Research by Generation Rent shows that every 15 minutes somebody is evicted under section 21 notices. Can my right hon. Friend confirm the Government's continuing commitment to this important renters reform, in line with the manifesto promises? Can we know when the Second Reading of that vital Bill is expected?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter. She knows I will not be able to give her specific dates, but I will announce them in future business. I can give her the assurance that we are committed to the Renters (Reform) Bill. She will note that the Bill had its first reading on 17 May, and it will include measures to abolish the section 21 so-called no-fault evictions.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I hope the Leader of the House is aware of the Miners' Strike (Pardons) (Scotland) Act 2022, which was enacted in Holyrood and provides a pardon for miners who were wrongly convicted of certain non-violent offences in the 1984-85

miners' strike. Can we have a debate on extending that Act to cover England and Wales? Many miners were subject to trumped-up charges and convictions, including Ray Patterson from Dawdon Colliery in my constituency who has sadly passed away. Many others, like Ray, who lawfully exercised their democratic right to withdraw their labour and protest, were wrongly pursued and prosecuted. Extending the provisions of the Scottish Act would be a good start to repairing existing deep divisions, which, sadly, too many are taking to their grave.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. He will know that Justice questions happened this week. Given that the next opportunity for questions is a little time away, I will write on his behalf. If he could provide me with some further information, that would be helpful. I shall ask the Ministry of Justice to contact him.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is clear from the quantity of issues raised with me by constituents at surgeries, and from talking to local schools, that we are seeing a significant increase in the number of families seeking support for children with special educational needs, and that that growth is putting pressure on local providers. Please can we have a debate on special educational needs and disabilities funding, so that we can explore how it is targeted, and factors such as waiting lists and the number of school places?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. He will know that we have published over £1.5 billion-worth of high needs provision capital allocations for the 2023 and 2024 financial years. This is a priority for the Government. As the Secretary of State will not be at the Dispatch Box for a little while, I shall ensure that she has heard the concerns that he raised.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Leader of the House for confirming that we can have a sitting Friday on 20 October. One important private Member's Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), deals with worker protection. It has secured cross-party support in both Houses and its importance was underlined this week with reports of sexual harassment suffered by female surgeons in the workplace. As it has now passed its final stage in the other place, with Government support, we need just half an hour to do the same in this place. Will the Leader of the House commit to a short window of Government time, if not on the sitting Friday then at the earliest possible time, to ensure that workers across this country have the protections that they deserve?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate all Members who have worked on that Bill, particularly on the cross-party work that they did to secure its passage through the other place when at one point it looked like it might be in jeopardy. I thank all hon. Members who did that, and the Government are very supportive of these efforts. The hon. Lady knows that I have just announced that, subject to the House's agreement, we will be able to consider private Member's Bills on 20 October. Our default position remains that, in accordance with the Standing Orders of this House, private Member's Bills will take precedence on Fridays.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I want to draw the attention of the Leader of the House to a kamikaze council, which I am afraid is wasting lots of public money. Six years ago, Mid Devon District Council started its own building firm. The chief exec and the deputy ran it, although interestingly they had never even built a sandcastle in their lives. Six years and £21 million later, 3Rivers Developments is broke. Instead of cutting their losses, these ridiculous council officers want to keep it going. Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, it is a Liberal Democrat-run council. Like the gullible amateurs they are, the leader is actually a perfume-packer by day, and his fragrant head of scrutiny has vanished to Venice instead of attending the meetings—I believe to fiddle with a gondolier's oar. This whole affair is crackers, farcical and expensive. Can we please have a debate in this place on councils' vanity projects right across the United Kingdom, because councils should not spend public money on projects that they cannot possibly hope to control?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question; it does sound a very sorry situation indeed. I am very sorry to hear that his constituents are having to endure misplaced priorities from his local authority. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns, and I congratulate my hon. Friend for getting his views on record.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Last week the Leader of the House told me that the former Prime Minister, her right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), had many achievements in office, and then struggled to name one. Now I understand that the former Prime Minister is giving a speech next week on how the Government can enable the UK to achieve higher growth. Irony really is dead with that one. For the sake of the millions hit by the Tory mortgage penalty, and as an enabler of her Government, will the Leader of the House please grant a debate on the subject of amnesia?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I look forward to entertaining questions from the hon. Gentleman. I gently say to him that given the Labour party's track record on supporting business and focusing on growth, he might like to attend the former Prime Minister's lecture.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Although I recognise the need for more housing, I have to tell my right hon. Friend that my constituents are angry and frustrated at the number of planning applications that continue to be granted for the villages across my constituency, and the main reason is that they lack the infrastructure and public services that should go alongside them. The anger is compounded when planning inspectors overrule decisions by local authorities, which are taken in the best interests of local people. May we have a debate on the whole planning system, and on how guidelines could be adjusted to ensure that infrastructure and public services are adequate when new developments are given the okay?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He knows that we have a good record on increasing additional homes—we have delivered 2.3 million additional homes since 2010—but we have also sought to protect

[Penny Mordaunt]

the ability of local communities to play a greater role in their local planning system and ensure that local needs are being met and that beautiful, sensitive developments are being created. He will have heard earlier our plans to strengthen the requirement to look at primary care facilities when such developments are being built, and he will know of the work that the chief planning officer is doing to increase capacity in planning departments to make good decisions. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns, and he will have heard the advert from the Backbench Business Committee. I think that is an excellent subject for a debate and encourage him to apply for one.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): After years of my lobbying the Lawn Tennis Association, and a lot of persistence and hard work from Councillor Lisa-Marie Hughes and all the team at OneRen, it is great to see the tennis courts in Robertson Park in Renfrew being fully refurbished with help from the LTA's park fund. The previous Labour council had promised a permanent repair, but unsurprisingly that never happened. Will the Leader of the House find time—in the otherwise hectic business schedule, obviously—for a follow-up to my debate of a few years ago on the Murray legacy, to ensure that Andy, Jamie and Judy leave the legacy that they and all Scots deserve?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate everyone who worked locally in the hon. Gentleman's constituency to secure that facility. The Lawn Tennis Association does wonderful work in many constituencies to ensure that these important and accessible facilities are there. I will certainly write to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to thank her and her officials for the role that they played in making the money available. I hope that everyone will engage with the Lawn Tennis Association, which does terrific work.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Dangerous dogs are doing harm. The Leader of the House will know that serious and organised crime is increasingly moving into the lucrative business of breeding such dogs. There was an attack last week in which a child and a 20-year-old man were severely injured. Last year there were nine fatalities, the majority of which resulted from attacks by the so-called American bully XL dog. This dog needs to be banned. I have made representations to Ministers and the Home Secretary, in her typical wisdom, has said that she supports such a ban. May we have a statement setting out that the Government will do just that under the provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, before more people are maimed and more people die?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue, which other colleagues have also been raising over several weeks. We take it extremely seriously, and I know that urgent advice has been commissioned on what steps can be taken, as the Home Secretary set out at the weekend. Beyond that immediate work, we have a number of measures in place to protect people, including penalties under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, which can put people in prison for a maximum of 14 years or disqualify them from ownership if they let their dogs get dangerously out of control. This is not

just about irresponsible owners, but about people seeing these animals as a particular weapon, and we need to approach the subject with that in mind. I thank my right hon. Friend for raising it. I know the Home Secretary is on the case and I will ensure that colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are also aware of his concerns.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), I too would like a debate on special educational needs. The reason I ask is that there was a report last weekend about the Government signing a contract with a consultancy with the aim of reducing the number of education, health and care plans by 20%. We all know the struggles that parents face to get EHCPs at the moment, so I am horrified by the suggestion that there might now be an additional element of demand management put into the system. Children's right to education should not be subject to that, and there are enough hurdles in the way for parents as it is.

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman will know that SEN provision is a priority for this Government. We have made many improvements to it and increased funding to more than £10 billion in this coming financial year. It is critical that people get provision in a timely way and that children are not waiting, but are able to access education at the start of the school year or when they are due to go into a new school. As I said in a previous answer, given that Education questions are a little time away, I will ensure that the Secretary of State hears what the hon. Gentleman has said today.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in welcoming the fact that John Lewis, Tesco and Marks & Spencer are reducing the price of period pants. It is particularly important when we know that 25% of women say the cost is a barrier to them using those products. Obviously it would be better if we could reclassify period pants as a period product, thus ditching the value added tax, as the "Say Pants to the Tax" campaign asks. May we have a debate in Government time on removing VAT on period pants, making them a more sustainable way of dealing with periods, saving women money and giving them more choices, and taking all possible steps to end period poverty?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I think people would view those items as essential products. The hon. Lady will know how to apply for a debate, but I also suggest that she writes to the Chancellor about this in advance of the autumn statement.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): My constituents have been appalled by accounts of sewage being dumped into the Thames and its tributaries. A recent BBC investigation showed that Thames Water and two other companies had carried out even more dumping than was previously thought. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on this important matter, and can she update me on what action the Government are taking, after many delays?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Recently there have been a number of reports of dry spills and questions about the legality of what certain water companies have been doing. It is

important that monitoring is excellent. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have increased such rates: in 2010 only 6% of discharges were monitored, but at the end of this year I think we will be at 100%—the figure is now in the high 90s. However, we also want to be able to monitor the circumstances in which any discharges are taking place. They have been huge steps forward taken since 2010 in that respect, but there is more to do and we want to see all water companies delivering their infrastructure plans to eliminate storm overflows and similar discharges in short order.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): There are currently 1.8 million people on mental health waiting lists up and down the country, including thousands in my constituency. That is a damning indictment of this Government's record. Despite the staggering numbers, there are rumours that the Government are set to scrap their proposed reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 in favour of more vote-winning ideas. I ask the Leader of the House to scotch these rumours and confirm that this long-awaited and much-needed reform of the Mental Health Act will feature in the King's Speech?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman knows that I will announce business in the usual way and that I cannot pre-empt the King's Speech, but I can reassure him of our commitment in this area. We have a proud record of many steps, not only legislative but in funding, towards getting mental health parity with physical health—that has always been our approach and I think it is a concern to many people across the country—and preventive measures to ensure that people are in the best possible mental health. That is particularly important given what we have been through in recent years with the pandemic—they were very difficult times and I think many people are still scarred by them. I shall ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns, but I know the Secretary of State shares his focus on mental health.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): Local newspapers, both online and in hard copy, are vital, and local journalists do a vital job for our communities and for democracy, but next week members of the National Union of Journalists who work for National World—it owns more than 100 local titles, including the *Yorkshire Post* and, indeed, titles in the Leader of the House's Portsmouth constituency—are set to begin strike action over the company's failure to reach a fair deal on pay.

Will she therefore grant a debate in Government time on the sustainability of local newspaper titles? Does she share my concerns about the danger posed by owners such as National World hollowing out titles in order to boost short-term profits, prioritising shareholder payouts over journalists' ability to afford to do their jobs, and cutting staffing to unsustainable levels?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sure I speak for everyone in the House when I say how important local newspapers and local media are, and not just as a lifeline of information for local residents but to assist in the functioning of democracy and holding people to account. The hon. Gentleman mentions my local titles; in my experience, the editors of these papers take very seriously indeed not only their responsibilities to journalists and those in their employ, but their obligations to the community. I am sure many people across this House have had similar experiences. They are important local services and I sincerely hope that they are not disrupted.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This week marks the one-year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini in Iranian custody. As many hon. Members will clearly recall, she was murdered by the Iranian security authorities because she dared to speak up against Government brutality. In that time there has been no accountability for her death or for the deaths of more than 500 protesters across the country. All that the people in Iran want is freedom, liberty, a democratic society, a people-led Government and the rights of freedom of religious belief to be secured for all. Will the Leader of the House join me and others in this House in calling for justice for Mahsa Amini and all the others who have been murdered?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for again shining a spotlight on those important matters, as he does every single week. I think that particular case struck such a chord with many people around the world, and we very much salute the courage that Mahsa Amini and her peers showed in the protests. Many people who protest against the regime, not just from Iran but from the UK and elsewhere, are subject to intimidation and death threats for calling out its barbarity. Everyone deserves human rights; the women of Iran deserve human rights and the ability to live their life as they wish. I know that there will be many events inside and outside Parliament to mark this anniversary, and that they will be well attended by Members of this place. I thank the hon. Gentleman again.

## Backbench Business

### Football and Dementia

12.30 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House asks the Government to investigate the links between football and sport-related neurodegenerative disease.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and to the number of Members across the House who support the motion, particularly my co-sponsors of the debate, the hon. Members for Moray (Douglas Ross) and for Easington (Grahame Morris). To use an old-fashioned footballing term, what a half-back line the three of us would make—although, if the hon. Member for Easington will forgive me, I will take up position on the left. I hope that we have an engaging debate and that, at the end of it, the Government will commit not just to examining the issue but to recognising our duty to support those suffering from football-related neurodegenerative diseases, and that the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council will conclude that classing those as industrial injuries is the right thing to do.

Many of us in this House are passionate about football and can celebrate just how much joy the beautiful game has given so many, but it is utterly tragic that so many of our heroes have suffered so much from diseases of the brain that academic research shows conclusively are a result of head impacts from careers in football. So many of those suffering, as well as their families, face challenging and distressing times, often without the professional and financial support that would make a difference.

Football holds a special place in the hearts of many people in Scotland and right across these islands. It is a sport that brings communities together, fosters camaraderie and showcases incredible talent. However, beneath the glory and the cheers lies a silent but devastating issue: dementia among football players. Dementia suffered by players should be classed as an industrial injury. That reclassification would provide much-needed financial and social support. As parliamentarians, it is up to us to demand that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations use their powers to support those who need early intervention and appropriate care and support.

Football has been an integral part of Scottish culture since the formation of the Scottish Football Association 150 years ago. Indeed, the oldest international game was Scotland versus England in Glasgow in 1872. Generations of players have graced our pitches, showcasing their skills and passion since the establishment of the game all those decades ago. However, the physical nature of the game, especially in the past, when head injuries were not adequately addressed, has left a legacy of suffering. Many former players are now facing the harsh reality of dementia, which robs them of their memories and quality of life. It is a tragic situation, and it is high time that we acknowledged that that is an industrial injury.

The connection between repeated head trauma and dementia is well documented in medical literature. Studies have shown that chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease, is prevalent among athletes, particularly in contact sports such as football. The repeated blows to the head during tackles, headers and

collisions can result in long-term brain damage, leading to dementia in later life. According to a study by the University of Glasgow, professional footballers in the UK are three and a half times more likely than the general population to die of neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia. That alarming statistic highlights the urgency of recognising the condition as an industrial injury.

In 2002, the passing of Jeff Astle at the age of 59 brought the issue of CTE into the public arena. Jeff, an ex-West Brom and England centre forward, was diagnosed post mortem with CTE. He had suffered from that terrible degenerative illness for five years. We should be grateful for the work done by Glasgow University, which conducted a field study of 7,676 former professional football players from Scotland. Although the headline rate is that footballers are 3.5 times more likely than the general population to die with a neurodegenerative disease, that risk increases to five times more likely for developing Alzheimer's disease, four times for developing motor neurone disease, and double for developing Parkinson's disease. The evidence is all there; these should be classified as industrial illnesses.

There is also a link to the length of a player's career. If they played for less than five years, they are 2.26 times more likely to suffer from brain injuries, but if they played for more than 15 years, that figure rises to no less than 5.2 times. There is a demonstrable link between playing football, heading the ball and brain injuries, and we must recognise that now.

**Dame Caroline Dinanage** (Gosport) (Con): I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, because he is making an excellent speech and I do not want to disrupt his flow. He will have heard that the Premier League and the Professional Footballers' Association have launched a £1 million brain health fund to assist former players and their families who are impacted by dementia. I have a foot in each camp, as a former Health Minister and with my Culture, Media and Sport Committee hat on, so I see the issue from a range of perspectives. A dementia diagnosis is a diagnosis not just for the individual concerned, but for their entire family and all their friends, as we know. September is World Alzheimer's Month. That £1 million health fund is an important step forward, but there are 55,000 male and female former professional footballers in England alone. Does he agree that that fund must be merely a starting point in the work that the various football associations put in to tackle the issue?

**Ian Blackford:** I am very grateful to the hon. Member, who makes valid points. We must recognise that the people we are talking about—the Jeff Astles and the thousands of people who are suffering, as she has identified—were often paid an average industrial wage; they were not well paid. They are in very serious ill health relatively early in life, and they do not have the financial circumstances to support themselves. They often have to rely on family members, and have to give up work early—let us remember that football players very often went into other careers. We are talking about people who are in many cases financially destitute, so that help from the PFA—with which I have worked closely in preparation for the debate—is welcome, but we cannot get away from our responsibility as a society to recognise football-related dementia as an industrial

injury. Let us ensure that there is support for football players, as well as for those who suffer from these conditions in other sports. We cannot leave them, as we have been doing, to die on their own without support. That is the salient point.

The position a footballer played on the park also was a key determinant. Defenders were 4.98 times more likely than players in any other position to suffer from neurodegenerative diseases—perhaps that is not surprising given the propensity for defenders to head the ball. No tragedy better encapsulates the gravity of the risk to defenders than the case of Billy McNeill, the iconic Celtic and Scotland captain. Billy was a legendary figure in Scottish football, perhaps best known for leading Glasgow Celtic to their historic European cup triumph in 1967. Sadly, he became a victim of dementia in his later years. His family revealed how this once mighty figure gradually lost his memory and ability to recognise his loved ones. Billy's case serves as a poignant reminder that dementia in football does not discriminate.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Billy's son Martyn, and as Martyn pointed out, it was not just about heading the ball; it was the multitude of head knocks that were endured in a player's career. Of course, in those days, players tended to stay on the park regardless of their condition. There were no substitutes back then and little, if any, in the way of physio support.

In Scotland, we also pay tribute to Amanda Kopel, who has fought valiantly to highlight the case of her sadly departed husband, Frank. Frank passed away in 2014 aged 65, having been diagnosed with vascular dementia back in 2008. Frank started his career at Manchester United but is perhaps best known for his 10 years with Dundee United. Indeed, he was the first signing of the legendary manager Jim McLean. I see I have an Arab sitting beside me—my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). Amanda fought a long time to make sure that the Scottish Government put in place free personal care for those such as Frank, who at the time were excluded from such support, which was available only to those aged 65 or over when it was introduced in 2002.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My right hon. Friend has correctly identified my football allegiance, not that that was any surprise to him. Frank Kopel was a hero of mine as a young girl. I used to go and watch him and many others running their socks off, and that was the golden era for my team, Dundee United. Amanda Kopel is also a hero for the work she has done. She has been instrumental in moving the dial, and all of us owe her a huge debt of gratitude.

**Ian Blackford**: I was going to come on to say that. I had the opportunity to speak with Amanda last week, and my goodness, what a stoic figure and what a champion she has been in making sure that the support that was sadly not there for Frank is there for those who followed him. Amanda has rightly campaigned to make sure that those aged under 65 living with disabilities and degenerative conditions such as this can get support. I am glad to say that after a long campaign, fought on a cross-party basis, support was extended in Scotland to those under 65 through the 2019 free personal care Bill—actually, we do not refer to it as that; we rightly refer to it as Frank's law.

We owe that debt of gratitude to Amanda, who, despite losing Frank in 2014, kept the fight going so that others facing the same harrowing circumstances could get that support. As Amanda said to me last week, this came too late for Frank, but we can help others. Up until the sad passing of Frank, the couple had been a team for a long time, having become childhood friends in Falkirk in 1958 aged eight and 10. She told me that their first kiss as sweethearts came over a game of postman's knock—a game only too familiar to those of us of a certain age, if I may say so, Madam Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I was referring to myself!

Amanda has supported Frank all her life, but her efforts ultimately meant that so many others were able to get that support. There must be support through access to free personal care, but we still have to do more to make sure that we have early, effective intervention and that critical financial support is accessed through the recognition of these cases as industrial injuries.

I have talked about Billy McNeill and Frank Kopel, but we also recently witnessed the sad passing of Gordon McQueen—yet another legend of our game taken by vascular dementia, lost to his loved ones far too early. We all have our own first love. Mine was Hibernian football club. Dundee United used to be called Dundee Hibernian back in the day. The joy we all have in supporting our heroes leaves us with special memories. When we think of the likes of Peter Cormack and Alex Cropley—Hibernian legends we were blessed to go and watch—now suffering with this terrible disease, it has to act as a wake-up call to all of us. They gave such joy to those of us who went along to Easter Road, but every MP will be able to recount stories of their own heroes battling with this disease. All those players were from an age when, if they were lucky, they were on the same wage as the average worker. Many now face financial hardship while they battle a disease that will ultimately take their life.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If I can take my right hon. Friend back to Gordon McQueen for one second, his first professional club was St Mirren in Paisley, Renfrewshire. I was contacted by many constituents at the time of Gordon's passing who wanted to talk about and pass on their memories of Gordon. Another family blighted by this was the Ryden family from Dunbartonshire, with five brothers. John Ryden played for Spurs, among others; George Ryden played for St Johnstone and our deadly rivals, Dundee; Hugh Ryden played for Chester; and they had two other brothers. John, George and Hugh all contracted neurodegenerative diseases. The other two brothers did not. It is a very small sample size, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is yet more damning evidence of the link between heading footballs and neurodegenerative disease?

**Ian Blackford**: Yes, it is. I made the point that all of us who support football clubs can think of people we know. Sometimes they are in the public domain, but in many cases they are not. We are not just talking about those who played top-flight football; we are talking about those who played in the lower leagues and in the amateur game. This goes beyond the high-profile public cases we are talking about. The common link is a disease that we know is a direct consequence of heading a football in a game that we all love.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am of the same generation as the right hon. Gentleman.

**Ian Blackford:** What?!

**Jim Shannon:** Yes! I can recall well that the footballs in those days were much heavier. They were harder on the foot and on the head, so the dementia and Alzheimer's that came off the back of heading the ball in those days was much more severe than it is today. I am not taking away from what happens today, but that illustrates the issue of the balls used in football at that time.

**Ian Blackford:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because it is a really important one. The damage that could be done to a player by those heavy leather balls, which could be sodden with water, is very real and marked.

I will come to a conclusion, because I know that others want to speak. Let me thank the Professional Footballers' Associations in both Scotland and England for shining a light and campaigning on this issue. In particular, we need to thank Tony Higgins of the Professional Footballers' Association Scotland and Dr Adam White in England for their leadership.

When we talk of footballers who sadly are suffering from football-related brain injuries, it goes way beyond the public cases we know about. There are scores of cases ranging all the way from the Scottish Highland league right up to renowned figures in European football. Just as this ailment does not discriminate, neither should the support that we offer these individuals. By classifying dementia in footballers as an industrial injury, we can ensure that these players receive the support they so desperately need. Financial assistance can cover medical bills and provide for their families, who often shoulder the burden of care. Moreover, it is not just about the money; it is about recognising the sacrifices these players made for the sport and the nation, whatever level they performed at. These people went out on the pitch to do a job and to entertain. Now it is our turn to stand by them as they suffer the consequences of their employment.

Both the UK and the devolved Governments must step up and take responsibility for this issue. The health and wellbeing of former football players should not be relegated to the sidelines. The recognition of dementia as an industrial injury is not just a matter of justice; it is a moral imperative. Dementia among football players is a crisis that demands our attention and action. Reclassifying it as an industrial injury is a crucial step toward providing the necessary support to these players. Moreover, it serves as a reminder that the beautiful game should not come at the cost of players' long-term health.

Let us honour the legacy of those who brought us joy on the pitch by ensuring that they receive the care and recognition they deserve. It is time to take responsibility and make a positive change in the lives of our footballing heroes.

12.48 pm

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing this important debate. As the MP for the city of Southend, I am very aware that Southend is known for two things: the longest pleasure pier in the country, and Southend United, a historic 117-year-old

club that is very much the beating heart of the city. I have spoken many times about the importance of football to our city, so it is obvious that we should have a keen interest in this important debate. I believe that understanding the correlation between football and dementia is vital, not just for the players, the clubs and the medical profession, but for the families and communities that are inevitably horrendously affected when these conditions develop.

The importance of the studies that have now been done cannot be overstated, particularly the research conducted by the University of Nottingham, which found that footballers are almost three and a half times more likely to be diagnosed with dementia than the general population. That study, which has already been referred to, is incredibly significant. Another study that should be noted was conducted by Swedish researchers, who compared the health records of 6,000 elite footballers with more than 56,000 non-footballers between 1924 and 2019—a huge longitudinal study. They found that 9% of male footballers playing in the Swedish top division were diagnosed with neurodegenerative disease, compared with just 6% in the controlled sample: in other words, footballers are 50% more likely than the rest of the population to develop dementia. However, the most interesting part of that study was that it found that goalkeepers, who rarely head the ball, had no observable added risk of dementia or Alzheimer's whatsoever.

I am pleased that the increased level of research is now leading to positive action being taken, and like other Members, I very much welcome the introduction of the brain health fund by the Professional Footballers' Association and the Premier League. Through that fund, we will see £1 million made available to support former players and their families who have been impacted by dementia and other neurodegenerative conditions. I am very proud to say that the Southend United Ex-Players Association is a great exemplar of work in this area. That is really what I want to talk about.

However, I cannot let this moment pass without mentioning that Southend United are facing terrible off-field issues that could tragically see the club being wound up in under three weeks' time, yet they are continuing to play exceptionally well and defy all expectations. Were it not for the transfer embargo and the 10-point deduction due to the winding-up petition, Southend United would be fifth place in the national league. I take this opportunity to recognise the fantastic efforts being made by the Shrimpers Trust, its chairman Paul FitzGerald, and the entire working group—Liam, Sam, Mike, James and Robert—to keep this 117-year-old club alive. Negotiations are ongoing, but I urge everybody involved in those negotiations, including the chairman of the club, to put all personal interest aside before it is too late to save Southend United.

Coming back to the Southend United Ex-Players Association, that association—which does such great work in this area—is one of the largest in the country, with 465 members. It includes players going back as far as the 1950s, and at least a dozen members of SUEPA have some form of degenerative condition. SUEPA, which was founded and is led by Andy Leeder, provides fantastic support to former players. When they are invited to match days, as they often are, from time to time they feel the need to apologise for their memory failing, saying openly, "It was too much heading of the



ball.” SUEPA has seen at first hand the impact of these degenerative conditions on the lives of former players and helps to support them in whatever way it can, from simple things—gestures like presenting ex-Southend United players with memorabilia of their achievements to remind them of the esteem in which they are still held—to completely renovating a garden for another ex-player to improve their quality of life, which has suffered so greatly due to these conditions.

Of course, SUEPA also makes the families aware of the help that is currently available from the Professional Footballers’ Association, and donates on a regular basis to the fantastic Jeff Astle Foundation. SUEPA would like to work more closely with the Professional Footballers’ Association in this area, and I call on the PFA to engage with SUEPA on this hugely important topic. It is my sincere hope that despite the current difficult circumstances that Southend United is facing—I thank the Minister very much indeed for his close engagement with the Shrimpers Trust and all the work he is doing to support the club—we will see SUEPA carry on for years to come, benefiting not just those players who currently play for Southend United but the many Southend United football stars of the future.

12.55 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend United West, and I wish her well in her efforts to secure the future of her team. I would like to express my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee—to my dear friend the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and his colleagues—for giving us the opportunity to participate in this crucial debate in the House of Commons. I also thank my good friend, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), as well as the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), for their support in securing Back-Bench time for the debate.

I also want to acknowledge the Professional Footballers’ Association and the invaluable contribution of Dr Judith Gates, who is one of my constituents. Dr Gates is a distinguished academic and educator, renowned for her expertise in chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the condition that has been linked to repetitive head impacts in sport. On Monday, in Ferryhill in County Durham, we will witness the launch of Head Safe Football, a new charity with a specific focus on brain-related issues in football. Dr Gates spearheaded that initiative at the request of the footballing community, aiming to provide emotional support, evidence-based knowledge and up-to-date research for footballers and their families.

Dr Gates’ dedication to this cause is deeply personal, because she is the spouse of the former England and Middlesborough footballer Bill Gates. Bill was diagnosed with dementia after a career that included a training programme involving hundreds of headers every day. Unfortunately, that led to headaches with migraines, and caused him to retire from football aged only 30. Bill was a renowned centre-half and is remembered for his prowess in the air, but his legacy is promoting Head Safe Football and raising awareness of the link between repetitive head impacts and CTE. I also commend the Scottish Football Association, as the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber did, on its proactive stance on addressing CTE and other brain diseases that are caused through football. Its efforts—including research

initiatives, concussion protocols, restrictions on heading in youth football and limits on repetitive heading in training—have set a commendable example.

The evidence overwhelmingly supports the link between repetitive heading of a football and brain diseases. Several people have suggested to me that that link is theoretical, or that there is some doubt about it, but there is absolutely no doubt: there is a huge amount of evidence, both at home and from abroad, and I will mention some of those academic studies later in my speech. My late father was a coalminer, and sadly, miners were subjected to many industrial diseases including pneumoconiosis, chest diseases, and vibration white finger through the use of pneumatic power tools. Many of my constituents worked in the textile industry—in the rag trade—and many of those women machinists suffered Dupuytren’s contracture as a result of their work. All those conditions are recognised as occupational diseases.

I am looking at the Minister; I do not know whether he has the power to direct—or he could ask—the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to look at the issue. Until CTE is formally recognised as an industrial disease, the compensation that the people involved and their families so richly deserve will not be available to them. We often focus on the top-flight celebrity professional footballer, but many footballers who do not play at the highest level have been similarly exposed to repetitive brain injury. They are living in hardship and we have a duty of care to them.

I want to mention again the study that the University of Glasgow carried out quite recently, in October 2019. It revealed a clear connection between professional football players and neurodegenerative diseases. The research compared the mortality rates of more than 7,600 former Scottish footballers with a general population sample of more than 230,000 individuals—a very large sample. The findings indicated that the mortality rate due to neurodegenerative diseases among the former professional footballers was three and a half times higher, with notable increases in Alzheimer’s disease, motor neurone disease and Parkinson’s disease.

Another study, by the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, published in *The Lancet* here in the UK, showed that footballers are 50% more likely to develop dementia compared with the general population. The research involved comparative analysis of the health records of 6,000 top division Swedish players and over 56,000 non-footballers. The study also explored the contrast between outfield players and goalkeepers. Researchers discovered that, as we might expect, outfield players faced a much higher risk of Alzheimer’s and other types of dementia compared with the general population. In contrast, goalkeepers, who seldom head the ball, showed no increase in Alzheimer’s, dementia or similar conditions.

The World Health Organisation says that between 5% and 8% of the general population over the age of 60 have dementia. However, the figure is different for England’s greatest ever team, the 1966 World cup winning team—we are not being partisan in this debate, but that victory was achieved under Harold Wilson’s Labour Government; I think we also won the Eurovision song contest that year. Research carried out by “Sky Sports” news found that 46%—almost half—of that World cup winning team were suffering from some degenerative brain condition such as Alzheimer’s disease.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my good friend for giving way. I had actually forgotten that England won the World cup in 1966; it is not something we hear often.

The hon. Gentleman has been dealing with the issue of scepticism. Does he agree that many former wingers actually worked the connection out? They were crossing the ball and worked out that the high-profile cases involved either centre halves heading the ball out or centre forwards heading the ball in.

**Grahame Morris:** That is a good point. Academic studies have identified that goalkeepers are not at any more risk than any other member of the population, but centre halves and centre forwards certainly have been. I am talking not just about the 90 minutes of football, but the many hours of training—consistently heading the ball. The general community and football authorities have a duty of care to the people who are suffering.

I want to mention another academic study, from Boston University in the United States. It identified CTE in young amateur athletes who played contact sports. After examining post mortem the brains of 152 participants who had died under the age of 30, it found that 41.4% had signs of CTE. More than 70% of those diagnosed were amateur athletes. The figures are shocking. It is imperative to pursue further research to determine not whether there is a link—there is; that is not in dispute—but whether there is a safe threshold for heading the ball. The ideal level is zero, but football authorities must undertake comprehensive research to fulfil their duty of care to players and establish a head-safe level.

I am not anti-football; I love our national sport, but I want it to be safe. I want us to recognise our responsibility to former players who are now suffering from these terrible conditions. Players themselves are rightly concerned about the risks associated with heading. A study by the Drake Foundation found that 66% of amateur footballers feared the impact of heading the ball on their health, with 70% advocating for guidelines to restrict heading in training and 48% desiring reduced heading in matches. There is also substantial support for extending rules in youth football, with 56% of parents endorsing restrictions on heading in training for children up to the age of 18.

The onus lies squarely on football authorities to ensure that their protocols and practices prioritise player safety. That includes ongoing research, immediate reductions in heading during training and matches, and a willingness to adapt the game to mitigate risks. There is no doubt that the game has changed. When I was first watching the game, it was much more physical. There were substitutions, but I think only one was allowed. The game has evolved and changed and it is right that it has. There will inevitably be a shift in the way football is played, but such evolution is inherent to the sport.

I hope SNP Members do not mind me mentioning the recent England-Scotland match on Tuesday night; I do not mean to be divisive—[*Interruption.*] I have forgotten the score already. I am not gloating.

**Chris Stephens:** I just want to put on the record that Scotland do not do too well in football against lesser nations.

**Grahame Morris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that.

The England-Scotland match was the 150th anniversary of international football, but I am sure it bore little resemblance to the inaugural England-Scotland international game in 1872 in how it was played; I do not just mean the longer shorts and so on. So the game does change and that is not a bad thing. It is critical to recognise that player safety should not be perceived as a threat to the game. Instead, it should be viewed as a new chapter in the ongoing development of a sport that we all cherish.

To safeguard football for generations to come, we must wholeheartedly support the concept of head-safe football. From a Government perspective, the implications are clear: we should adopt a public health approach. The Minister holds a crucial role in funding education and awareness efforts to future-proof football for today and tomorrow. That includes raising awareness about the risks associated with repetitive heading and its links to degenerative brain disease.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned the former West Brom striker, the legend Jeff Astle, who died in 2002 from a neurodegenerative disease associated with heading the ball. The coroner ruled he suffered death through an industrial disease, although it is not identified officially as an industrial disease. It is worth noting that my constituent Dr Judith Gates has diligently lobbied the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council over the past three years to recognise CTE as an industrial disease. Despite presenting extensive and authoritative information and research, the IAC has unfortunately fallen short and failed in its duty to acknowledge this disease. I hope the Minister will be able to assist in his closing remarks in persuading the IAC to look at that again. The evidence supporting that recognition is overwhelming and includes numerous peer-reviewed studies and coroner verdicts. It is high time to prompt the IAC to step on to the pitch and fulfil its responsibilities by acknowledging the issue and taking the necessary actions.

Football holds a special place in our national psyche. It is a sport enjoyed by millions of people each week. It is evident that participation is on the rise. The professional football landscape is evolving, with National League North team South Shields transitioning to a full-time model, signalling growth even in the lower divisions, yet the most remarkable growth lies in the Women's Super League and Women's Championship.

The Lionesses have been a source of inspiration for the nation. We have had tremendous success and it is heartening to witness more young girls embracing football and getting involved in active sport. However, as the women's game expands, it brings new challenges because medical studies indicate that female athletes are almost twice as likely to develop CTE as their male counterparts. I wholeheartedly support the surge in women's football, but amidst the growth the safety of players remains paramount. Given the additional risks faced by female athletes, I hope the WSL will be a trailblazer in establishing head-safe football.

Football is a tight-knit community, and it must address this issue both now and in the future. Clubs that have prospered thanks to the skills and contributions of players such as Bill Gates, my constituent, have a responsibility to prioritise the wellbeing of their players. It is imperative that we take action to support a generation of players who are currently facing the challenges of degenerative brain diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's. With

the clear connection between repetitive heading and CTE now established, it is high time we focus on increasing awareness and providing education at all levels of the game. Additionally, we should implement policies and procedures to restrict heading, whether during training sessions, or in actual games.

I ask the Minister to make it clear to the football authorities that this is their opportunity to deliver head-safe football, reducing the risk today and progressing the research to understand if there is a safe level of heading. If as an industry—a multi-billion-pound industry at the highest level—the football authorities do not accelerate their action on this matter, the Minister must be clear that the Government will have no option but to intervene to protect public health.

I would like to end with the words of my constituent Bill Gates, who on his diagnosis told his family, “It is too late for me, but I want to plant a tree, so others can benefit from its shade.” I thank Judith, Bill and the whole family. I will do everything I can to future-proof football for today’s and tomorrow’s players. I hope the Minister will commit to doing the same.

1.14 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my good friends, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), and the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), who made an excellent speech; I know her predecessor, the great David Amess, would undoubtedly have been here taking part in this debate, pushing the case not only for Southend United, but for his beloved West Ham United. I am sure that when West Ham won the Europa conference league he was looking down with a smile.

I also commend Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament Michael Marra, who has been leading some debates on this in the Scottish Parliament. I commend, too, the *Daily Record* for its support for that campaign. I was very pleased that it published a story highlighting this debate. Michael Marra and the *Daily Record* have had the support of former footballers who have written to the authorities asking that the diagnosis of an industrial injury be put in place, including Alex McLeish, former Scotland manager, and the great Sir Alex Ferguson.

We have now heard evidence of industrial injury from Glasgow and Nottingham universities and Boston University in the United States, and it is clear that there is definitely a link and that football injuries such as head injuries or heading the ball are leading to dementia, Alzheimer’s and other conditions. Why is that? The *Daily Record* published a story about this debate and I made the mistake—a schoolboy error as it would be known in football—of reading the comments afterwards; a journalist once told me, “Never read the comments of a story you’re mentioned in.” There was a lot of scepticism in the comments. What frustrated me was people saying that there was no link.

As I said in my earlier exchange with my good friend the hon. Member for Easington, I am doing some work with Rangers football club former players association on this: they are very interested in this topic because they also think there is something in it. They have been providing support, thanks to donations from their supporters to former players. That includes paying for respite care for the families of those former players who

have dementia and ensuring that family members can have a break for an hour or two a week to go off and do shopping and other things. The work the association is doing in this regard should also be commended.

There was initial scepticism even within the former players community when this link was first talked about, but the advocates of there being something in it and of the fact that the evidence is now clear includes former wingers. They have worked out that they were running down the wing and crossing the ball and it was then being headed by the centre-half or centre-forward, and it is they who are now the high-profile cases—many of the great players that have been mentioned in this debate.

I want to highlight the issue of wages, too, which has also been touched on. There are some sceptics who think we are advocating for rich people. Telephone number-type salaries flash up on Sky Sports News on transfer window final day, but that does not reflect the situation for many who are caught up in this. As has been said, those who played at the top level in the ’60s and ’70s probably earned twice the amount of an average tradesman and those in the lower leagues would have been getting about the same wage as an average tradesman. Some play, of course, for the love of the game, and they might only get £10; I remember some football clubs in Scotland even in the 1990s would just pay travel expenses and £10 for playing, and there were reasons for that, of course.

Gordon Smith, the former Rangers, Brighton and Hove Albion and Manchester City player, and former chief executive of the Scottish Football Association, had a chat with me about this issue, when he heard it was to be debated. He told me that when he signed for Rangers football club, Jock Wallace, the then manager, told him, “I have been trying to sign you, Gordon, for the last four seasons.” Gordon Smith did not know that because, at the time, the registration of a player was held by the club, and if the club chose to keep the player, they would not be told that another football club was interested in them. That was driving wages down.

We need to hear from the Minister today to ensure that this matter is recognised as an industrial injury in the work he is doing with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions. As was touched on by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the ball that was used in the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s was a lot heavier and harder, especially if people were playing in inclement weather. It might surprise you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but in Scotland we do get inclement weather during the football season. If there was rain or the ball was caught in mud, it would become even heavier, and that is almost certainly one of the reasons this situation has come about.

It is fairly clear that there is cross-party consensus on this matter, and I thank all the Members who signed up to have this debate today. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, because we now need a strategy with his Department and the Department for Work and Pensions so that our heroes can get the support they need.

1.21 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am sure that anybody who is interested in football and the many people whose families have been affected by neuro-degenerative diseases, such as dementia, will be interested

[Kirsten Oswald]

in what is being said today. I am sure they will want to support the calls that have been made for research, proper safety provisions and proper support.

There is no doubt that dementia is more prevalent among football players than in the general population. We have heard about the research that underlies that. The recent studies that I have been looking at have found that professional footballers are three and a half times more likely to die from neurodegenerative diseases than the general population. That is quite a statistic. We have also heard about the study in Sweden that concluded that male football players who had played in the Swedish top division had a significantly increased risk. That was among outfield players, but not goalkeepers. The evidence is all pointing in the same direction. It is not necessarily new evidence, either. We have known about this issue for some time, with studies from as early as 2017 showing a great risk of dementia among professional football players. I say this as a very big football fan, but I know there are risks that come with sport. There are risks associated with participating in football, but those risks need to be balanced against the need to keep people safe.

This debate is welcome, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and colleagues who secured it. I put on record my gratitude to Tony Higgins, who was mentioned earlier. He gave a helpful briefing, which I attended, detailing the issues around football and other sports and neurodegenerative diseases. It was thought-provoking, particularly in relation to the health impacts on people who are at their work. I usually look at football through a different lens—I am enjoying the sporting element—but we cannot take away from the fact that the people on the pitch who we watch in football stadiums and on the telly are doing their jobs. Perhaps it is because we are accustomed to looking at it through that particular lens that we are maybe neglecting to consider the welfare of those participating. As a football fan, this is not the situation I want for the sport that I enjoy so much. I cannot think that fellow fans would want their enjoyment of football to be at such a significant cost to health. Things need to change, and it is high time that we saw that happening.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) mention women's football. I had a fantastic constituency visit a couple of weeks ago to the wonderful Busby Girls AFC. It is a new and young club, but it already has hundreds of girls out there playing. Seeing that made me incredibly happy, and I say that as someone who is still smarting, four decades on, from being told at school that girls do not play football and having my football confiscated. I do not think I will ever let go of that issue. Girls do play football, and it absolutely is for girls. Hats off to all the folk at Busby for the brilliant work they are doing.

It is heartening that we can watch women's professional football and enjoy it much more easily now, because it is there for us all to see. We do not have to hunt it out so much; there are so many more opportunities to see women at the top of their game playing football, and so many young girls are inspired by that. That is to be encouraged.

The challenge is that we cannot be entirely clear about the impact that heading the ball has on women and girls and exactly how it is different from men. I have

looked at that question, and the answer is we do not know enough about it. We know it is not good, but we do not know the detail that underlies that, and that is unacceptable. I am aware of reports about Sheila Parker, who captained the England women's team in the early 1970s. She was renowned, apparently, for her heading of the ball with frequency, gusto and accuracy. Her family believe that that has caused significant damage to her health. I send my best wishes to Sheila and her family, but it makes me think, and that kind of sad situation is a glaring example of the thing we cannot escape: we just do not know what the impact is on women of heading a football, and the more that we see women playing football and the more that women are playing football, the more pressing it is that we close the gap in research, and sharpish. Women and girl footballers deserve far better, so research and further discussion are necessary as a matter of urgency.

It is not only girls' clubs that need us to focus on this issue. I also recently visited Giffnock Soccer Centre, which is doing fantastic work at all levels and bringing the whole community into the footballing world. I never like to miss an opportunity to speak about the Mighty Arthurlie in Barrhead. All these clubs and all the other great clubs in East Renfrewshire and all other constituencies also deserve our attention. We have heard clearly that this issue does not just affect those playing at professional level, and the hon. Member for Easington quoted stark figures on brain injury in amateur athletes. We need to focus on this issue at all levels of football, not just the highest levels. I say the highest levels, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned, I am a lifelong and very enthusiastic Dundee United fan. That can be character-building—that is probably the most constructive way for me to describe it.

**Chris Stephens:** Not as character-building as supporting Partick Thistle.

**Kirsten Oswald:** My hon. Friend points out that there are other teams that give us grey hair.

**Chris Stephens:** My hon. Friend seriously believes that supporting Dundee United is character-building, but it is not as character-building as being a Partick Thistle supporter. You need nerves of steel when you go to the theatre of dreams, Firhill stadium.

**Kirsten Oswald:** My hon. Friend is tempting me to giggle in an unparliamentary manner, which I will avoid doing. I will go back to the serious remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber in opening the debate. I thought that his speech was powerful and timely, and he made some important points. I was delighted that he spoke about Frank Kopel. I said earlier in the debate that Frank Kopel was a hero of mine. He was a shining star in an era of shining stars at Dundee United. We were at the pinnacle of our success—I am sure those times will come again—and it was a joy for a football-mad wee girl to watch Frank and his fellow players at that time.

My right hon. Friend also spoke powerfully about the huge contribution of Frank's wife, Amanda Kopel. She has made a huge difference to so many people. She is a giant, just like Frank, and they have both made their mark. We really owe them, and all of the families

who have experienced the utter sorrow of what dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases do, to keep on at this subject.

We know that there is a higher incidence of these terrible diseases among people who play football. The figures noting which football positions people have played in show that, without doubt, there is a link. Despite the availability of very clear evidence over a number of years, it is a shame that more concrete action has not been taken. I would like to see concrete plans to minimise damage in the future. We cannot keep repeating the mistakes of the past.

It is time to consider reclassifying this as an industrial injury. It is absolutely clear what is happening. It is time to look at what all of the structures and guidance for men's and women's football say, and make sure that the appropriate levels of safety and support are built in. It is also time that we all change the way we think about football, so that it can remain a safe and enjoyable pastime well into the future.

1.31 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on introducing the debate, all Members who have made contributions, and those who will reply from their Front Bench? I look forward very much to the Minister's response. I do not mean to put any pressure or expectation on him, but we are very fortunate to have a Minister who always tries to give us a response that is constructive and helpful. We as MPs are trying to garner a response for our constituents. I know that he will listen to all of the points of view put forward and then respond in a way that helps us.

We have asked the Government to investigate the links between football and sport-related neurodegenerative disease. A 2019 public study revealed that football players were at increased risk of diagnosis of neurodegenerative disease. The risk increase was observed for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, but not for all types of neurodegenerative disease, and for outfield players but not goalkeepers. As others have said, if three or four of the 11 who play in a team do not have it but the others do, there must be an issue. The call for this to be classified as an industrial injury is heavily backed in Northern Ireland as well, so it is important for me to be here to give that Northern Ireland perspective.

Last year, some of Northern Ireland's most iconic footballers reunited to raise funds for Dementia NI at the Spirit of '82 event in Belfast. It was held in memory of their good friend and teammate, the legendary Northern Ireland manager Billy Bingham, who had been living with dementia for 16 years before he passed away on 9 June 2022. I do not think there is much between my age and that of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, but I am old enough to remember Northern Ireland playing at the World cup in Spain in 1982. I had the opportunity to meet all the football players and Billy Bingham, who was an inspiration to me at that early age. He was an inspiration on the pitch as a footballer, and he then became an inspiration as a manager.

I was also in Mexico in 1986, which was before I got married—everything changes when we get married, and we are not able to get away the same as we used to—and on coming home I had the opportunity to get the autographs of the Northern Ireland team and Billy

Bingham. A Brazilian football supporter and I swapped a Brazilian shirt and a Northern Ireland shirt, so I have in my office a shirt with the autographs of all the Northern Ireland team of 1986 plus Billy Bingham. I pass that shirt every day and remember very clearly that he was a player who inspired me and inspired us all, yet he passed away as a result of the game he played so well. It is important to be here today to speak on behalf of the Billy Bingham of this world and others who have suffered and passed away.

It is fantastic that high-profile footballers recognise the link. That is also true of retired managers such as Sir Alex Ferguson and Alex McLeish. They were great players who we all looked up to as young boys and young men. That emphasises the importance of investigating this link further and gathering the evidence.

A study has found that footballers are 50% more likely to develop dementia than the rest of the population—that is evidence, factually based and cannot be ignored—fuelling calls to restrict rules for heading a football. Classifying it as an industrial injury would mean that former footballers suffering with the disease would be able to claim certain benefits for industrial injuries that occurred in the workplace. Their employment and the source of their income is the sport that they play. I support those calls, given the evidence, which is becoming clearer. My belief has been reinforced by all Opposition and Government Members who have spoken today. They have been galvanised by what they have heard in their own constituencies and from their own personal experience. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) spoke of what Rangers football club is doing. It is really important to have that in place.

The other evidential base is from football in the States—or soccer, as they call it. I find it hard to get my head around the word “soccer”, because we call it football. In the US, they have imposed guidelines limiting players' exposure to heading, despite controversy over whether dementia is caused by heading the ball. The fact is that, as has been said, they have introduced precautions. The hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Glasgow South West referred to evidence from the universities. There is quite clearly an evidential base in the United States of America.

**Chris Stephens:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jim Shannon:** Absolutely.

**Chris Stephens:** I have always wanted to intervene on the hon. Gentleman. He has mentioned Billy Bingham and footballers in Northern Ireland. I am sure he will agree that it is important to note that the wages in Northern Ireland football are not at the elite level that we read about in all the sensational headlines in the newspapers. Does he therefore agree that access to the industrial injury benefit will help former footballers and their families?

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The wage structure in Northern Ireland is nowhere near that level. There is some expectation of teams in the Irish league. There have been many buy-outs and clubs with lots of money-making financial investments, but let us be honest: in the years past many people probably played because they loved the sport. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

[Jim Shannon]

Will the Minister undertake discussions with our American counterparts and share information so as to ensure that we have the most accurate information available on which to base our response to tackling this issue?

**Grahame Morris:** The hon. Gentleman makes some great points about international comparators and co-operation. Earlier he raised the issue of the old fashioned footballs—we used to call them caseys—that would be soaked with water. They were like heading a cannonball. It has been suggested to me in mitigation that in the modern game the footballs are much lighter, but that is not actually true. They may be of a different construction, but they are the same weight and they travel much faster—40, 50 or 60 mph. If I am not mistaken, Peter Lorimer, the Scottish footballer who played for Leeds—or perhaps it was a Manchester City player—had the record for the hardest shot, of more than 70 miles an hour. Imagine being hit on the head regularly—that must cause some damage. I do not think the new construction of the balls is any mitigation.

**Jim Shannon:** The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and I are of a certain vintage, and therefore probably remember those footballs better than most. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) is absolutely right. It is about the force and the distance of the ball, how hard it is hit and the person on the receiving end.

There is no reason that the correlation and the evidential base that everyone has presented should not be considered for industrial payments for our retired footballers. There is much cross-party support, mostly from the Opposition Benches, though that does not take away from the Government side—those who have spoken are of the same mind. There is support from lobby groups and football clubs that have contacted us. The information that we have received over the years from interactions with retired footballers and ex-managers cannot be ignored. We must do our best to support them. This debate is so important to all constituents and footballers.

We have a love of football. We cherish the game of football on a Saturday afternoon. In my house, my wife supports Leeds, my second son Ian supports Chelsea, my third son supports Arsenal, my eldest son supports Ipswich, and I support Leicester. At 10 minutes to 5 on a Saturday it is interesting when the scorecard comes in.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

1.42 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I believe has a wee soft spot for one of the Glasgow teams, and not Partick Thistle.

It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate on such an important subject, given that so many young people across these islands partake in football-related activity on a regular basis. I thank all Members from across the House for their heartfelt contributions. It is clear that we all love the game of football, but it is also clear that we want improvements in this area for former footballers.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) not only on securing such an important debate, but on his informed contribution. He knows, as I do, that this issue is keenly felt in Scotland, with high-profile public campaigns from the families of those affected, as well as world-leading pioneering research carried out in our Scottish universities. Such research undertaken by the University of Glasgow has found that professional footballers are three and a half times more likely to die of neurodegenerative diseases than the general population—three and a half times more likely to die of dementia, Alzheimer's or other associated diseases. A previous study from the same university in 2021 found that defenders are five times more likely to develop dementia than the general population are.

Those of us who have played the game at any sort of level—competitive or otherwise—or who are just passionate about the sport will know that heading the ball is an art form in itself and an intrinsic part of the game. It is a skill that not many who play the game can fully master: a mighty last-ditch clearance by a committed defender; a leap and flick on to the back post; or my own favourite, the diving header goal—a majestic sight. These studies show us that they are also dangerous. That is why we must be confident that we are doing everything we can to ensure the safety of all the young people who enjoy football today, to protect their health now, in the long term and in later life.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, Billy McNeill was one such defender—a man with a glittering playing career in the game. He always comes to mind when discussing dementia in football. He was a hero to many, myself included. Born in Bellshill, he was the first man from the United Kingdom to put his hands on the European cup and hold it aloft. He was world-renowned for his heading capabilities. In 2017 his family announced he was suffering from dementia, and in 2019 he sadly passed away. I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my gratitude to the Billy McNeill Commemoration Committee in Bellshill for the fantastic work it has done and continues to do in raising awareness of Billy's life and of dementia in football, and in ensuring that the story of the great Billy McNeill will be told for generations to come.

A study published in 2019 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, jointly funded by the SFA and the Professional Footballers' Association Scotland, compared the causes of death of more than 7,000 Scottish male former professional footballers born before 1976 against those of more than 23,000 matched individuals from the general population. It was the first to definitively identify a link between football and dementia. Responding to those findings back in 2019, the head of Alzheimer Scotland welcomed the findings of the team led by Dr Willie Stewart, stating that they provided

“what can only be described as conclusive evidence that there is a definitive link between playing professional football and a higher incidence of dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases.”

Like many colleagues, I met Tony Higgins of the PFA Scotland—and of Hibernian folklore—here in Parliament a few months back, and heard about the real-life examples of former footballers facing ill health. The PFA Scotland is committed to this issue not only through funding excellent studies such as the one I mentioned, but by investing in long-term aftercare for former footballers and their families, many of whom played the game at

the very highest level but in an era that did not bring the financial rewards or comforts that many of today's players enjoy.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Member is making a very powerful speech, among many powerful and important speeches, about a sport that we all love. We have talked a lot about professional and elite football, but when it comes to the young—I declare an interest, as my nephew plays junior football—there is not the same financial reward, but the same danger is involved in heading a football. Do we need to take a much broader approach and ensure that those at all levels, right down to youth football, are encouraged to tell players about the dangers?

**Steven Bonnar:** The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Boys and girls of five and six in young and junior football are the professional players of tomorrow. We need to protect them right the way throughout their involvement in the game, because that will be for the benefit of all. Football brings so much joy and goodness to our communities—we all know that—but we must safeguard our young players.

A study in Sweden published earlier this year, which has been mentioned, concluded that male football players who had played in the Swedish premier league had

“a significantly increased risk of neurodegenerative disease compared with population controls. The risk increase was observed for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias...and among outfield players, but not among goalkeepers.”

That further solidifies what we know about the game and what the Scottish studies told us. The risks have been known for several years now. Studies as early as 2017 showed the greater risk of dementia among pro footballers, particularly defenders. No time should be wasted in moving forward with further research to properly define the main risk factors and what must be done to minimise them. But we are not much further forward at all from 2017. It is unfortunate that despite evidence having been available on this issue for several years, we are still to see more concrete action taken. There have, of course, been some changes in light of those studies, such as children younger than 11 not being taught to head the ball in training conducted by the SFA, but is that really going far enough? Another way to look at that statistic is that we are still currently allowing children aged 11, 12 and 13 to persistently head the ball in training.

Another progressive step, it could be said, is the introduction of concussion substitutions in the English premier league, a new rule that allows for a permanent substitution to be made if a player suffers a head injury. The new rule was approved in January 2021. So far, I am aware of only one attempted use of the rule so far in England. However, there was an error in the paperwork which meant that the concussion substitute could not in fact be utilised. It was interesting to hear comments about that from Tottenham Hotspur manager, Ange Postecoglou. If we are going to do this right, we must ensure that safety, not paperwork, is the most important thing. I know of no concussion substitutions taking place in Scotland yet, although we have adopted the five substitutions rule—up from the previous three subs per match. That encourages managers to use a substitution should a player take a knock to the head during a match.

Other advice on heading the ball seems to be limited. While lighter footballs are now commonplace, as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) pointed out, they travel a lot faster and are hit a lot harder in the modern game. We must ensure we do everything we possibly can to protect young individuals now, as well as in later life.

Some campaigners have been calling for a complete ban on the practice of heading the ball to eliminate the increased risk of dementia among footballers. We have all heard about the love we have for the game today. I do not know how that is manageable or workable in the professional game. As I said, heading the ball is an intrinsic part of the match. Some will tell us that rugby, mixed martial arts and boxing also come with heightened health risks—there is the potential for serious injury, and perhaps even fatality. That is undeniable. There must always be a balancing of the sport against the risk. We as legislators and those who govern the game should always seek to make things safer wherever we possibly can.

1.52 pm

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) and my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate.

Football is at the heart of so many of our communities, bringing people together in both victory and defeat. At all levels, playing football brings immense benefits to our physical health, mental health and sense of belonging. But despite its contribution to our society, culture and economy, there is now increasing evidence that footballers in both the men's and women's game are at greater risk of dementia. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) suggested, former footballers may be 3.5 times more likely than others to die from a neurodegenerative disease. In recent years, we have seen many of our beloved former players live with, and tragically die as a result of, dementia. That link must be taken seriously. Action is needed to prompt new research to inform our understanding of the issue and to ensure that responsibility is taken across the board for the welfare of players at every level.

That action matters. It matters for the former players and their families who have already experienced the life-shattering impacts of dementia, often without any recognition or support. It matters for players in the midst of their career, who must be equipped with accurate information and supported in taking preventative measures. And, of course, it matters for families up and down the country, so that adults and children alike can continue to participate in football and feel certain they are enjoying its benefits, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) highlighted in the context of the women's game.

Research is vital to progress in both the prevention and treatment of football-related dementia. Published in the same year as Alan Shearer's ground-breaking documentary “Dementia, Football and Me”, the 2017 University College London and Cardiff University study was among the first to identify a connection between professional footballers and dementia. Since then, studies from the University of Glasgow, the Drake Foundation and the University of East Anglia have only solidified

[Stephanie Peacock]

our understanding of that link, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington highlighted. Those studies, alongside the tireless campaigning of former footballers and their families, have been absolutely crucial in prompting change.

From the advice that children under 12 should no longer head footballs in training to the newly established Brain Health Fund, it is to the credit of every researcher and campaigner involved that the first protections and support measures have now been put into place. However, that momentum must continue. Further analysis will be critical to ensure the sport is able to take the correct preventative measures, and to offer meaningful support to those already impacted. I therefore look forward to hearing from the Minister what the Department has been doing to encourage and support research, as well as to work with football governance to ensure that it is ready to take any necessary actions as soon as possible.

1.54 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew):** I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this important debate. I thank all Members for the constructive manner in which it has been held. I would also like to take this opportunity, if I may, to welcome my new opposite number, the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). I look forward to working with her very closely on the important issues we will be facing. I also put on record my thanks to her predecessor, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), who was extremely constructive and very easy to work with. On that note, there has been much coverage of the fact that the new shadow Secretary of State has not attended a football or rugby match before, so may I take this opportunity to extend my plus-one to the next game I am invited to?

I have enjoyed the cross-party approach to the debate. The hon. Member for Easington talked about the England win in 1966 under a Labour Government. Well, this Conservative Government are very proud of the tremendous successes and efforts of the Lionesses.

**Ian Blackford:** It is important that we applaud the growth and success of the women's game, and reflect on how much things have changed. In Scotland, we often think about a woman called Rose Reilly, who was not permitted to play football in Scotland and had to go abroad. She ended up as the captain of the Italian women's team that won the World cup. Thank goodness people can now play for Scotland or for the Lionesses. We should make sure that we get behind women's football and support it, including in relation to dementia and other such diseases.

**Stuart Andrew:** I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman. I will come on to women's football shortly, because some of the contributions have highlighted the fact that we have come such a long way, which is fantastic, although it is extraordinary that we have had to go on this journey.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I am pleased to say that I will be visiting his constituency next week—clearly has a very wise wife. Not only did

she marry him, but she is a Leeds United supporter. He worried me slightly as he built up the expectations for my response to this debate, but I will endeavour to do what I can.

The issue of dementia in football is clearly very important, and it touches the hearts of many people. Indeed, we have heard some extraordinary examples today, bringing testament to extremely emotional stories and accounts such as those of Jeff Astle and Gordon McQueen. I am grateful to Members for raising those important personal stories, because it is important to remember that we are talking about individuals and their families. The fact that the debate has drawn such cross-party support demonstrates the depth of feeling about this vital issue across the House, as well as in wider society.

The safety, wellbeing and welfare of everyone taking part in sport is absolutely paramount. On top of that, I know how important football clubs and players are to our local communities. Recent examples of dementia-related deaths of former footballers are of great concern to Members across the House, and certainly to me as the Minister for sport. The vast majority of people participate in sport safely, but we know that head injuries in sport do occur. Player safety must be a major focus for sport, as we highlighted in our recently published strategy, "Get Active". Much more work is still needed to ensure that robust measures are in place to reduce risk, and to improve the diagnosis and management of sport-related head injury at all levels of sport. That should apply not just during matches, but during training. There should be provision for both professional and amateur players. That will be a key focus as we start to implement the strategy. I can assure the House that I will continue to make sure it is a high priority for me personally.

As we have heard, sports' national governing bodies are rightly responsible for the regulation of their sport and for ensuring that appropriate measures are in place to protect participants from serious injuries. We look to individual sports to take responsibility for the safety of their participants. I am pleased to say that positive progress has been made in this area across different sports over recent years.

In football, for example, as others have mentioned, the football associations have changed their guidelines to prevent under 11s heading footballs during training in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, it is not just national governing bodies that are contributing to improvements in player safety. Player associations play a valuable role in supporting professional players, providing short and long-term support to those affected by sporting injuries. In all the meetings that I have had with those player associations, I have taken every issue that they have raised with me up with the relevant agencies straightaway, because I recognise its importance.

The Government are also leading work on brain injuries in sport, specifically concussion. As part of that, my Department has worked with interested parties to develop the first ever single set of shared concussion guidelines for grassroots sport across the UK. It was published in April. The guidelines were developed by a panel of UK and international experts in the field of sport-related concussion. They build on the world-leading work that was first conducted in Scotland; I pay tribute to Professor Willie Stewart for the work that he did. We remain grateful to Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish



colleagues for their support in expanding the remit of the new guidelines to cover the whole of the UK. I also want to say thank you to Professor James Calder and Laurence Geller for helping us to get to this point.

**Grahame Morris:** On that point about concussion injury, I assume that that would happen from, say, a clash of heads in a football game, but that does not address the fundamental point of repetitive injury through many hours of heading the ball in football training. Is the Minister in a position to have discussions with his colleagues in the DWP about referral to the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, because the evidence is clear?

**Stuart Andrew:** The hon. Gentleman is pre-empting later parts of my speech, but I think that it is important to highlight the concussion guidance. It is important that we give information to grassroots organisations that often will not have medical advisers on hand. Having that information available for grassroots volunteers is incredibly important and valuable, but that is the start of our work.

As I say, the guidelines are for the use of everyone involved in grassroots sports from school age upwards: participants, coaches, volunteers and parents, as well as those working in education settings and healthcare professions. The guidelines are especially helpful for grassroots players and being able to recognise and respond to concussion symptoms appropriately when no trained medical person is on hand; as we know, that is more likely to be the case than in a professional setting. Through the guidelines, we want to encourage more people to enjoy the benefits of being active and playing sport and we hope that they will prove to be a helpful tool in reducing the risks associated with concussion.

We have also established a research group on concussion in sport. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) and the hon. Member for Easington mentioned international experts, and I am pleased to say that they will be represented so that we draw on the latest and best information. The group is working across the sport and academic sectors to identify the key research questions on sports concussion that need to be addressed. The aim is for the research efforts to become more co-ordinated across sport so that the sector can pool its understanding and expertise. Just a few months ago, I went to see some of the incredible work that Loughborough University is doing in this area and some of the equipment it uses to test what would make sport safer for all.

Alongside that work, DCMS has established an advisory concussion in sport innovation and technology panel to identify tech innovations to help with concussion in sport issues on an ongoing basis. The Department for Health and Social Care is formulating the Government's new strategy on acquired brain injury, including dementia, and DCMS is feeding into the process to ensure that those who play sport are properly represented. We remain committed to working with the sector to help to make sport safe and enjoyable for everyone, including through technological solutions for the prevention of concussion.

To turn to more specific points, as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), mentioned, there have been developments within football, too. The Professional

Footballers' Association and Premier League recently established a new care fund to provide financial support to former players who have been affected by dementia and their families. The initial amount of £1 million will be made available immediately to provide discretionary financial support to former players and their families to help to improve the quality of their life. I have discussed the great work of the Professional Footballers' Association on player welfare with its chief executive.

As it is the first of its kind for English football, I welcome the creation of the fund and hope it will provide help to the former players who need it most. We will continue to liaise with the football authorities in support of funding for cross-game initiatives. The Professional Footballers' Association also has a dedicated brain health team that provides a range of support to former players and their families, including assistance with claiming state support and benefits.

During the debate, there has been discussion about whether dementia in footballers should be treated as an industrial disease. The Department for Work and Pensions provides specific support to people with industrial injuries through industrial injuries disablement benefit. As many will know, DWP is advised by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, an independent specific body, on changes to the list of occupational diseases for which IIDB can be paid. I know that many Members feel strongly that professional footballers' access to such benefits should be explored, as was mentioned by many members, including the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

The hon. Member for Easington asked whether I could instruct the IIAC. If I had that power, I would love to use it, but I am pleased that the council is considering any connection between professional sportspeople and neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia. The council will publish its findings when its investigation is complete in due course, but given that the question has been raised a number of times, I will of course highlight the debate and the views raised in it to my colleagues in the DWP. It is important to remember that this is a complex area of work, and that going through the raft of published scientific literature that is available is significant work.

**Chris Stephens:** That is a very helpful response from the Minister and we would certainly welcome that. Could he perhaps facilitate some discussion with the IIAC and hon. Members who might be interested? I think a number of us would be interested to have such a discussion, if he could feed that back. We could then report back to our constituents. I welcome the comments that he has just made.

**Stuart Andrew:** The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the IIAC is an independent body, but I would absolutely be more than happy to write to it or to my colleagues in DWP to say that colleagues in this House would welcome the opportunity to engage with the council.

**Grahame Morris:** I welcome the Minister's response; that is real progress and we are very grateful for it. I do not want to pre-empt what he is going to say, but in terms of exerting his influence—particularly over the Premier League, for example, which is awash with huge sums of money to assist in this process—may I say that because I represent a coal mining area, I have had

[Grahame Morris]

occasion to try to push the IIAC and to get it to make decisions on conditions affecting coal miners, and it notoriously takes an age. If there is anything he can do to expedite that, it would be much appreciated.

**Stuart Andrew:** Although I am flattered that Members think I have all this power to force people to do things, I am totally aware of my own limitations. I will do what I can and I will certainly highlight the issue. I do understand.

This is a complex area of work. There is a lot of information and research for the advisory council to consider, and it is right that it does so properly, so that it can come up with the right conclusion. Once the advisory council has reported, colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions will carefully consider any recommendations.

It is also important to talk about dementia research, which is important to tackling the issue. I am delighted that the Department of Health and Social Care will double funding for dementia research to £160 million a year by 2024-25, spanning all areas of research, to deliver evidence to help us prevent, diagnose and treat dementia. The Government launched the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission in August 2022, and this will focus on accelerating the development of new treatments and boosting the number and speed of clinical trials for dementia. Departments are doing a raft of other things, recognising that this is an incredibly important area and that this disease has a big impact not only on sufferers but on the wider family network and carers.

I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West has taken the opportunity to wear the colours of her beloved football club, and I pay tribute to her for the immense work she is doing to support that club through these difficult times. She is right about the support that many clubs offer. She referenced SUEPA and it is important to acknowledge that.

The hon. Members for Easington and for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) both mentioned women's football, where there is a lot for us to celebrate—it is amazing to see what has happened. The hon. Lady was told that she could not play football and, sadly, that was still the case after the Lionesses came home victorious from the Euros, with only 63% of girls finding they were able to access football at school. Thanks to their persuasive campaigning and our work with the Department for Education, I am pleased to say that we have made big strides in levelling that playing field. I look forward to seeing women's football go from strength to strength. We commissioned an independent report; I am grateful to Karen Carney for all her work. We are considering

many of her recommendations. Of course, players' physical and mental health features in the report and it is important that we include it.

There is much good work going on in this area but, of course, there is always more to do. We recognise the strength of feeling on the issue of dementia in football and the effect it has on those who suffer from this terrible illness, as well as on their families. We will continue to work with the sport sector, including the football authorities, to ensure that player safety is prioritised so that everyone can take part in sport as safely as possible.

2.13 pm

**Ian Blackford:** I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have participated in this debate, and I thank the Front Benchers for their contributions, too. My goodness, this has been an example of how the House can come together across parties. After the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Moray (Douglas Ross) appeared with me before the Backbench Business Committee, within 24 hours, 28 Members had sponsored the debate. This issue and the love of football strike at the heart of so many Members. There is an appreciation for the travails that so many football players have faced after suffering terrible brain injuries over the past few decades.

I applaud the Minister for his considered and constructive response. My goodness, there is an opportunity for the House to demonstrate the scale of our concern to the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, representing the interest of all our constituents. I reiterate the comments of my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), that it may be helpful for us to represent those concerns direct to the advisory council, which I hope is watching and has listened to our deliberations this afternoon, recognising that there is a case for it to act at pace because so many people are suffering.

We commend all the actions that have been taken, including the financial support provided by the Football Association in England, but people are suffering today. People have suffered for far too long, so let us make sure that the advisory council completes its work and concludes from the overwhelming evidence that these injuries must be seen as industrial injuries. We, as legislators, can then fulfil our responsibility to look after our constituents who need support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House asks the Government to investigate the links between football and sport-related neurodegenerative disease.

## Support for Bereaved Children

2.15 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to develop a protocol for ensuring that bereaved children are made aware of and have access to practical and emotional support through public and third sector agencies.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee and everyone who supported my application.

I have a jigsaw puzzle at home that my sisters recently had made for me for a big birthday. It is an old photograph of the family at Christmas, when they were just seven and 12—it was the last Christmas before dad died. They did not have to explain to me why they had chosen that picture, as I knew from the moment I unwrapped the present. There is an unspoken bond between the three of us, and with our mum when she was alive, and that bond is understood by families all over this country.

I have an interest to declare, of course, as I am both an adult who was bereaved as a child and the mother of a bereaved child. Every day, more children in this country experience what we experienced when our lives were turned upside down. The trauma of losing a loved one—not just a parent but a loved one—is often sudden and inexplicable. Every 20 minutes a parent dies in this country, and around 127 children are bereaved every day, but that figure is only for parents, and I say “only” advisedly. We do not have figures for the number of children who lose grandparents, siblings or friends, all of which are traumatic losses for a young person.

**Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Supporting bereaved children is incredibly important, and the physical presence of their loved ones is a huge part of that. My Broxtowe constituent Aaron lost his wife Bernadette in childbirth. He did not qualify for leave or pay due to the time he had been employed so, while going through the heartache of losing his wife and raising his son Tim, he had the added stress of the employment situation he faced. No one should be in that position, so does the hon. Lady agree that there must be a day one right to leave and pay for those who lose a partner in childbirth, so that children can be with their loved ones?

**Christine Jardine:** The circumstances the hon. Gentleman outlines are dreadful and affect so many people in this country every day. We often do not acknowledge the amount of practical and emotional support and help that people need to get through this and, as he says, Aaron should have had support and should have been able to look after his child without having to worry about the financial implications.

I was recently privileged to meet a group of bereaved children who had come to Parliament while handing in a petition at Downing Street asking for exactly what we are talking about today. Listening to them, I could not help but be frustrated that so little has changed in the decades since I went through what they have experienced. Although there are support systems through schools and wonderful charity organisations such as Winston's Wish, which had arranged the petition, I am told it is still the case that, unless a family is already in touch

with social services, those services have no way of knowing about a child's bereavement or that a child needs support. That means that brave children in this country must often still rely on luck and search engines to find the help they need. It is children of all ages, even those who might consider themselves, as I did, a young adult, who need support through those circumstances, but at the moment we have no official way of keeping track and matching up children with organisations.

These organisations tell me that they know the children are out there and need their help, but they just do not know who and where they are, or, sadly, how to get in touch with them. Child Bereavement UK told me:

“As a service that works tirelessly to meet the needs of bereaved children, young people and families, one of the hardest things to hear someone say is, ‘I only wish I'd known you were there when this happened to our family’. Services like ours at Child Bereavement UK are there, but without knowing who and where bereaved children and young people are, they are invisible and the chances of them finding the practical and emotional support they need to navigate life after bereavement are severely diminished.”

That is a crucial point: this is about navigating life after bereavement, and not just immediately after. For children, this can be about more than that immediate period. My sisters and I were lucky, as we had support around us—mum was brilliant—but perhaps there was something more we could have had. Perhaps we could have had more support to make it easier for us and for her—something we did not know about—because it is tough and you just get through the challenges as you can, and not just then. My apologies if this seems ungrateful to anyone, but one reason why I hope the Government are able to take this on, take it across Departments and recognise that it is a cross-departmental issue is that we are dealing with a lifelong challenge. It does not go away miraculously when we hit 30, 40 or 50; I have no idea when it will go away—if it ever does, I would be grateful. More than one person I spoke to cautioned me, when I began to raise this issue, that I might be opening an emotional can of worms for myself. One group I have spoken to, Adults Bereaved as Children, tells me that anyone who loses a parent, grandparent, sibling or friend can be affected in ways that they do not recognise and can be affected later in life when this comes back. I am told that they have an increased risk of depressive symptoms and anxiety. They also have physical health symptoms and can suffer serious illness, have riskier health behaviours and face earlier mortality. Educationally, we can suffer lower than average scores. We are less likely to be employed at the age of 30 and, sadly, we are over-represented in the criminal justice system. Those are only the personal implications. For the NHS, there are ongoing costs involved in dealing with people who have mental or physical health issues as a result of not getting the support they needed when they were a child and this coming back in later life. We must also consider the economic impact of undermining the contributions that so many people could make to our economy by not making sure that they have the support they need at a traumatic time. So the ramifications of this are huge and they are much more than just personal.

In the past few months, I have spoken to people in the voluntary sector, written to the Scottish Government and sat down with the former children's Minister, the

[Christine Jardine]

right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho). Without exception, they have been supportive. Everyone recognises that there is a problem, wants to help and outlines the wonderful services that are available. However, pinning down the solution is the problem: how do we connect these services with children who are grieving? That is the issue that everyone seems to grapple with, but should it really be difficult?

As I have said when we have talked about this previously, we have debated the merits of a registry for bereaved children. In modern society, it should not be difficult to find people who need support, as we have registers and statistics for just about everything. A digital society makes a lot of things easier; it is often too easy to keep track of things. For example, my medical records are online, as I am sure all of ours are, in order to make it easier for the NHS anywhere in the country to know our history if we collapse somewhere away from home. I hate to think of exactly what information can be scanned from my passport or my national insurance number. But if, God forbid, anything were to happen to any of us who have children, there would be no way of checking whether they were getting the support they needed and whether they were okay—whether they were safe, looked after, coping with the trauma they were going through or whether they were perhaps just needing someone outside their immediate family to talk to. The immediate family is vital and supportive, and schools do a fantastic job in supporting young children, but that may not be the ideal way of ensuring that every child gets the right help. What happens if they move home, to a different school? Who tells the school about this? Do they tell the school or will they be too embarrassed? What happens if they do not want their classmates to know just how bad they are feeling and they need more than the school can provide? Where is the network to ensure that they get that?

That is why today I am calling on the Government to look at how we establish a new and necessary protocol to help a wide range of public bodies—the NHS, local authorities and schools—to establish where and how children who are grieving can find the support that is right for them and perhaps put them in touch with a charity organisation that can give them support. We need to make the children's carers and the children themselves feel valued and looked after. This should be a low-cost, low-effort task to help the charities connect with grieving families, but to help them in this process would also have undeniable benefits for many people in our communities. It would help them process difficult, traumatic experiences and overcome the problems I talked about earlier. All we need to do, and all I ask the Government to do, is invest some time, thought and care into coming up with what should be an administrative solution—this should not require legislation. This might be something as simple as noting, when a death is registered, whether a child might need support, and identifying which Department can best administer it and the easiest way to do it.

When I met those children who had been brought here by Winston's Wish to deliver the petition, it was heartbreaking to hear their stories. I have not met anyone in this place who would not sympathise with them and want to address the problems some of them

faced in getting support; we recognise the significance of helping them. There is no political issue here; there is no divide over whether or not we should be supporting our children and our adults who perhaps did not get the support they needed when they were younger and perhaps did not even realise they needed it, because the advice was not there for them. We all want to do this, so what is stopping us?

Many bereaved children will not take up the offer of support, but sometimes even knowing that there are organisations out there to offer it provides the safety net that their families desperately need. They may never actually pick up the phone or send an email, but a protocol would mean that they would know that they could and they would know who they could phone if they wanted to. That would be a way of making sure that we know where those children are, that they are getting the help that they need and that they know that we are here for them. We would be making sure that we can reach out and offer that support to every single child—it is the least we can do.

2.28 pm

**Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): I would like to start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for sharing her own experiences, as well as for being a voice for so many children who feel forgotten during a difficult time.

I rise to speak because this topic is very close to my heart. When I was at primary school, I lost my father. As for many young people in that situation, it was a confusing time. Life changed overnight and suddenly the relationship that I had shared with him became a distant memory. In an effort to support our mother, who was coming to terms with her loss, my siblings and I stepped up and took responsibility. We essentially became adults overnight.

Our lives at home had changed, but at school there was no acknowledgement of our loss. There was no support or counselling, and we were told to focus on our education and left to our own accord. Life continued as normal, as it does for children. We never took the time to acknowledge our grief and we never spoke about our loss. We essentially went into survival mode, just grateful to have each other and be a family. To be honest, I think we essentially thought we were unaffected.

And then A-levels came. My eldest brother suddenly died and, to be honest, I felt as though the world had been shaken. I will never forget the day my mum called me at school to tell me. For the first time in my life, I experienced an anxiety attack. My brain could not decide how to react. The security, the hope and all the certainty that I knew was gone overnight.

As the weeks went by after the death, I had to adjust to the new responsibilities. I found myself learning about things I had never thought I would have to learn. I had to learn about how to bring a body back from abroad, because he had died in Peru, how to get a death certificate translated and how to organise a funeral. As well as that, I had the added stress of being told that, because my school had put me in for exams, there was no way any adjustments could be made, even though the school tried very hard, and I had to sit those exams. I know how hard my school tried and how much support they offered me during that difficult time.

As the years went by, as I discussed with my siblings, I realised that although we had thought we were unaffected, actually the situation has had a considerable impact on our outlook on life. It meant that we grew up with separation anxiety, difficulties adapting to change and many other things that we did not necessarily acknowledge at the time. I am exceptionally grateful for having an incredibly supportive family and friends, and a church community that was always there.

Sadly, my case is not unique. I hear many stories from my constituents about children who are experiencing a difficult time. Children should not have to ask for support while they are grieving; it should be a given that they are offered our support. Schools should have guidelines to support children. Care, counselling and support should be given to young children. Leaflets and clear signposting should be available so that families know exactly where to go to get support and what charities are available locally. GPs should be equipped with the knowledge to support families and to identify them once they are in that difficult situation.

We all know that grief can be difficult and can have a lasting impact on our lives. That is why it is so important, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West said, that we collect data, so that we can understand how many children in our country face the situation every year. Then we will be able to identify the gaps in our current services and make adjustments to the current provision.

Lastly, we need to understand the impact of childhood bereavement on those children as they grow older. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh West said, research has shown that those children are more likely to be unemployed by the age of 30, and evidence from studies supports the various impacts that growing up with childhood loss can have on children. It is important that those children are not forgotten and that they are given the necessary support to allow them to achieve their full potential, to support our economy and to know that, because we did not give up on them, they were able to become the best adults they could be.

2.33 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for setting the scene, and for doing so from personal experience. I also thank the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for telling her personal story in this Chamber. I always believe that personal stories carry extra emphasis in illustrating what has been asked for.

As a father, I found preparing for this debate difficult, because the natural reaction is to think about one's own children and grandchildren. That is the nature of these types of debates. "Support for bereaved children" is the title of the debate and encapsulates what we are talking about well.

I was an adult when I lost my own father in 2015, and also a father myself, yet that pain and loss was immense. I am going to give an illustration of someone who was bereaved as a child—I have asked her permission, so I know I can mention her name. A lady called Yvonne works in my office and looks after all the questions about benefits. She does that five days a week and is very good at her job: she is compassionate, understanding and able to relate to people. When we were preparing for the debate, she reminded us that she lost her mother at age nine. She described the confusion and the loss, and the feeling that she was lost for many years after.

It is clear from her story, and from the others we have heard today, that the support she craved was not available. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West said that clearly. That is why the hon. Members participating in the debate—giving speeches, contributing from the Front Bench and making interventions—are asking for that support, because there was nothing available then and no help to fill the gap through school or even the GP. The hon. Member for Coventry North West and I share a faith, and that faith encourages us in the times when we need it. However, the issue is that something needs to change, because we see children facing pain and loss. Even adults struggle to deal with it, never mind how difficult it must be for children.

The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that some 26,900 parents pass away each year in the UK, leaving approximately 46,300 dependent children aged between zero and 17. That gives an idea of the magnitude of the issue and why it is so important to debate it in the Chamber today. Although those estimates provide an understanding of the scale of the issue, the absence of concrete data poses significant challenges in providing those children with the appropriate support.

The Belfast Barnardo's child support bereavement system was set up in 1998. It directs therapeutic support to children, young people and their families. There are other examples of such charities across the United Kingdom, irrespective of geographic location, including Winston's Wish, which helps children, teenagers and young adults up to the age of 25 to find their feet when their worlds are turned upside down by grief. Those charities do a magnificent job, but they need referrals as there is no automatic process in place for referring children to get the help they need.

I believe there is a role for Government to play in the matter, which is what the hon. Member for Edinburgh West is asking for. I hope the Minister can respond to that request and give us the encouragement we all seek—through personal experience, in the case of the hon. Members for Edinburgh West and for Coventry North-west; and in my case on behalf of my constituents. Those charities do a fantastic job when people's worlds are turned upside down by grief.

The assumption is that if bereaved children do not need foster care, then their families can take care of them. Unfortunately, that does not always happen, as the hon. Members for Edinburgh West and for Coventry North West expressed. While family are important, it is clear that support may not always be there in the way that is needed. Families are not always able to see the support that a child needs when they are in the midst of their own loss, which was exactly what the hon. Member for Coventry North West said in her contribution. That is why I believe an automatic referral to support must be put in place.

We all understand the current pressure on children's mental health services, so it is clear that the current system cannot deal with the additional pressure. Such support must therefore come with additional funding. Whether that is granted to charities to provide, directly through NHS services or through the education system, as represented by the Minister who is responding to the debate, the fact is that grieving children need at least to be given the option of speaking with someone without having to request that themselves.

[Jim Shannon]

I always bring a Northern Ireland perspective to debates because I like to refer to the things that we are doing. I believe that within this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland we have so much regional experience that we should be able to swap ideas, so that other regions can take advantage of their benefits. Back home, this is something that the education sector is considering; there are more than 300 teachers across Northern Ireland embarking on bereavement training to enable them to better support students who have lost a loved one. It is a fantastic initiative, but it needs to be rolled out further. Hopefully, we will be able to do that in Northern Ireland.

Training will take place at seven venues across Northern Ireland and has been designed by Marie Curie and delivered in partnership with Cruse Bereavement Support, two magnificent charities. Marie Curie is a charity that we all know and love, and Cruse Bereavement Support is known back home for its fantastic work—we love it every bit as much as Marie Curie. In my opinion, the initiative should be rolled out to each school, so that the education support system is in place. School can be a lonely place for someone who is grieving; that person could be surrounded by dozens, if not hundreds, of pupils and still be on their own. My thanks go out not only to all those in Marie Curie and Cruse Bereavement Support, but to the education authority, which has been determined to make this change.

I believe that we in this House must support these children to navigate their grief in as healthy a way as possible. It is so important that help is given at an early stage to enable people to get out the other side. At the minute, too many children are lost in pain and not getting the help they need—they are unable to seek the help they need. Let us have that support widely available to stop these children from having to ask. In these instances, I always think of a biblical text:

“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.”

Our duty in this House is to ensure that children across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can be comforted. Support must be available. So, here in this House, I am asking the Minister and the Government to step up and deliver the support that is needed. Thank you so much.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

2.41 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate and thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for securing it. She and I do not agree on many things, but I absolutely agreed with what she said in her excellent opening speech.

Like many people who have spoken today, I wish to focus my remarks largely on children who are bereaved by the loss of a parent. And I, like many others here, declare an interest, because I come to this debate having been bereaved twice as a child, as the youngest of eight children: my father died in 1969 when I was 15 months old, and my stepfather died when I was 17 years old. Both events had a huge impact on my family. When my father died, the eldest child in the family was 14 years

old. I am perhaps the only member of the family who has no memory of my father. I have never even seen a photograph of him, because of the poverty in which we were raised—photographs were a luxury, far beyond our reach. My father was a labourer and died very suddenly of a heart attack, while waiting for a minibus to pick him up for his shift at Hamilton Cross, which was far from home. I have no memory of that, but the shockwaves that went through my family were significant.

As an immigrant, my mother had no idea of what support—financial or otherwise—could have been available to her, so she struggled on with no more support than her own resilience and family allowance. I well remember my stepfather dying at home in 1985, also of a heart attack. I was there when it happened, and it was truly traumatic. My mother never really recovered from the shock and she died a short five years later.

On both occasions, my family’s reaction took the lead from my mother who, at the best of times, could never be described as a tactile woman. The way to deal with this was to simply plough on and get on with things. Loss was not discussed. Certainly, when my father died in 1969, my mother, left alone with eight children, dealt with it by making sure that everybody was shod and fed as best they could be and looked after with the basics. I have to say, that stiff upper lip approach to loss—I hate to use that phrase—from when I was a child growing up has very much shaped how I have dealt with subsequent bereavements in my own life.

In 1974, when I was a child at school, two children at my school—a brother and sister—were murdered. One of the children in the family survived. The story attracted huge publicity. The papers at the time showed that children were frightened. I remember that, as a school, we went to the funeral service and sang hymns. I was eight years old at the time, and remember being very traumatised by the sight of these two little white coffins. I cannot even begin to imagine how the surviving child felt. When the service finished, we were all marched back to school and immediately the workbooks were given out and we were back to our work with nothing said. Nowadays, that would not happen. The way that loss and bereavement is dealt with for children actually shapes how they then go on to process grief as an adult. I think that that is why I have dealt with grief subsequently in the way that I have. I am not aware that it has done me any harm, but I know that, for many children, it can be very, very destructive. Debating and discussing how children should be supported in managing grief really matters, and that is why this debate is so important.

I have spoken a great deal about bereavement in this House. I introduced the Bereavement (Pay and Leave) Bill, which asked, very modestly, for two weeks’ paid bereavement leave for anybody who loses a close family member. I did so because there is much evidence that the cost of that would be offset by the benefits to society. That Bill mattered, and it still matters even though it did not pass. It matters because we need to look after the bereaved. We need to support bereaved parents who have to look after their grieving children as well as trying to cope with their own grief. We know that how a child copes or does not cope with grief can have a long-term impact on their own mental health, their wider outcomes and their general wellbeing. How Government are able to support those grieving, especially bereaved children, alongside surviving parents really

matters. Getting it wrong—I do not know that we are getting it right—has a huge social cost, which outweighs any economic cost. Put simply, we cannot afford to fail bereaved children.

As we have heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that 26,900 parents die each year in the UK, leaving approximately 46,300 dependent children aged up to 17 years of age. By age 10, 62% of Scottish children will have lost a close family member. By the age of 16, up to 7% of children in the UK will have lost a parent. We must remember that, when children lose a parent, there is another parent who somehow has to navigate their own grief and the grief of their child.

A few years back—I think it might have been in 2017—we had a debate when the Government brought in changes to payments for bereaved parents. I criticised that move, but it is done now. The argument is over because the litigation has gone through, and the changes have been made. The reason I was concerned about that change to legislation is that those who are grieving need support, and unless that support is adequate the social fallout is significant, and we all pay the price for that. At the time, I expressed real concern about the consequences of the so-called streamlining of these payments for children, and the potential detrimental consequences for their emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as for their educational outcomes.

We all understand that the bereaved need time to process and somehow come to terms with their grief. How long a person needs to emerge from the fog of bewilderment, shock and disbelief, as well as the pain of the grief that the loss of a loved one brings with it, varies from person to person. We know what that is like, but also how much worse it is for children. Cash payments for bereaved parents are now limited to 18 months. I feel that that means that grief has been given a sell-by date, when it is not like that; if only it were.

When a parent has been bereaved, and left to bring up their children on their own, we know that the surviving parent wants to be around to support, listen and help their children to make some sense of the irreplaceable loss that they have suffered. That is where bereaved parents want, and ought, to be—not stuck in an office or on a shop floor, having to put in extra hours to make up their income shortfall due to the death of their partner, and hoping that friends and neighbours will step in.

My fear is that the recent streamlining cuts to the bereavement payment regime disproportionately affect women. Working-age women are more likely to claim bereavement allowance, with recent figures showing that most people who claim it are women. Nobody wants or expects to claim bereavement support, but its existence is vital for bereaved parents who are left to bring up children with one parent missing, with all the grief and distress that that can bring.

Some people have mentioned this in the debate, but having been an English teacher for 23 years before I was elected I can personally testify to the terrific and extremely sensitive support that young people can receive in schools following the loss of a parent or close family member. That kind of support is essential in helping children to process and come to terms with their loss, but it is not always available and is not always of the same standard. I have alluded to the fact that when I was at school, in

the '70s and '80s, if somebody lost one of their parents or a close family member, it was never mentioned or discussed. That is not particularly healthy for every child.

In the early days of grief, a child will be in the fog of disbelief and bewilderment, and the surviving parent is not always able to help them to navigate and process that grief, because they are suffering with their own grief and trying to navigate their own bewilderment and loss. That is where outside agencies such as schools, though not just schools, can provide vital support to bereaved children, and why an appropriate level of financial support is necessary and crucial, so that the family unit can work through their grief with less financial pressure interfering with that process.

Everybody in this debate understands that we need to do more to support children who are struggling with bereavement, as well as bereaved parents who lose a spouse, who will also struggle but have to continue to be the responsible parent and meet their child's needs. They will need support with that. This debate is extremely helpful, as too often grief and its corrosive impact are not discussed as openly as they should be. We need to get better at talking about dying, because death touches every family and we all experience it.

We need to do better at supporting children through the death of a close family member and helping them to make sense of it in a way that is suitable for that child. If we can do that, we will have healthier, happier and well-balanced children who in turn will be better at supporting their own children through such loss. That is where we need to get to as a society. We are not there yet, and we need to get better at supporting bereaved parents, because the bereavement that a child suffers is inherently linked to their other parent, if it is a parent who has been lost.

Ultimately, this is about ensuring that, despite the confusion, trauma and bewildering impact that grief can cause children who lose a close family member, the children affected can and will, with support, recover and go on to live healthier, happier and more fulfilled lives. It is really important that we have this debate and keep on pursuing this subject, because there is a lot of work to do here.

2.54 pm

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for securing this incredibly challenging debate. I know she has worked hard to raise this issue, both here in this Chamber and prior to that in Westminster Hall. I pay tribute to her for her work to ensure that this matter gets the time it deserves in this place. She made an incredibly moving opening speech.

I also thank all those who have contributed to this debate, because it is not easy to share personal experiences and insights on this issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) made a most powerful speech; I know it will have resonated with many people, and sharing such a personal story will have the impact of making this situation better for somebody else who is facing it. I pay tribute to her for the incredible speech that she made. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who brought his perspective and his insights into this important issue from his many years of experience speaking in this House.

[Catherine McKinnell]

Bereavement is an experience that is difficult for anyone, but for a child the impact truly is profound. We know and we have heard in this debate the experiences of how that impact can stay with a young person for many, many years after their bereavement. The problem is that we do not even know how many children are currently living with bereavement across the UK. Estimated figures from the Childhood Bereavement Network—we have already heard them in this debate, because they are some of the only figures we have—suggest that each year 26,900 parents die, impacting around 46,300 children under 17. That is happening every year.

Without any further data, we have no way of knowing how many more might be impacted by the death of a close relative. The charity Winston's Wish has provided the figure that one in 29 children are affected by the loss of a parent or sibling. That could be one in every classroom, with schoolteachers and support staff potentially completely unaware of that child's loss. For that reason, while schools may name bereavement as a key concern that they would like more support to deal with, the support they can give is currently limited by lack of time and lack of skills among an already stretched school staff.

Schools need the tools to help grieving children. However, between the pandemic and disruption to education, crumbling infrastructure, the cost of living crisis and budget restrictions, school staff increasingly find it a challenge to direct their resources to addressing the issues that young people face. It is the Government's role to break down those barriers to achievement, yet sometimes it feels as if the barriers are just being built higher for some of our young people.

Teachers are not trained mental health staff, but are often expected to fill that role, because they are often the ones who children turn to, if they turn to anyone at all. Yet when teachers look for support with helping that young person, too often it is not there. We should pay tribute to teachers who go above and beyond their role in supporting young people who they know are suffering bereavement.

While of course young people should feel able to share with their teachers the fact that they are struggling with personal loss, children who are suffering from bereavement need professional mental health support. Every child should have access to that, but we just know that that is not currently the case. Many schools do not have trained mental health resources, and accessing child and adolescent mental health services can take years before a child can even get an appointment, never mind be seen. Far too often, children reach crisis point before any help is found.

During that crucial part of a young person's life, they are missing out on education due to a lack of support and missing out on their development. Older children may be taking on the role of supporting their younger siblings in dealing with that bereavement, putting to one side their own bereavement, and their education as well. Every young person deserves the tools they need to take advantage of the opportunities that school provides, yet for far too many young people those essential mental health services simply are not there.

In 2021 and 2022, patients seeking mental health treatment spent more than 5.4 million hours waiting in A&E—waiting rather than getting the support they

need. The Government's scrapping of the 10-year mental health plan has left 1.6 million stuck on waiting lists for mental health treatment. That is why Labour recognises that the sticking-plaster approach is failing our children badly. We must move to a preventive plan to support our mental health services and support those who need them. That is why Labour is committed to expanding mental health services and staff, ensuring that everyone can receive mental health treatment within a month of their referral. Labour is also committed to putting a specialist mental health professional in every school, and open-access mental health hubs for children and young people in every community. We need those measures in place urgently to address problems early and provide young people with a place to discuss issues such as bereavement before they reach crisis point.

By reforming and expanding mental health services, we can take the pressure off teachers and allow young people to thrive again at school. Mental health hubs will also allow young people to seek support outside the school environment and in their community instead. The Government may have written off a generation of young people, with crumbling schools and public services, but Labour will ensure that every child gets the support they need to take advantage of opportunities both at school and throughout their lives. That is vital because we know that issues that affect us in childhood can affect us throughout life. We have to go beyond expecting teachers to pick up the pieces; we must instead expand mental health support services and give teachers and students the support they need so they can focus on their progress at school.

I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West again for securing this important debate. I hope that the Minister will provide clarity on how the Government will tackle this issue and when they will recognise the importance of mental health support reform.

3.1 pm

**The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb):** May I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this debate on an important subject, and on her very poignant opening speech, informed as it was by her personal experiences? She made the important point that children need support to navigate life after bereavement, during and beyond the immediate period of their loss. As she said, losing a loved one is a lifelong challenge for a child, or indeed for any person.

The Government are committed to ensuring that bereaved children get the help that they need. We are always looking for ways to improve support and access to it, and to ensure that families are aware of such help. A family bereavement is devastating for anyone, but especially for children. Bereavement turns a child's life upside down and can have profound and far-reaching consequences that may affect their mental health, their wellbeing and their academic performance, meaning that they require additional support.

I listened carefully to the powerful and moving speech by the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who I know is currently attending a Westminster Hall debate on kinship carers. Losing her father as a young child was clearly devastating for her. The lack of empathetic support at school clearly compounded that hurt, but her family, her friends and the Church were



her salvation. To lose her brother in her late teens, at the time of her A-level exams, was clearly overwhelming for her. In those circumstances, exam boards will use special consideration to reflect the impact of bereavement on a candidate's performance in exams.

The hon. Members for Coventry North West and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) mentioned the financial consequences of losing a parent. Bereavement support payments provide short-term financial support to working-age people with dependent children whose spouse, civil partner or partner is deceased. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran pointed out, it consists of an initial lump sum and then up to 18 instalments, with higher amounts paid for those with children.

No one experiences grief in the same way, and children are no different in this respect. Not all children will need access to services when they experience bereavement, due to the support they may receive through their family and wider community, but where support from early help services is required, the Government are committed to ensuring that it is provided.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), in a speech again based on personal experience, helpfully highlighted the role of the voluntary sector. It plays a vital role in supporting schools, children's social care and other services that can signpost children to support and help them find it. We are always looking for ways to support all children, and the support provided by Government is complemented by the tremendous work of the voluntary sector, some of which has been inspired by personal experience of bereavement. For instance, I am incredibly grateful to the Childhood Bereavement Network and Papyrus for working with us on the review of the relationships, sex and health education statutory guidance. Recently, the Minister for the School System and Student Finance met Andrew Strauss to discuss the important work of the Ruth Strauss Foundation. The foundation does valuable work in preparing children and families for the bereavement of a parent, particularly families with a parent who has a terminal condition.

As the former Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), set out in the Westminster Hall debate on this subject in March, there are no official statistics on the number of bereaved children in the UK. The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that 26,900 parents die each year in the UK, leaving approximately 46,000 dependent children under the age of 17. Those figures are based on sources such as the census and mortality statistics, in the absence of any other data, so they are only an estimate, as Members have pointed out. However, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West said, it is not just the loss of a parent; the loss of any loved one—a sibling or a close friend, for example—can have a deep and lasting impact on a child.

Families provide the love and support that we all know children need, and Government are committed to supporting families, including through the most difficult times. Early help services—a key plank of our reforms announced in “Stable Homes, Built on Love” earlier this year—play an important role in supporting families, and they can be used in some cases to help children through bereavement. Central to the Government's ambitious plans to reform children's social care is family

help, which will provide effective and meaningful support for families. Multidisciplinary teams will work with local partners to meet the whole needs of a family.

As set out when we published “Stable Homes, Built on Love”, the Government are providing over £45 million of additional funding to pathfind family help and build on the strengths of existing early help services. We recently announced Dorset, Lincolnshire and Wolverhampton as the three local authorities that will be involved in the first wave of the Families First for Children pathfinder.

Our work to reform children's social care builds on our wider work to support families, including the £695 million Supporting Families programme, which this year sees its 10th anniversary. Through that programme, we have supported over 650,000 vulnerable families through whole-family working to achieve positive and, we hope, sustainable outcomes. The programme has put whole-family working and early help at the heart of the local offer for families.

Key to our strategy for supporting families is the £300 million to establish family hubs and transform Start for Life services in 75 local authorities. Family hubs join up services locally to improve access to services, improve the connections between families, professionals, services and providers, and strengthen the relationships that provide the foundation for happy and productive lives. Family hubs will bring together services for children from conception to adulthood, with a great Start for Life offer at their heart. Family hubs are now opening, with the majority having opened by the summer, and they will be delivering all the programme's expectations by the end of the funding period in March 2025. We have published guidance for participating local authorities.

As was referred to a number of times during the debate, we know that bereavement can have a significant impact on mental health, requiring specialist support. We are expanding specialist mental health support by spending an additional £2.3 billion a year—we are putting that into mental health services—by March 2024, which will mean 345,000 more children and young people accessing mental health support per year. We are also introducing mental health support teams to support schools and students across the country. Those teams offer support to children experiencing common mental health issues such as anxiety and low mood, and facilitate smoother access to external specialist support. As of April 2023, mental health support teams covered 35% of pupils in schools, and we are extending the coverage of those teams to an estimated 44% by the end of this financial year and at least 50% by the end of March 2025.

Schools and teachers are often a first source of support for children in tough times, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) mentioned. I am grateful for what they do to provide effective and sensitive pastoral care, although it is important to remember that they cannot be expected to provide specialist support: as she pointed out, they are not mental health, bereavement or trauma specialists. However, teachers know their pupils best, so they are in a position to decide on the pastoral support that they might need. We are offering all schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead to help schools to put informed support in place, drawing on specialists and working with families where needed. More than 13,800 schools and colleges have now received a senior mental health lead training grant, including more than seven in 10 state-funded secondary schools.

[Nick Gibb]

In addition, over 14,000 schools and colleges in England have benefited from the wellbeing for education recovery and wellbeing for education return programmes. Those programmes provide free, expert training support and resources for staff dealing with children and young people who are dealing with additional pressures from covid-19, including a focus on supporting pupils with bereavement. During the covid-19 pandemic, we provided a list of resources for schools to draw on to support children's mental health, including the Childhood Bereavement Network, Hope Again, and resources from the Anna Freud Centre on supporting children dealing with loss and bereavement.

Health education—taught as part of relationships, sex and health education—became statutory in schools in 2020, and through the mental wellbeing topic, pupils are taught a range of content relevant to dealing with bereavement. That includes recognising and talking about emotions and how to judge whether what they are feeling and how they are behaving is appropriate and proportionate. It is important that children know where and how to seek support, including whom in school they should speak to if they are worried about their own mental health or someone else's. We also know how important regular attendance at school is for the development and wellbeing of children and young people. Schools should speak with pupils and families to understand what support bereaved children will need in order to be integrated back into school following a bereavement absence so that they can re-engage with their education and social development.

In conclusion, I again thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West for continuing to draw attention to what is an important subject: the needs of bereaved

children. As we have heard, the impact of losing a parent or close family member is profound. The Government remain committed to supporting families in difficult times in a number of ways, including those I have set out today. Grief and loss are deeply personal, and where additional support is needed, I pay tribute to the organisations and individuals who provide that support to bereaved children and their families.

3.13 pm

**Christine Jardine:** I thank the Minister for his comments, and I thank everyone who has stayed late today to take part in the debate. The powerful speeches from the hon. Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) all had one thing in common: they all reflected my own experience, as well as each other's experiences. I find that we have confidence that support is there and is available, but our fear is that the people who need it do not know, and it is not reaching them.

I thank the Minister for his commitment to making sure that children get that support, that the services are there and that the Government are investing in them. I only ask that the Government continue to listen to survivors such as ourselves when we highlight what is perhaps missing—the co-ordination that is needed—so that we can continue to improve the support for children and young people that I am sure the Minister, and all of us, want to provide. I thank everyone for taking part today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House calls on the Government to develop a protocol for ensuring that bereaved children are made aware of and have access to practical and emotional support through public and third sector agencies.

## UK-Chile Relations and 50th Anniversary of Coup in Chile

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

3.14 pm

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): I am grateful to the parliamentary authorities for allowing this debate to take place. It might be said that the events under discussion took place a long time ago, but I am going to argue that they are relevant to this day. I want to speak principally about the events of 50 years ago and their contemporary significance, but let me begin by referring to the fact that both Chile and the United Kingdom are now part of this slightly bizarre relationship in the Pacific—not that we are anywhere near there—and that in some ways we are partners.

I hope that the Minister will not focus purely on the commercial relationships between our two countries, although those are important—trade is an important factor in bringing people together. But beyond trade, international relationships are also about democracy, progress and human rights, and about resisting torture and arbitrary murder. Those things are important too. When it comes to Britain's role in the world, if we want to really be a motor for progress, yes, we should promote trade, but we should equally promote democracy and those other things that I have just referred to.

My next point, on which I will touch briefly, is about whether those events 50 years ago are still important today. I want to argue that they are, and for three reasons. The first is perhaps the most personal. I was 23 at the time of the coup, and it marked me profoundly. I do not know exactly why; over the past century, the capacity of human beings to inflict the most awful damage on other human beings—and animals and the planet too, come to that—has been profound. Yet somehow those events in Chile have particularly stayed with me from that day to this. I feel I want to make some points here about them because I believe that there is unfinished business for the British Government.

The second reason is also personal, as I shall shortly refer to. Significant numbers of people came from Chile to escape the violence, murder, torture and bloodshed, as refugees. They came in numbers, which I will give shortly. I met them and helped them. Some of them were legitimately here. Some were in fear of their lives; we helped them, in a kind of underground railroad in Leeds, to avoid the people pursuing them who might well have tortured and killed them. I think the issue is still relevant because, in Chile, the constitution, currently much debated in the country's political life, is the same as that introduced following the military junta. It is important for that matter to be resolved, although that is for the people of Chile. It is there as a current debate that is interesting to watch.

I am quite clear about the third reason why I think the issue is still contemporary. The experiment in Chile following the junta involved the introduction of what we have now come to call neoliberalism—the attack on so many public services, privatisation, globalisation and the triumph of finance over industry. All those aspects of economic life were first tried in Chile, dripping in blood, and then implemented elsewhere, including in our country. Those three factors play in my mind when I think about Chile.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech. Nobody who heard President Allende's last speech in Chile as the bombs fell on the palace will ever forget his voice or his words.

As my hon. Friend has explained, Chile was the first place where the Chicago school of economics—Milton Friedman and the rest; “the Chicago boys”—rolled out their neoliberal experiment, which spread across Latin America. Actually, Latin America was the first place in the world not only where neoliberal economics was tried but where elected Governments, in the late '90s, fought back against neoliberalism with a different view. Would my hon. Friend like to reflect on that? It is poignant to think about it today.

**Jon Trickett:** My hon. Friend is of course right. Famously, the Chicago boys, as they became known in Chile, were those in the economics department of the University of Chicago who developed a reactionary theory about how economies ought to be managed. It was implemented first in Chile, as my hon. Friend has just remarked, and that was the point I was making. It was rolled out elsewhere, too, and there were conservative and right-wing politicians throughout the world watching what was happening in Chile to see whether, not so much the bloodshed, but the economic experiment could be brought about in their countries too—and of course we have seen it in our country.

I was reflecting on why this is still a contemporary matter and want to refer to some correspondence I received today from the Bell family, refugees from Chile at the time of the coup. The brother of the father of the family was murdered by the military and I understand that the father was imprisoned and tortured. They say in an email:

“As a family, we experienced unspeakable horrors at the hands of Pinochet and the military coup.”

It goes on to talk about communities in the UK who welcomed them, but the family has doubts about the role of the UK Government and I am going to come on to that. The email goes on to say:

“For 50 years we have been fighting for justice, searching for those who were disappeared and campaigning for the perpetrators to be held to account for the human rights violations.”

And we know the facts: the junta killed 3,600 people, tortured 40,000, and some 200,000 were driven away from their home country by what was going on there. The scale of this is hard to come to terms with, yet it happened and there are families who still today do not know where their disappeared ones are.

There is also a programme to build a memory forest for every person who was a victim called Ecomemoria. I recommend that Members have a look at it; there is a memorial there to each person who was killed.

As a young person I was beginning to think about politics. I had been a manual worker; I had left school at 15 with no qualifications and I had come across the ideas of socialism. I looked across the world; the distance between London and Santiago is 7,000 km but somehow it was inspiring to see a country trying to create a new path to this creed that I was beginning to embrace, called socialism. It was particularly inspiring to listen to President Allende, who insisted that:

“The road to socialism lies through democracy, pluralism and freedom.”

[Jon Trickett]

I was a young man, as I have said, and our hearts stood still as we hoped he would be able to find a peaceful road to socialism, although all the time we were hearing on the radio and the television that there was a possibility that something would happen there, and that was frightening. But we were also being told by the BBC and others that Chile had a long history of democratic representative government, and that the army and the Chilean state apparatus would not move against a Government; but, of course, they did.

Let me quickly talk about the United States. Allende moved more slowly than he promised he would. I was watching and thinking, “Get on with it, because there’s much more to do try to feed the poor and liberate so many working people in Chile.”

Early doors, Allende took public ownership of the copper industry. It was copper, above all—it was a resource that the Americans, the British and others were using—that turned the tide. Nixon’s crimes are well known, but among them we should add this: he had authorised action—I think he had put \$3 million to one side—to try to prevent Allende from winning the election. The money was used in such a way as to try to achieve that. The CIA conducted spoiling operations prior to the Allende victory. Nixon personally authorised the agency to seek to instigate a coup to prevent Allende from taking office. Those were inappropriate—let us say it no more strongly than that—deeply reactionary activities by Washington. Santiago is 1,000 km further away from Washington than London. We cannot say that any kind of military or other threat was posed by Chile to the interests of the United States or Britain.

Moving on to the British Government, Edward Heath recognised Pinochet within 11 days of the coup. Diplomatic cables that have now become available in the National Archives indicate that the British Government were fully aware of the violence being used by the Pinochet regime against innocent people, whose only so-called sin was to hope for a better world. They were working people, socialists, trade unionists and activists of various kinds.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. I spoke to him beforehand, and he knows what I will say. It is important to put on record that in 2022, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom reported an increase in antisemitic social media posts and media publications against Chile’s Jewish community over the past few years. The US special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism has said that antisemitism erodes democratic institutions and values. I know that the hon. Gentleman and I stand together on that issue. Does he agree that it is time that our Minister and our Government conveyed to the Chilean regime that something must change, and that they cannot keep persecuting Jewish people just because they happen to be Jews?

**Jon Trickett**: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I have spoken in this House about antisemitism, and I have been the victim of antisemitism, because we have Jewish blood in my family. I have even been to Leeds court as the victim of antisemitic behaviour. Nobody feels more strongly about this issue than me, and I am sure the whole House stands in condemnation

of antisemitism generally. The hon. Member has made his points. I am not here to speak about that, so I will not follow him further down that track.

I was just speaking about the Heath Government. In the spirit of all-party truth, I need to record the fact that during the first of Harold Wilson’s Labour Governments, it appears to be the case that there was at least one MI6 officer in Santiago collaborating with the Chilean military prior to the coup.

When the coup happened, Heath was the Prime Minister, and Alec Douglas-Home was the Foreign Secretary. It is shocking to see what happened. They were aware of what was going on in Chile. The Foreign Secretary sent official guidance to British embassies across the world, only weeks after the coup, outlining British support—it is impossible to read it any other way—for the military junta. He said:

“For British interests...there is no doubt that Chile under the junta is a better prospect than Allende’s chaotic road to socialism, our investments”—

meaning British investments—

“should do better, our loans may be successfully rescheduled, and export credits later resumed, and the sky-high price of copper (important to us) should fall as Chilean production is restored”.

I am sorry, but it is simply not good enough for judgments on what is happening in a foreign country to be made on the basis of our commercial interests, as I said at the beginning of my speech.

The Heath Government defied calls from all sides to impose an arms embargo on Chile. In fact, they delivered Hawker Hunter jets to Chile before the 1974 general election, when there was a change of Government. It was Hawker Hunter jets that laid siege to the presidential palace during the coup. Over the past few days, it has been possible to listen to a Spanish language broadcast from BBC Latin America and hear the chilling sounds of the jets—British-made jets—attacking the palace, which resulted in the death of Allende. I am sorry, but it is not good enough that those events happened all those years ago, and I do not think we know the full truth about them yet.

As a Labour party member, I am sure that Members would expect me to say that, when Labour came back to office, I was pleased that the Wilson Government cut off all diplomatic relations and then instigated an arms embargo against the junta. However, Mrs Thatcher restored relations when she won the election a few years later in 1979.

The Wilson Government also accepted 3,000 Chilean refugees into our country. As I have said, I met a number of them in Leeds. Many of them are still here and have a personal interest in what happened. Those Chileans, who had fought for a different kind of country and a different kind of world, and who had friends, comrades and colleagues who were tortured and killed in the Santiago stadium and elsewhere, were among the finest people I have ever met. We can be proud that Britain had a tradition of accepting refugees into our country in such circumstances. If that were to happen again, I would like to think that Britain would be prepared to do the same. We took 3,000 Chilean refugees. Sweden took 40,000.

Let me wind up with a couple of points. I got to know those people. I worked with them and helped to feed some of them who were in the underground. We helped to house them—not many of them, just two or three. There

were 250 in Leeds. They brought a different culture. We had Chilean music and Latin American music. It was the first time I had heard it. There were even cafés and restaurants opening serving Latin American food. It was a tremendously exciting time, but it was heartbreaking as well.

Before I make my final points, I just want to reflect on one thing. It has been possible to hear another sound on the BBC website this week, and it is even more chilling than that of the Hawker jets—built in Britain—attacking an elected President. It is the sound of the Chilean soldiers going to attack the palace of the elected President and they are singing a marching song. Visit the website if you like, but the sound is awful—it is blood-curdling—because the marching song is a song developed by the Nazis. When we think about antisemitism, we know that it has resided above all with the Nazis. To think that the soldiers were attacking their own democratically elected President and singing marching songs from the Nazis is really bone-chilling.

**Richard Burgon:** My hon. Friend has shared examples of chilling sounds from that coup. I would like to take this opportunity to ask him to share his memories of a very inspiring sound from Chile that the junta sought to silence, and that is the sound of the progressive folk singer Victor Jara, who went around Chile arguing for a better society and singing songs about social justice. He was taken to the football stadium, his hands, which usually played the guitar, were broken and then he was killed. Will my hon. Friend share his memories of Victor Jara during this significant anniversary week?

**Jon Trickett:** I do not want to detain the House for too long, but Victor Jara was a great folk hero. He chose to put his particular skills of singing and playing music at the disposal of the people, fighting for a better world and a better Chile. He was then taken to Santiago stadium, with thousands of others. His hands were immobilised so that he could never play music again, and finally he was killed.

I am reminded of the city of Leeds, and what happened with the Chile solidarity movement back in 1973-75. I hope the House will not mind if I detain us. The Chileans there decided to paint a tribute to Chile, to the movement and to our solidarity. They painted a large mural of Chilean people—peasants, workers and others—in vivid colours. Underneath it says: “And there will be work for all”. That was the simple objective of that Allende Government: to give decent work to all. It is not too difficult a thing to agree with.

Secondly on culture, there was a band that travelled Europe and Britain—I remember seeing them many times—called Inti-Illimani, which sang Chilean music. It was tremendously inspiring. It was great to be young and to fight back against what was an appalling assault on our common humanity in Chile.

I was trying to get to the end of my speech. I do not believe that we know all the truth about the British Government’s involvement, but we should. The email that I read earlier from the Bell family asks that the Government consider making public all the existing material that is not in the national archives, so that we know the true extent of what happened. To build a better future, it is important that we know what happened in our past.

I wonder whether I can tempt the Minister to express some sense of regret. Does he agree with my brief description of Britain’s involvement? I do not mean this in a partisan way, but this democratic Parliament—one of the great creators of democracy—should say that we regret our involvement at the time. I may be tempting it too far, but I feel that an apology is required from the House of Commons to the Chilean people who were killed and those who survived, and the children and grandchildren who are bereft of their dads, mums and grandparents. If the Government will not do it, let me say in my humble, Back-Bench way: I apologise on behalf of the British people—it is impertinent, but I do it—to the Chilean people for what happened in the name of the British Government, but not in the name of all of us.

3.37 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing this debate and on sharing his lived experiences and sincerely held views. I assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Members and my Parliamentary Private Secretary that I do not intend to speak until 5.30, but I will reply to the important points that the hon. Gentleman has made with sincere conviction, and to the other contributions.

As a country, we share a long-standing and warm partnership and friendship with Chile, which continues to go from strength to strength, as demonstrated by this week’s highly successful Chile Day. I would like to take a moment to express my sincere sympathies for those affected by the recent deadly flooding in central and southern Chile, which saw over 30,000 people evacuated from their homes last month. Let me reaffirm this Government’s commitment to address climate risks.

This is a timely debate, following the anniversary of the coup on Monday and the fact that this year marks the 200th anniversary of the UK and Chile establishing formal consular relations. It has been an honour to join the celebrations on Chile Day this week. Let me begin by reflecting on the anniversary of the coup.

Just over 50 years ago, General Pinochet launched a coup against the democratically elected Government of Salvador Allende. Fifty years might feel like a long time ago for some people, but I remember it myself—perhaps not in quite the same way as the hon. Gentleman—and it is not quite as long ago for me as it will be for some people listening to the debate. Following the coup, the military junta was quick to suspend all political activity and suppress dissent. The total number of people who were disappeared or killed between 1973 and 1990 stands at 3,216. That is a slightly different number from that given by the hon. Gentleman, but as we understand it, it is 3,216. That is a large number of people, with the figure for survivors of political imprisonment and/or torture much, more higher. It is tragic to hear about the experiences of the Bell family and others. There can be no justification for an armed coup bringing to an end a democratically elected Government.

At the time, all countries grappled with the challenge of how to respond to the events on the ground. The UK was far from the first country to recognise the Pinochet regime. Indeed, we were the eighth European country to do so, having judged that we needed to be able to talk to

[David Rutley]

the Government to present our views on human rights and protect the interests of over 4,000 British subjects in Chile. Demonstrating our support for the return to democracy, just over a year after it happened, the UK welcomed President Aylwin on a state visit in April 1991 when he met Her late Majesty the Queen and the Prime Minister.

It is important to recognise—I think the hon. Gentleman recognises it, too—that there is a live debate today in Chile over the context in which the coup happened. That debate is happening democratically and peacefully, and it is right that the Chileans are leading it. It is also the case that the hon. Gentleman has a democratic right to put his views on the record today as well. It reminds us of the importance, still today, of protecting democracy, freedom of speech and human rights. They have been hard won and hard fought for in this country and across Latin America over recent decades, and they absolutely need to be protected. Across the House, we would all agree with that.

Following the commemorative events this week in Chile, it was heartening to see representatives of all political parties come together to agree a commemorative statement made by the Senate President on Tuesday. The Foreign Secretary saw during his visit in May, which was part of an extended visit across Latin America, including Brazil, Colombia and the Caribbean, how Chile has restored and strengthened democracy since 1990, and how the country continues to work through the consequences of the dictatorship. In particular, his visit to the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, which commemorates the victims of human rights violations during the military dictatorship, highlighted the importance of memorialising the 50th anniversary of the coup, as the hon. Gentleman indicated. The Foreign Secretary met the museum's director, Marcia Scantlebury, a victim of torture by the military dictatorship, and jointly toured the museum—this is significant—with Chile's Foreign Minister, Alberto van Klaveren. In their meeting, the Foreign Secretary and Minister van Klaveren reaffirmed our countries' shared values and commitments to protecting and promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Today, the UK and Chile are two like-minded, liberal democracies committed to working together to solve global challenges. I particularly welcome Chile's membership of the UN Human Rights Council. It is a key priority for both Governments to protect and strengthen democracy and human rights in the face of increasing challenges. Democracy and human rights are not abstract concepts in Chile or the UK. They are values that must be fought for and protected. It is important, now more than ever, to reaffirm our shared values and commitment to protecting and promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Looking further back, this year also marks 200 years of our consular relations with Chile, which began with Christopher Nugent, the first British consul general in Chile, who was appointed to Valparaiso in 1823—I cannot remember that far back, Mr Deputy Speaker, before you cheekily intervene. It is a reminder of the strength and longevity of our partnership, which continues to thrive today. The UK supported the establishment of Chile's navy. Admiral Lord Cochrane's heroic efforts to

support Chilean independence are still celebrated—he was certainly quite a character by all accounts. Indeed, our defence co-operation continues to this day through joint training and exercising among our armed services and through the defence dialogue between our two countries, addressing shared defence priorities on a range of issues.

Sadly, I missed the all-party group's reception to celebrate the 200th anniversary this morning because I needed to respond to the urgent question on Libya, but I would like to thank the Chilean embassy in London and the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—sometimes I wish the Scottish constituency names were shorter—for organising the event to celebrate this important anniversary.

I would also like to welcome the Chile Day celebrations taking place in London this week for the 12th year. These events have now flourished to such an extent that I suggest that we change the name. Although it is not my call, I think “Chile week” would be a much more appropriate description. It is a perfect example of our close relationship, with over 300 top Chilean investors and businesses visiting London, led by Finance Minister Mario Marcel, to improve economic and trade co-operation between our two countries.

I know that it is not all about commerce, but commerce is important to bind our countries together. Chile was the first country to sign a continuity agreement with the UK after we left the EU. We have worked together with Chile to further strengthen our relationship through our annual trade dialogue and modernisation road map. The fourth trade dialogue took place yesterday, with Trade Ministers in discussions. It was led by my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Economic Security on our side and by Claudia Sanhueza.

Chile acceded to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership in February, and we are grateful for its support for the UK's accession in July. As a result, the bloc now accounts for 15% of global trade. The partnership brings new opportunities for both countries, including for growth. The agreement will eliminate tariffs on over 800 products, including exports of Chilean fruits, fruit juice and olive oil to the UK. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for his sterling work as trade envoy.

Overall, the figures show that trade between the two countries is thriving. Bilateral trade between our countries amounted to £1.7 billion in the year to March 2023, an increase of £100 million on the preceding year. Clearly, there are more opportunities going forward.

As the hon. Member for Hemsworth set out, this is not just about trade. Of course, we need to ensure that growth is green and sustainable. Chile is a clear climate leader in Latin America. Inspired in part by UK legislation, Chile has legally committed to a net zero target by 2050 and has ambitions to be a leading global producer of green hydrogen. I learned more about that during the Chile Day celebrations this week. There are clear opportunities to benefit both our countries and the planet if we move these initiatives forward. Our COP26 presidency came after Chile's, creating a close relationship on climate action that continues to this day. Chile signed up to more commitments at COP26 than any other Latin American country. We have supported Chile to sell green and sustainable bonds worth more than £21 billion on London's sustainable bond market.

Turning to foreign policy, we stand together against Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. President Boric is a leading Latin American voice against it. We must continue to work together with other allies in the region to condemn Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

The ties between our countries are equally strong when it comes to cultural links. The UK is a destination of choice for Chileans undertaking postgraduate study. They are supported by UK scholarships such as Chevening and welcomed by leading universities such as the London School of Economics—where I was privileged to study—University College London, Sussex and many others. We want to expand the Chevening programme to enable more Chilean students to pursue postgraduate studies in the UK, especially when it comes to fields concerning lithium and green hydrogen. Plans are in train to launch a scholarship next year to boost the study of lithium battery technology.

British music is big in Chile. I hear that Chilean music was big in Leeds, at least for a period, and I am sure that it will continue with the support of the hon. Member for Hemsworth. Over the past 12 months, global British artists such as Harry Styles, Coldplay, and Dua Lipa have performed in Santiago to huge crowds. Some other bands that I am a bit more familiar with, such as Blur and Pulp, are at the vanguard of British music in Chile.

British immigrants introduced a number of sports to Chile, including football, tennis and rugby. We are all proud to see that Chile have qualified for the rugby world cup, for the first time in their history. We congratulate them and look forward to an entertaining match on Saturday.

I am confident that the links between our two countries will only continue to grow over the coming years and decades. Chile has an important role to play in making the international order fit for the 21st century, and the UK will work closely with our friends and partners there to do just that. We will continue to stand together to promote and protect democracy and human rights. We will work to boost our trade relationships further, creating jobs and furthering innovation in both our countries. On climate, we will continue our close relationship as we strive to deliver net zero, and on the global stage we will continue to stand together to speak out in condemning Russia's aggression and supporting the people of Ukraine.

Although we might be rivals on the rugby pitch next week, our links across sport, music and education continue to promote friendship, understanding and connections between our people. Long may that continue.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I was privileged to visit Chile a few years ago with an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation. I went to Santiago and a few other places, and we were royally looked after by the Chilean Parliament. It is a superb country. I was there at the same time as the Archbishop of Canterbury, so the links between the United Kingdom and Chile are incredibly strong. I wish all well for Chile week, as it has now been rebranded by the Minister.

*Question put and agreed to.*

3.51 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 September 2023

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Support for Kinship Carers

1.30 pm

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of support for kinship carers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate and by welcoming the many kinship carers who are here listening. The last two times that I led a debate on kinship care, the Children's Minister resigned shortly after—literally within days—but in an exciting plot twist, this time the Children's Minister got a promotion the week before, so perhaps things are looking up for the new Minister. I welcome him to his place.

On a serious note, I launched this campaign in Parliament in July last year and the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) is the fourth Children's Minister I have engaged with on this issue since then. I know that his brief covers so many important areas. I really hope, for the sake of our country's children, that we will get some stability now and that we will be able to progress—on opposite sides of the Chamber, and also by working together on some of the critical issues facing children up and down the country. I know that the Minister has an extensive and long-standing interest in children's policy, so I look forward to seeing him hit the ground running. We are all looking to him to ensure that the upcoming kinship care strategy will be delivered before the end of the year, as his Department has promised.

The last debate that I led on this issue was in this Chamber 11 months ago. I set out many of the themes and issues that are in my ten-minute rule Bill from July last year, so I want to focus on the upcoming strategy as well as revisiting some of the themes that we have talked about consistently.

I acknowledge some of the progress that has been made over the last year in getting the Government to acknowledge kinship. In their response to Josh MacAlister's independent review of children's social care—the Government document was called “Stable Homes, Built on Love”—we finally saw an acknowledgement by Government of kinship and kinship carers. In the document, there was recognition that

“kinship care has received little national policy attention” and that

“too little support is given to extended family members who play a caring role for their young relatives.”

When the previous Children's Minister made the statement in the House of Commons, I was really heartened by the number of Members on both sides of the House who spoke about kinship care. It was the first time that I had heard so much attention given to this important issue, which has too often been overlooked.

The MacAlister review was the crucial moment in putting kinship carers on the map, kick-starting what has happened. It recognised that, with the right help, housing a child in crisis with family or friends they know and love will often be the best outcome for them. We know that, every year, thousands of grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and family friends step up in this way, and they do so instinctively, out of love, despite the huge personal sacrifice involved. We know that children in kinship care have equal or better mental health, education and employment chances than looked-after children. With my Bill, I sought to press the Government to implement several of the MacAlister review's recommendations.

I am delighted that, since then, kinship carers have shared their stories numerous times on breakfast TV and local radio. An ITV documentary highlighted their plight. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) shared, on Sky News, his moving story of growing up in kinship care, and I am really proud that in March this year, at the Liberal Democrat spring conference, Lib Dem members approved as party policy a lot of what was in my Bill about allowances, leave, pupil premium plus and having a statutory definition of kinship care.

Kinship care is on the Government's lips and in the media spotlight in a way that it rarely has been. It has been a pleasure to work alongside these carers, the Family Rights Group, Kinship and other MPs in making the case that kinship care is worth investing in—saving the taxpayer in the long run. It would be remiss of me if I did not also acknowledge and thank, from the bottom of my heart, Andrew Burrell from my team, who is here today and has been the driving force in my office behind this work. He is leaving my office in a couple of weeks, and a lot of what I have done would not have been possible without his expertise and dedication, so I am very grateful to him.

Ministers are finally beginning to listen, and the attention given to kinship care in “Stable Homes, Built on Love” is hugely welcome. I am sad to say, however, that the document was policy-lite, with commitments to merely “explore the case” for greater financial support for kinship carers, and to pilot new “family first” decision making in just seven council areas. Other announcements were kicked down the road into the kinship care strategy promised by the end of the year, but, as the cost of living crisis bites, too many children in kinship care cannot afford to wait. There is a serious risk to children's outcomes and the public finances if kinship care does not get the investment that it needs. The MacAlister review warned that, with no action, almost 20,000 more children will be in local authority care by 2032, costing the Treasury an extra £5 billion.

In recent months, Kinship has seen a significant increase in the complexity and severity of cases to its advice and support line. In its 2022 “The Cost of Loving” survey of more than 1,000 kinship carers, out of the three quarters who said that they were not getting the support they needed, one third said that they may not be able to continue caring for their children as a result.

The need for change is becoming increasingly urgent. We need the Government not just to acknowledge the love that kinship carers provide, but to value it, invest in it and step up for those who are struggling.

**Sir George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate and the very eloquent way in which she is putting the case. Does she agree that if what she described were to happen to that one third, it would be a disaster not just for those families and the care system, but for the taxpayer, because it would require a very expensive solution to a problem that we could resolve by other means?

**Munira Wilson:** Absolutely, and I am grateful for that intervention, because the right hon. Member makes a case that I have made throughout, whenever I have talked about kinship carers: the Government cannot afford not to provide this support. The analysis shows that if we paid kinship carers a similar allowance to foster carers, for every child that we prevent from going into care, the Government would save £35,000 a year. It is a no-brainer because of both the short-term savings to the Treasury and the long-term savings, in terms of the more positive outcomes that we achieve for those children.

So what opportunity stands before us with the national kinship care strategy? It provides a key opportunity for the Government to deliver financial and educational support to children in kinship care that will be truly transformative. Kinship carers cannot wait for another spending review or a different colour of Government.

My Kinship Care Bill, introduced last year, had four main asks, and I hope that the strategy will make significant progress towards implementing each one. First, all kinship carers should have a weekly allowance at the same level as the national minimum fostering allowance. Many experience severe financial hardship. Kinship's survey last year found that two in five kinship carers had avoided putting the heating on, one in five skipped meals and more than one in eight used food banks. A national, non-means-tested allowance would end the system of patchy, means-tested allowances that reflect a postcode lottery in the support that councils can afford to provide.

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): I apologise for missing the beginning of the hon. Lady's speech, but I know that she has campaigned very effectively on this issue. Does she not agree, though, that the particular challenge with means testing in this space is that so many kinship carers are grandparents? They are retired and they have savings, but they need those savings for themselves and their retirement. It is vital that we have a system of support that recognises that particular challenge.

**Munira Wilson:** Absolutely, and that is why we need a consistent system applied across the board that is not dependent on the political persuasion of a local authority or what means it has to support kinship carers. I have come across many grandparents who are using up their life savings and people who might be about to retire and are having to quit the workforce sooner than they wanted. Kinship carers come in so many different shapes and sizes. That is why a proper means-tested allowance and national rules governing that is so important. The critical thing is that money should not be a barrier to a family or a friend taking in a child who is part of the wider family, because such barriers can lead to a child being forced into local authority care.

Secondly, kinship carers should be entitled to paid employment leave on a par with adoptive parents. Kinship's "Forced Out" survey found that four in 10 kinship carers had to leave work permanently and a further 45% reduced their hours after becoming a kinship carer. Those carers are disproportionately women and are over-represented in healthcare, education and social care, which simply exacerbates our workforce crisis in public services.

Thirdly, the Bill proposes extending greater educational support to children in kinship care such as pupil premium plus, virtual school heads and a higher priority in school admissions.

Fourthly, there should be a definition of kinship care in statute that will help carers and councils to better understand who a kinship carer is and what support they are entitled to.

The Government's response so far on the first of the three core asks has been disappointing, and "Stable Homes, Built on Love" has provided little hope. The Government have simply said they will "explore the case" for a mandatory financial allowance for kinship carers who possess a legal order. I am intrigued to understand more from the Minister about what "explore the case" means. Perhaps he will shed some light on it today. Will we see a cost-benefit analysis and an impact assessment? Are civil servants working actively on the issue, or are we talking about a couple of emails and phone calls?

I am pleased that the Government have adopted wholesale the definition of kinship care that was proposed by the Family Rights Group and have put it out for consultation—it was the same definition that I used in my Bill. However, the definition will have clout only if it is put into legislation and has statutory rights or entitlements attached to it. Simply putting it into guidance will likely not resolve the poor recognition and understanding of the term.

We cannot have another strategy that ducks the big decisions and kicks them into the long grass. Even if the plan has no spending commitments, which would be an absolute disaster, there are some steps that the Government could take to significantly improve the lives of kinship carers.

On data, our ability to make the case for greater investment in kinship care is greatly hampered by confusion over how many children live in kinship care and where kinship carers work. The latest estimate that 152,000 children in England live in kinship care comes from a University of Bristol analysis of the 2011 census.

In April, I wrote to the UK Statistics Authority to ask whether the Office for National Statistics intended to publish figures from the 2021 census. It replied that the Department for Education formally requested data on kinship carers earlier that month and that it would provide an update on that later in the year. I understand that that data might be published later this month. Will the Minister confirm that? Will it include information on the demographic make-up of kinship carers and their labour market patterns?

Meanwhile, parliamentary questions that I tabled reveal that, although the Ministry of Justice publishes how many special guardianship orders and child arrangement orders are granted each year, it does not know how many children are currently subject to one. What more will the Minister do to ensure that his

Department, the Ministry of Justice, and local authorities have accurate information on the number of children in kinship care?

On therapeutic care, I know how important the adoption support fund was to my constituent, Kim, who used it for her granddaughter's attachment therapy. However, Kim was in the uncommon position that her granddaughter was previously looked after before she went into kinship care. That meant she was entitled to ASF and also to pupil premium plus. As I told the House during my debate in October, that creates a totally perverse incentive for families to allow children to go into care so that they can receive additional support. Will the Minister review the eligibility criteria for the schemes so that more children in kinship care can qualify? Could the name of the adoption support fund be changed to acknowledge that kinship carers can also apply?

On legal aid, the Department has committed to

“work across government to explore...options for an extension of legal aid with kinship carers with SGOs and CAOs.”

Again, I would be grateful if the Minister explained what “explore” means as we seek to plug the gaps in legal aid provisions, particularly when children's services first reach out to prospective kinship carers.

The Government must remember that one in three kinship carer households is non-white. Ethnic minority children in kinship care are less likely to have a legal order. I recognise that a legal order may signify that the caring arrangement will be stable and permanent. However, if the Government restrict all their support to children in formal kinship arrangements, they risk widening ethnic disparities. Will the Minister confirm that the strategy will be accompanied by an equalities impact assessment, so that the risk can be mitigated?

This debate comes in the context of increasing anxiety about the financial stability of many local authorities across England. As we have seen in the press lately, some are in a catastrophic position with their finances. The strategy must not impose on local authorities various well-intentioned duties, pilots and instructions to change their culture without giving them the resources to implement them effectively.

I will end with a reminder of why we are all here and of the families whose lives we are trying to improve. Kim was one of the first kinship carers in my constituency to contact me. She is the special guardian of her granddaughter. She says of her experience:

“We are fortunate to have an understanding of the system now and can advocate for our granddaughter. However, the emotional, financial and physical price has taken its toll! Even 5 years into our Special Guardianship Order and with the help that we have been able to access, my granddaughter really struggles with any change...On a personal level, we have had to give up our roles as grandparents and become her parents. We have done so gladly but there are moments when we do grieve for those lost roles that we will never get back.”

April, which is not her real name, spoke to me about caring for her nephew after his mother passed away. She says:

“Little did I know that [by] giving my sister peace of mind as she faced leaving her small children, and [by] giving my nephew the security and care he desperately needed, I was unwittingly stepping into a ‘private arrangement’ with zero support.

We want to focus on the positives. It is a positive [that] we've got a new family member. But if we have to worry about financial things or [other] support...We don't want to have to do that. I want to give him the very best childhood.”

Many of the kinship carers who are watching the debate from the Gallery will have similar testimonies. Indeed, last year I hosted an event in Parliament for kinship carers and heard many moving stories. I also met kinship carers in Sutton a few months ago. Although every story and every family is unique, the themes I have set out today, including the barriers and challenges kinship carers face in the system, are often a common thread. People are so exhausted from fighting against them.

I invite right hon. and hon. Members to come to tea in the café after the debate with me and the kinship carers here today to hear at first hand about their experiences. They and I now look to the Minister to make sure that the upcoming kinship care strategy will be truly transformational. By stepping up for kinship carers, we support every child to get the very best start in life, no matter what their background.

**Martin Vickers (in the Chair):** Only one Back Bencher has applied to speak, so I invite others to bob if they wish to take part.

1.49 pm

**Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing the debate and bringing to the attention of the House all the costs of being a kinship carer, as well as illuminating the tremendous value they represent and the real difference they make to the children they bring into their immediate family and circle. I also congratulate her on her speech. I join her in paying tribute to the new Minister, who has a strong background that touches on all the issues we may consider today, most notably performance in school, outcomes and achievement. He will also be looking to ensure that the children in our care have every opportunity to thrive.

I pay tribute to the Government for bringing forward the kinship care strategy, with the tremendous potential therein to bring the sector into a much more sustainable and fair place. They have acknowledged that historically the sector has not had the focus and recognition it deserves, merits and needs, so I really welcome the sea change that we all hope to see. I praise East Sussex County Council for the work it does in this space—indeed, its support was recognised by the kinship carers I met most recently—and I pay tribute to the council's team as they endeavour to meet the challenges and support kinship carers across East Sussex, and Eastbourne in particular.

The hon. Lady is right to recognise that across the House there is not just increasing recognition of this kinship care but an earnest desire to see change and reform. Ultimately, this place is all about creating the environment in which this youngish generation can rise up and take their place. We are all about the business of making the world a better place, and enabling children who, for all sorts of reasons, cannot and should not stay with their parents to move to the security, love and continuity offered often by their grandparents, but also by their wider family, is surely a really important policy objective for us to try to achieve. As she said, we must ensure that finances are never the barrier, because in my estimation, if a child can remain within the love of their family, it is the very best place for them, in many instances, to recover, and then thrive.

[Caroline Ansell]

We know that, over and above almost every other circumstance or opportunity, the support of family is defining. We know that applies to every child from every background and every socio-economic setting. It is a defining factor in physical health, mental health, educational outcomes and life chances, so every effort should be made to try to secure the wider family stepping up to welcome in children who, for all sorts of reasons, cannot and should not stay with their parents.

In that light, the urgency that the hon. Lady described is the question of the day. We are agreed that family represents the best opportunity for children, and that kinship carers have been overlooked for too long. That urgency and pace is before us, so we await the strategy and for a number of recommendations to find form. The scale of the challenge is deep and wide, with 162,000 children cared for by their kin across England and Wales. To give a measure of the scale and scope of this sector in the shadows, that is more than double the number in foster care.

As we have heard, grandparents are of course the most common kinship carers, but grandparents increasingly have to work until later in life. The tension and the pressure of working is one very real barrier and obstacle to their being able to reach out and provide a full-time home to a child. There are perhaps more children in private arrangements that are not included in the official figures, and in such cases finance and support do not find their way to them. The census has really important information, which I hope will soon come to light, to help us to understand the scale and scope of the challenge before us.

On the financial issue, one of my constituents who attended the meeting that I arranged with kinship carers told me that she fears losing her job; she cannot get the parental leave she needs to care for her granddaughter, but without her job she cannot provide for the granddaughter she wants to offer a full-time home to. That is an excruciating tension. And another constituent described the mental anguish caused by years of court battles.

In my constituency, there is a really strong support group led by Wendy Turner, who is here with us in the Public Gallery today, so in addition to recognising the hon. Member for Twickenham, the Minister, the Government and MPs from across the House, I most particularly recognise kinship carers themselves in this really important debate, because it is their stories, their testimonies, that will really and truly land the change that we all desire. I commend them for that.

**Mr Robin Walker:** I could not resist the opportunity to pay tribute to the local kinship care group in my Worcester constituency. Kinship Carers UK, which is led by Enza Smith, has campaigned hard on this issue and first drew my attention to some of the concerns. One of the issues that the group has raised is the status of kinship carers and recognition of that status, which I think is addressed in the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Twickenham. There is a concern that when kinship carers take a child they look after for NHS care, they may not be able to take decisions in the way that a parent could. They can find it very difficult to work with the health service and other public services because

of the distinction between parents and kinship carers. Is it not very important that we come up with a very clear definition of kinship carers and a clear way for them to identify themselves and their relationship to their charge, so that they can access all public services effectively?

**Caroline Ansell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; he makes an excellent point. Some means of recognition is needed, not only in healthcare but in all the different arms and institutions of public services, not least in schools, because recognition enables far swifter decision making, which is surely in the best interests of the child and those caring for them. There must be a way to achieve that recognition of status, and I look forward to the Minister telling us how such an innovation could help to rationalise the whole experience of kinship care, so that we can better address the challenges.

Interestingly, one of the members of the group of kinship carers that I met talked about guidance on how to navigate the quite complex bureaucratic situation in which they found themselves: they are responsible for a child, yet are not in a decision-making role. As an example, we spoke about a guide that had been established for the Homes for Ukraine scheme, interestingly enough, in which there was a step-by-step and issue-by-issue walkthrough to help people who were bringing Ukrainians into their home, showing them how they could navigate some of the complex systems that exist and where they could find support. The point was made to me that there is no handbook for kinship carers. There was simply a call, sometimes in the middle of the night, and then sometimes there was a social worker on the doorstep at any hour of the day, saying, “Over to you.”

Regarding some of the issues around passports and access to medical records, we can surely bring some sanity to bear on the bureaucracy, which just provides another layer of challenge and adds nothing to safeguarding or child protection. When we have put a child in the care of a family member, we should most certainly empower that family member to make decisions on behalf of the child. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester made in his intervention is very well made.

While their costs are no different and their challenges certainly of similar order, unlike foster carers the vast majority of kinship carers find themselves without a minimum financial allowance to assist with the covering of expenses. The current state of financial support for kinship carers is both insufficient and marked by significant variations, not always hinging on the specific needs of the kinship families, but rather being subject to legal and geographical disparities. If we bring a new understanding to bear, surely we can create something much fairer. The current system unintentionally—perverse even—encourages kinship carers to transition into foster carers, as this is often the sole path by which they can access reliable financial and other forms of support. That does not align with the best interests of the child. The repercussions, beyond the emotional and psychological, of this lack of financial support are profound and affect both families and the state. According to the 2022 annual survey report “The Cost of Loving”, six out of 10 kinship carers reported resorting to borrowing money, taking out short-term loans, or relying on credit cards for everyday expenses in the past year.

For every 1,000 children raised in kinship families rather than placed in local authority care, the state saves £40 million and enhances the lifetime earnings of the children by £20 million, so the statistics say. I know that there are very serious pressures on children's social care, even in my own county. A mark of this is that, just this last financial year, for the first time the cost of children's social services outweighed the cost of adult social care. This is a very significant development: not only has that cost now overtaken that of adult social care, but its trajectory is set to escalate exponentially. We know through our work on the Education Committee that the care sector is under massive pressure, to the point where providers in the marketplace are able to charge what they will, leaving county councils competing for places. Kinship care is, in part, an answer to that very real, sustained pressure on services. Surely it merits significant investment.

Before I came to this place, my career was in education, so I know the impact that family support can have on children and young people. It was too often the very parents I needed to speak to who did not come to parents evenings. Children who have been taken from mum or dad and out of the family setting for very good reasons have experienced trauma. The fact that that is not more recognised in school is, to my mind, a burning injustice. They experience challenges with their focus and stamina, and their ability to concentrate is affected because they come from a place of trauma. It is really that clear. They need additional support as urgently as possible, because with every year of lost learning, it is exponentially harder to recover and recapture that learning.

The effects of those early years can last a lifetime if we do not rush in with more support. Schools are the strongest partners for kinship carers when it comes to rescuing these children. I am hoping the Minister, perhaps today, but ultimately as we approach the strategy, will have some encouraging words around what new provision and recognition we might see in schools, because they are important partners too.

In addition to the financial support I have spoken of—the pupil premium plus—I long to see employment leave to facilitate kinship care, particularly at the start of the placement, legal aid to take the sting out of court battles, and recognition of the work of local authorities and a just settlement, so that they can more ably meet the needs of families in their areas. I look forward to seeing progress, recognition and investment for all of those things.

2.6 pm

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), who made some important points that I wholeheartedly support. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing the debate and all the cross-party work that she does on the issue. She works incredibly hard in this area. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time.

It would be remiss of me not to welcome the new Children's Minister to his post. I hope that he enjoys his time in the Department for Education, dealing with some important issues. Today it is kinship care, but there is also the wider issue of how we improve children's services across England, because in too many parts of our country, children's services are not just underperforming

but letting children down. I hope that the Government take a close look at those local authorities that could and should be doing better for our children and young people.

I wanted to speak in this debate because not only am I the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care, but, as many Members know, my wife Allison and I are kinship carers to our grandson Lyle. We never planned on becoming kinship carers, but life can be unpredictable. Sadly, Lyle's mum and dad were unable to care for him, and social services knocked on our door. We did not think twice—of course we would take him in; of course we would care for him. It was, and it is, one of the best decisions that I—that both of us—have ever made, probably apart from getting married, as otherwise the rest would not have happened.

We love Lyle to pieces. He is a little ball of energy and joy. He is four now, and has just started primary school. He is kind, caring, incredibly funny and just the right level of mischievous. That is why being a kinship carer is such a strange conundrum: on the one hand, you are given this gift, whom you love more than anything in the world. Every Thursday evening I race home from this place back to Manchester, because spending time with Lyle is the thing above all else that I look forward to.

**Caroline Ansell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, because in my contribution I focused on the issues, challenges, setbacks and disasters, but I should also say that all the kinship carers I met spoke about love. That is how the conversations started: they spoke about their motivation to reach out and to protect the child, and how they would do anything and everything in their power to look after them.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I can speak from experience. Mondays and Fridays have now got even better for me because I get to take Lyle to the local primary school. He is loving his time there, especially now he has worked out that he gets fed—last week was the first week he was there all the time, and it came as a revelation to him that they fed him at lunchtime.

On the other hand, as we have heard in the previous two contributions, kinship care is also exceptionally hard. Kinship carers are essentially picked up and dropped into a legal and emotional labyrinth, with precious little support from anyone. Like many carers, Allison and I had to go through the family courts to obtain a special guardianship order, which gives us parental responsibilities so that we can make active decisions about Lyle's upbringing and about precisely the things the hon. Member for Eastbourne mentioned—healthcare, school and passports. We have parental rights and can make those decisions for Lyle. We had to undergo hours and hours of assessment—really intrusive police assessment of not just me and Allison, but my children and my friends. It is a gruelling system that demands an extraordinary amount from all those involved.

There are also wider family implications. Children are raised in kinship care for a variety of complex reasons, including parental mental health problems, substance misuse or illness. A kinship carer often has to manage a sensitive family situation while fiercely protecting the health and wellbeing of the child they are caring for. They are given absolutely no formal emotional support. It is only thanks to organisations such as Kinship and

[Andrew Gwynne]

the Family Rights Group that Allison and I have been able to speak with other kinship carers, build support networks and access advice. It is amazing, because you find that you are not alone and that virtually every other person in the system has, to a lesser or greater extent, gone through the things you are going through, which you think are incredibly traumatic and a massive upheaval.

Then there are the financial implications. Allison and I have spent thousands of pounds in legal fees since we became kinship carers, and we continue to do so. There is always the threat of being taken back to court umpteen times. That puts a carer under such stress, trauma and emotional and financial pressure while they are trying to care for and protect their loved one. Allison and I are lucky because we are in a financial position to be able to pay these fees, but over the years I have found myself asking pretty basic questions: What if we did not have that money? What if I lost my job? What if I did not have a platform? What then?

The answers to those questions are as depressing as they are concerning. Last year, the APPG on kinship care found that 38% of kinship carers surveyed had received no legal advice about their rights and options in relation to their kinship child. Where carers had received legal advice, just 16% had received part or full payment through legal aid. Of the kinship carers who ended up in court, almost a third had to represent themselves. Some 53% of carers have made personal contributions of above £1,000, with 9% accruing costs of £10,000 or more. To be frank, the system treats kinship carers as an afterthought. They are a convenient solution in a time of crisis, and then they are left to drift in a buckling system that does not seem to recognise their existence, let alone the love they have for the children they care for.

Studies consistently show that kinship care, where possible, is in the best interests of the child. It certainly is for Lyle, and it is for hundreds of thousands of children across the country. Research from the parliamentary taskforce on kinship care shows that behavioural, educational and emotional outcomes for children in kinship care are, on the whole, better than for children living with unrelated foster carers. Kinship care allows children to develop a strong sense of their own identity and a feeling of belonging that comes from the stability of living within their wider network of family and friends. Kinship care placements are 2.6 times more likely to be permanent than unrelated foster care arrangements. It is essential that we embrace the opportunities that kinship care offers and that we make it easier for families who want to be kinship carers to do so.

It is estimated that around 100,000 children will be in care by 2032, and we must prioritise things such as kinship care if we want to avoid that reality. However, without even a legal, inclusive definition of kinship care in legislation, there is a long way to go. I am glad the Government have committed to publishing a national kinship care strategy by the end of the year. I sincerely hope Ministers will listen to the voices of kinship carers and organisations such as the Family Rights Group and Kinship and develop a system that gives kinship carers not only the support they need but the recognition they deserve.

I get uncharacteristically nervous when this subject is debated in Parliament. It sometimes feels a bit too exposing and personal to speak publicly about it. The reality is that there are hundreds of thousands of kinship carers in the same position as Allison and me. We owe it to them to get this right. Above all, we owe it to the children being cared for—children such as Lyle, who deserve all the love, care and stability the world can give. Kinship care makes that possible, so let's make it happen.

2.17 pm

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing the debate, and I welcome everyone with an interest in kinship care who has made the journey to Westminster to hear it. Anybody who has done so or who is watching cannot fail to be moved by the powerful speeches that have been made by all the Members who have contributed substantively or made interventions to share their perspective.

I dare say I could fill a speech 10 times over with stories of the love, care and benefit that kinship carers bring to relationships. The only time I have had to consider this issue in my own context was in a discussion with my then partner about who, in an ideal world, we would like to look after our children if we ever found ourselves, for whatever reason, unable to do so. That was a challenging enough discussion, so I cannot adequately express my gratitude and admiration for those who step up when they are called on to do so, as we have just heard.

The UK Government are set to publish their strategy for kinship carers later in the year. The Scottish Government have published a number of strategies, which they are in the process of implementing. This is not a matter of geography, because the best place for a child to be brought up is not about geography. The best place for a child to live when they need to leave their birth parents is, wherever possible, in that wider family setting, if it is safe and in the child's best interests to do so. Kinship care helps a child retain that sense of identity, family, heritage and background and can help them—in ways that other settings, with the best will in the world, simply cannot—to feel safe, protected and valued.

We have already heard about some of the challenges that kinship carers face—the number of legal processes as well as the financial expenses associated with taking on these important responsibilities—and often they did not plan to spend their future years fulfilling those responsibilities. All too often, despite the best efforts of Governments and agencies, the available support is not—and can never be—commensurate with the responsibilities that kinship carers are asked to fulfil.

The hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) gave an honourable mention to an organisation in his constituency. My good and hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) specifically asked me to mention Airdrie Kinship Carers, and the vital network it provides across north Lanarkshire to support kinship carers. It is important that Governments do all they can to ensure not only that individual kinship carers and wider family units are supported, but that the support networks out there are well funded and can operate within a framework of best practice.

Back in 2020, the Scottish Government committed to something that has been called “The Promise”. That was the report of the independent care review, which had the aim of ensuring that Scotland could be one of the best places in the world for care-experienced children and young people to grow up. That is an extremely high ambition, but it starts from a place of knowing that improvement was needed. In the seven preceding years, there had been six reviews of how Scotland cared for children, yet the recommendations—even though they were based on a range of evidence, knowledge and understanding—did not lead to the kind of wholesale change that was necessary.

In publishing “The Promise”, Fiona Duncan—the chair of the independent care review—spoke to the chairs of those previous reviews to take on their perspective on what had stalled things. The answers that came back are probably depressingly familiar: a lack of buy-in for change; insufficient resources invested in enabling the necessary change; in some cases, restrictive rules preventing change; people simply not knowing how to make the change; and much more.

That care review had to be different, and it started with an unwavering commitment to making sure that the care experience community would be at the very heart of its considerations, to ensure as full and proper an understanding as possible of not only how the care system operates, but how it feels to those in it and what children and their families truly need to flourish. On concluding its deliberations, the care review had listened to over 5,500 experiences. Over half of the voices were those of children and young people with experience of the care system. The review took into account the experiences of adults who had lived in care and lots of different types of families. The remaining voices came from the paid and unpaid workforce, whose stories guided the review and whose experiences shaped all its conclusions. As the UK Government set off down their own path of considering similar issues, I commend the work encapsulated by that document, and the resulting action plan, which might inform their work in taking forward the areas for which they are responsible.

As the chair, Fiona Duncan, said:

“It is clear that Scotland must not aim to fix a broken system but set a higher collective ambition that enables loving, supportive and nurturing relationships as a basis on which to thrive.”

Last year, the implementation plan was published. The Scottish Government’s approach reflected “The Fundamentals” set out in “The Promise”, which were:

“To do what matters to children and families

To listen and embed what we have heard from children and families

To tackle poverty and the forces that push families into it

To respect children’s rights

To improve our language”

when we are talking about the care settings.

Some key policy commitments have come out of this plan, including to invest £500 million in preventive spend over the course of the parliamentary Session through the whole family wellbeing fund. That is designed to deliver transformational change and service redesign in the totality of family support, with the aim of reducing the crisis intervention that needs to take place and contributing to the improvement of lives across a wide

range of areas, including, but not limited to, child and adolescent mental health, child poverty, alcohol and drug use, and educational attainment.

There are also measures to support local areas to implement the national guidance on child protection, with £10 million invested per annum through the care experience grant—a new £200 annual grant for young people aged 16 to 25 who have care experience. The grant is intended to provide additional financial security for those young people and to help reduce some of the barriers they face in their transition to adulthood and more independent living.

As much as we would like to, it is not always possible for SNP spokespersons to stand up and say how much better we think we are doing, because we know that that is sometimes simply not the case. One area where we have been playing catch-up is in having a standard national allowance. Prior to its introduction, Scotland was the only part of the UK with no national minimum allowance for care support grants for kinship carers—allowances were provided by local authorities, but there was variability. That floor has now been set, which does not mean that local authorities cannot continue to pay more, but there is now a baseline in place. These payments can help people to meet the costs of clothing, hobbies and funding activities and school trips—all the things that help young people to feel included, and not excluded or in any way different. There is also the expansion of the legal definition of “kinship carer”, which has allowed more carers to benefit from the Scottish child payment. We can already see the difference that that is making to the lives of many, whether they are in kinship care or not.

I am acutely aware of the time; nevertheless, it would be remiss of me not to conclude with the words of Scotland’s then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, in responding on behalf of the Scottish Government to the independent report. He gave this message to the children of Scotland:

“We want you to be safe with the people that you know and love. We want you to be healthy. We want to give you a good education. We want you to know and feel that you are loved.”

As we have heard, the role that kinship carers play in helping to secure those outcomes cannot be overestimated. I very much look forward to listening to the rest of this debate.

2.27 pm

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing the debate and on the work she does to raise the profile of kinship carers and the issues they face. We have had a high level of consensus in the debate. I welcome the kinship carers to the Gallery today. It is great to have them with us.

I also welcome the Minister to his place. I looked back at our previous debate on this topic about a year ago and I noted that I was welcoming the Minister’s predecessor’s predecessor, so I wish him luck as he hangs on to the revolving door that seems to be the Department for Education. I have no doubt that he will bring commitment to his role, and particularly to this topic, as we think about the needs of kinship carers.

[Helen Hayes]

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) spoke of the pressures on grandparents and older kinship carers, who not only have to bear the costs of looking after children, but are required to expend all that energy in a role that they were perhaps not expecting to perform later in their lives. I was glad to hear her acknowledge the pressures in her area, the pressures on children's social care more widely, and the grotesque profiteering by private providers of children's homes and foster placements. I hope the Minister was listening to a colleague on his own side of the House speaking about those pressures, which affect the children's social care system across the whole country. The pressures bear down on families, which results in increasing numbers of children having to enter the care system.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and thank him for all the work he does through the APPG on kinship care, of which I was a member until I took up my current role. It is not easy to speak about one's own personal circumstances. It is not easy to speak about one's own personal circumstances, but he speaks so movingly about his role as a kinship carer for his grandson, Lyle. In doing so, he gives voice to kinship carers across the country, and he is a powerful and important advocate. As I have said before in this Chamber, Lyle is a very lucky little boy to have such fantastic grandparents as my hon. Friend and his wife.

I pay tribute to kinship carers across the country who step in to look after a child when a family member or friend is unable to do so, and to the Family Rights Group, the charity Kinship and the Kinship Care Alliance, which work to support kinship carers and to advocate on their behalf. Stepping in to care for a child when a close friend or family member cannot is an extraordinary and very special thing to do. Yet most kinship carers I have met do not describe it as a choice; they love the children in their care and stepping in to care for them when there was a need to do so was a natural consequence of that love. They would not have thought of doing anything else. It is always humbling to meet kinship carers and hear their stories. The unconditional love for the children they look after and the joy and pride they receive from being able to play a part in their lives is always clear to see—but so are the challenges.

Over half of kinship carers give up work to look after the children in their care. Some 75% of kinship carers experience severe financial hardship. The children have often gone through significantly adverse experiences such as bereavement, abuse or neglect. Looking after children in those circumstances requires support and access to professional help. Kinship carers themselves may also have suffered trauma: the loss of their own child, supporting their child on a journey of addiction, or other challenges that have led to a grandchild, niece or nephew being in their care in the first place. They are sometimes left to manage complex contact arrangements with birth parents. While kinship carers may be in suitable housing, in areas where there is a crisis in the availability of genuinely affordable housing, many will not be, and taking on kinship care may result in overcrowding in a family home that had previously been big enough to meet the family's needs.

I have met kinship carers who are using their savings to care for children. I remember one grandmother in particular who was so committed to her grandson continuing to play football—it was the one thing he loved that helped with the trauma he had experienced—that she was dipping into her pension lump sum to pay for it, and to meet other costs as well. Support for kinship carers is inconsistent across the country. I recall another kinship carer who had taken on the care of her friend's children. Contact arrangements with her friend were really fraught, but her local authority told her that because the arrangement was private, they had no role to play and could not support that process. These issues are widespread across the country. Some 180,000 families are in the same situation: they have stepped in to care for the children of a family member or close friend, but they find that enormous personal sacrifice and considerable extra cost are involved, often with little meaningful support.

In thinking about the needs of kinship carers, we must also look at why the number of children who cannot be cared for by their birth families is increasing. We cannot escape the Government's record on this matter: the Family Rights Group has highlighted the erosion in early help and support for vulnerable families; more than 1,300 Sure Start centres have closed since 2010; and the National Children's Bureau estimates that Government funding available to councils for children's services fell by 24% between 2010 and 2020. The pandemic is likely to have made it even harder for councils to offer early intervention services for families. I have certainly been told by local authorities across the country that early help and support that was available more than a decade ago has all but disappeared in many places. The failure of the Government to ensure that early help is always available to the most vulnerable families, wherever in the country they live, has a direct bearing on the extent to which families are able to overcome challenges and avoid a crisis in which it becomes unsafe or impossible for children to remain with their parents.

**Caroline Ansell:** I too am most concerned about support for vulnerable families, particularly to help families stay together. I have some experience of Sure Start centres, and they are focused on those first few, very important, years. The family hub model, which the Government have brought in, looks to extend support from the early years of nought to five all the way through to 18. I know many parents struggle particularly in the teenage years, rather than with tinies. Does the hon. Lady recognise the work of family hubs, and does she have experience with them?

**Helen Hayes:** Certainly, the hon. Lady is right to say that the challenges facing children and young people have changed over the last decade, particularly those facing teenagers and the need for help and support. I absolutely recognise that point, but I would say to the hon. Lady that we had Sure Start centres in every community up and down the country at a very local level. In many places, they have all but disappeared. So far, the family hubs model funds a family hub in only half of all local authority areas, which does not meet the scale of the challenge. If Sure Start centres had been protected and allowed to evolve to meet the changing needs of families and children, we would be in an altogether different position than the one that affects



far too many families up and down the country. We have never been committed to an entirely static model of delivery, but the infrastructure of Sure Start centres is a very grave and serious loss, in all those areas where they have not been protected and have closed.

Kinship carers are an essential part of the way in which our society looks after children. They deliver outcomes for children which are as good as, and often better than, foster care or children's homes, for a fraction of the cost. The Government have been failing children and families for 12 long years. The focus on kinship care in the independent review of children's social care was very welcome, with a large degree of consensus around many of its recommendations. We are still, however, seeing only piecemeal measures from the Government. It is vitally important that the kinship care strategy is published by the end of the year, as the Government have promised. I hope that the Minister will say more today to confirm that is the case, and that he might also comment on whether that strategy will be cross-departmental, looking at all the areas where kinship carers need support and where it is not being provided.

Kinship carers have waited too long to be fully recognised as a vital part of children's social care. Their love has not been valued sufficiently. If we are successful in winning a majority in the House of Commons at the next general election, Labour in Government will put children and their families at the heart of everything we do, as we did before. We will support the vital work of kinship carers—support which is so long overdue.

2.38 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank all the Members who have played a part in this well-informed debate today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this debate and those she has secured previously. She says it is traditional for those in my role to resign a few days after she has had her debate; I will try my best not to do so, but it probably partly depends on how this debate goes. I also commend her staff member Andrew, who is soon to depart, for all the work he has done in supporting her on this. It is such an important issue, and I too am pleased to have kinship carers in the Gallery—Wendy and others—with whom I hope I can have a little chat at the end of the debate.

I wholeheartedly share the hon. Member for Twickenham's commitment to championing the important role of kinship carers. They play a vital role in the children's social care system and in the lives of children up and down the country. Too often, they play that role without people knowing or appreciating it. I think we all agree that too little attention has been paid to this area of kinship carers for far too long. We are determined to change that.

About 17 years ago, I did some mentoring through an organisation that helped primary school children who were showing behavioural problems in the classroom as a result of what was going on at home. I was matched with a nine-year-old boy who had been removed from his parents due to what was going on at home and placed on the child protection register. He had been placed with his gran. In this mentoring capacity, the mentor would take the mentee out each week to do fun

activities—football, ice skating, swimming and things like that—while trying to work with them on the behaviour they were exhibiting in school.

When I picked the boy up at the beginning of the day and when I took him back at the end of the day, I got a glimpse of the incredible role that his gran was playing. She was in her 60s, she had raised her children and this was not what she had expected to be doing—a number of Members have said this—and yet, through boundaries, discipline, nutritious food and stable bedtimes, she was transforming the little boy's behaviour far more than was the weekly session I was having with him. That was my first experience of the incredible role that kinship carers play, so I am determined that we should do as much for them as we can.

I will now set out the steps that the Government are taking to improve the position of kinship carers. Towards the end, I will try to answer as many of the questions as possible; for any I do not cover, Members should feel free to intervene, or I will write to them afterwards.

When a child cannot remain with their parents, wider family and friends can offer a safe and loving alternative to being looked after and having to move in with strangers. We have discussed how many people are in kinship care, and at this moment in time about 110,000 children in England are being brought up in kinship care, many of whom would otherwise be in local authority care if members of their extended family network had not stepped in. The census data was mentioned, and our 110,000 figure comes from the 2021 census information, which was published in July. I am happy to show Members the source of that after the debate.

Living in kinship arrangements can offer a stable and permanent option for children. Maintaining connections with family and the people they love can contribute to a healthy sense of identity and belonging. Hon. Members will know that I am passionate about social mobility and closing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, and, as has been touched on in part, children living in kinship care, on average, achieve better GCSE results, have a greater chance of being in employment and experience better long-term health outcomes than children who grow up in foster care or residential care. For example—this has been quoted already—in 2021, it was found that 69% of adults who experienced kinship care were in employment, compared with 59% or 48%, respectively, for those with a history of fostering or of residential care. The average attainment 8 score for those with a special guardianship order was 33.5, compared with 22.2 for looked-after children. The data therefore backs up the experience that Members have been sharing.

Not only does kinship care offer better outcomes for children—which is the primary concern of everyone present—but it makes better economic sense. Investing in kinship care is considerably more cost-effective for local authorities than paying for residential care homes, for example. I therefore want to create a system that not only helps kinship arrangements to take place, but actively supports kinship families to thrive. What I do not want to hear any more of is the gruelling system that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) is having to go through with Lyle.

The independent review of children's social care highlighted the lack of focus on kinship care from successive Governments. It has been a problem for some time. The review made a number of ambitious

[David Johnston]

recommendations, which we hope will increase the number of children who can remain within their family networks. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) touched exactly on the Government's focus, which is that children should remain with their families if they can, although that will not always be possible. Where possible, that is our primary focus: we want children to be with their immediate or extended family, before they have to go into care homes or other less desirable situations.

The strategy sets out six pillars of action, including unlocking the potential of family networks. In July, we announced that we will start implementing family network support packages through the £45 million Families First for Children pathfinder and family network pilot. Family network support packages will look at how to use financial and other practical means to unlock barriers to family networks being able to provide support for children to stay safely at home. As has been touched on—this is perhaps more relevant to the debate—we have also made a commitment to implement or explore the recommendations on kinship care. I stress to Members that, as I said to my team as soon as I was appointed, we will have no slackening of the timetable. We will publish the strategy before the end of the year, whatever it takes. It will set out a long-term vision for kinship care and how we can better support carers and children. I will not be able to set out all the details of the strategy today, but I will set out some of the progress we hope to make.

I wholeheartedly agree with right hon. and hon. Members who have highlighted that kinship carers need more support than is currently available to them. We have developed a twin-track system, whereby there is much more support for foster carers than there is for kinship carers. There is no great logic to that; it is just where successive Governments have focused their attention. We are trying to bring the two together. Part of that is about helping people to connect with other kinship carers, which is why the Department has supported kinship families through our £2 million partnership with the charity Kinship, whose good work has already been commended, to deliver high-quality peer support groups for kinship carers. Those groups are already supporting kinship carers, and we hope that 100 peer support groups will be established by January 2024. Also to come will be a whole host of face-to-face and online training, and useful resources—some of the things that Members have talked about—to provide access to the type of independent guidance and support that people can get in other areas already.

The independent review of children's social care recommended a financial allowance for special guardians and carers looking after children under a child arrangement order. I think we all recognise the strain that many kinship families are under, and we are exploring the feasibility of mandating a financial allowance for kinship carers in every local authority. I chaired the national implementation board this week, and some of the local authority representatives said that a number of local authorities are already providing such an allowance. Part of our limitation here, which I will come to, is about data, as some Members have touched on. Part of exploring the feasibility is to get a picture on exactly who is doing what already, but I agree with the hon.

Member for Twickenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne that finance should not be a barrier, particularly when we want children and young people to remain with their families.

We recognise that there has been a lack of a consistent, recognised definition of kinship care, which can make it difficult to know whether people are in a kinship arrangement and what help they are entitled to. In "Stable Homes, Built on Love", we published a draft definition of kinship care and sought the views of people with lived experience, as well as those of professionals and charities, on whether the definition helps to create an accurate understanding of kinship. I am grateful to those who have responded to the consultation, and the definition has been pretty well received. I cannot commit to introducing legislation at this time, but the feedback we have had so far has been positive.

Legal support has been mentioned. Again, kinship carers sometimes have to pay extraordinary amounts of money to get the legal advice they need, even though they are doing something that society should want them to do and should enable. From May this year, the Ministry of Justice extended legal aid entitlements to prospective guardians making applications for special guardianship orders in private family law proceedings. We predict that that will benefit thousands of potential kinship carers.

On workplace entitlements, it is important to recognise the employers who are already providing paid leave and so on, and have been doing so without the Government mandating them to do so. Wherever that is possible, we welcome it. The kinship strategy will provide an update on our commitment to explore workplace entitlements for kinship carers.

On pupil premium, which my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne touched on, at the moment, children who live with special guardians and were previously looked after by the state are eligible for pupil premium plus, a non-means-tested, non-income-tested benefit. Kinship children who were not previously looked after but have been entitled to free school meals can get pupil premium in the usual way that other children can if they have been eligible within the last six years. We constantly review and assess the effectiveness of pupil premium to ensure that it is supporting the children most in need of it.

Briefly on admissions, in 2021 we introduced changes to the school admissions code to improve in-year admissions. That enables kinship carers to secure a school place for their child in year if they cannot do so by other means.

Finally in this area, children who are living with special guardians and have previously been in state care can access therapeutic support via the adoption support fund. Last year, we made that support available to children who live with relatives under child arrangements orders. We are looking to improve local authority engagement with the adoption support fund, to increase the proportion of eligible kinship carers—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to the Minister for covering this point. It is not quite as simple as he is making out, because a number of local authorities—my own included—make it very difficult for people to access those services through that fund, unless they

have gone through all kinds of hoops and loops with other statutory services prior to making an application. Will the Minister ensure that all local authorities understand that the message coming from him is that those services should be available to kinship carers?

**David Johnston:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for that point and I will certainly do that. He made a point about assessments, which I will come to. Again, they should be simpler than they have been in his experience.

My Department is also working with Ofsted to improve the visibility of kinship care in inspection reports. Through updated guidance and inspector training, Ofsted will make it clearer that reports should refer to the quality of support being provided to kinship carers and children in kinship care arrangements.

Let me try to rattle through as many of the questions as I can. We have touched on data. I have given the 2021 census figures, but data collection is something that my officials are really working on, because there just has not been enough. Not having that data is inhibiting our ability and some of the things that we want to do in the strategy.

I was asked whether there will be an equalities impact assessment. Yes, there will be a thorough equalities impact assessment as part of the forthcoming strategy.

On the bureaucracy that my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne referred to, part of the setting of the definition is to ensure that agencies are better able to provide the right support and remove some of the hurdles that kinship carers experience. We hope that the peer support groups will support that work as well.

I just touched on the point made by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish about assessments. LAs have the statutory responsibility for assessing kinship carers, because they have the legal duty to safeguard vulnerable children, but those assessments should be proportionate and prioritise the best interests of the child. I encourage local authorities to think about how their assessments could be adapted to be more supportive, and we will reiterate that in our strategy.

I need to leave a little time for the hon. Member for Twickenham to wind up. I thank her again for securing the debate, as well as previous ones, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. The debate has rightly focused on the issues that all too many kinship carers face. I put on the record my thanks and admiration for every one of those kinship carers—including Members of this House—for their selfless contribution to the lives of the children they care for. It is a huge commitment,

but such an important one. I am proud of the progress that we are already making to support kinship carers, but I know there is much more to do, and that is what the strategy will contain.

I am fully committed to reducing the barriers to kinship care where it is in the best interests of the child and can offer a safe, stable and loving alternative to their becoming looked after. I look forward to publishing our kinship strategy before the end of the year. As I set out, that will be an opportunity to begin to make meaningful and lasting change in the lives of kinship carers and their children.

2.55 pm

**Munira Wilson:** I thank the hon. Members who co-sponsored my application for the debate and all those who have participated in it. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said that he gets nervous when this issue comes up because it is so close to home, but I urge him: please do not stop talking about it. His passion, love, devotion and dedication to Lyle makes what he says so much more powerful than anything that I or anybody else says, because it comes from the heart and personal experience, and it is always so moving.

I was heartened by the level of cross-party consensus, not least from the new Minister. I was delighted to hear his commitment to the issue and his recognition of some of the key issues we raised. I feel encouraged. I know, however, that the stumbling block for the strategy will be the Treasury; my sense is that children tend to be a much lower priority for it. I make the Minister this offer: if he needs any help lobbying the Treasury, I, and I suspect Members from all parts of the House, stand ready to work alongside him to make the case and ensure that kinship carers and children in kinship care get support.

I do not think that I heard much about employment leave. Again, if the Minister needs to work with the Department for Business and Trade on that, I will be happy to support him in any way. We can follow up the detail of some issues in correspondence, but he started to address many of the questions that I and other hon. Members raised. We look forward to seeing the strategy, and hon. Members from all parts of the House will continue to work alongside him and to champion this issue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered the matter of support for kinship carers.

## Community Pharmacies

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered community pharmacies.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, the purpose of which is threefold. The first is to thank community pharmacists for the great work that they have been carrying out in towns and cities for around 175 years. It was in 1849 that John Boot opened his first shop in Nottingham. More recently, the sector stepped up to the plate and was a key player in delivering the covid vaccination roll-out.

Secondly, I wish to acknowledge and support the Government for recognising in their delivery plan for recovering access to primary care, published in May, the key role that community pharmacists have been asked to play in the future of planning care.

Thirdly, and probably most urgently, there is a need to address the enormous pressures that community pharmacists currently face. If that is not done, the sector could cease to exist in large swathes of the country and will be in no fit state to perform the role for which it has successfully auditioned. There are clear comparisons to be drawn with the current state of NHS dentistry, and it is vital that action is taken to prevent a repeat of that particular nightmare.

A community pharmacy, previously known as the chemist's in the UK and still known as the drugstore in the US, is a retail shop that provides pharmaceutical drugs as well as other personal products. There will be a qualified pharmacist available to issue medical prescriptions and to provide advice and guidance to customers on prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs, as well as on general health problems. Community pharmacies should be distinguished from the solely dispensing pharmacies located in medical practices and hospitals.

In my research for the debate I noted, as I have over the years, that in some places and at some times, relationships between GPs and community pharmacists can be fraught and strained. That needs to be addressed if the Government's plans for improving access to primary care are to be successfully delivered.

In preparing for the debate I visited the Kirkley pharmacy at Kirkley Mill in Lowestoft and Boots in Beccles. I thank them both, as well as Tania Farrow and Kristina Boulton from Community Pharmacy Suffolk, for their advice, information and support.

Community pharmacies are made up of privately run businesses and corporate chains. It is important to emphasise that both those groups are going above and beyond what any business could reasonably be expected to do to keep their shops open. It is the framework within which they have to operate that is at fault, not them. The private businesses often work ridiculously long hours for no reward in the service of their local communities, and the corporate chains use retail sales to subsidise the pharmacy side of their operation. It is clear that if reform is not carried out urgently, the steady stream of closures will turn into a torrent.

On 19 July, my hon. Friend the Minister—it is great to see him in his place—confirmed, in answer to a written question that I had submitted, that in the first six months of this year, the number of pharmacies in England reduced by 222. Yesterday, I was advised that Boots has announced that its shop in Orwell Road in Felixstowe, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), will close on 18 November.

While their number is falling by the day, there are approximately 10,800 community pharmacies in England. As I have mentioned, they do great work, and it was in recognition of that that the Government announced on 9 May that community pharmacies will play a central role in the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care, with £645 million being provided to support a pharmacy-first service.

That will include expanded treatment options for seven common ailments, including earache, sore throats and urinary tract infections. Community pharmacists will also be able to assess patients and supply certain prescription-only medicines without a prescription from a GP. That vote of confidence is welcome, but there is a concern that, due to a real-terms reduction in funding, about which I shall go into more detail shortly, there is an element of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

We now need the detail of how pharmacy-first will work, so that integrated care boards such as the Norfolk and Waveney ICB can set about its implementation. There have been no further details since May, and I will be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister can advise us when further information will be published.

An important part of the future of community pharmacy is for pharmacists to be independent prescribers. By 2026, newly qualified pharmacists will be able to start work having received the necessary training to become independent prescribers as part of their qualification. There is a need to ensure enough support to enable existing community pharmacists also to be trained as independent prescribers.

To become independent prescribers, pharmacists will need the support of a designated prescribing practitioner as part of their training. Sufficient investment is needed to ensure that that can happen, as designated prescribing practitioners will be required to support both those studying for their foundation pharmacist year in 2025-26 and the existing community pharmacists wanting to be trained as independent prescribers. Both will require 90 days in a prescribing environment.

Community pharmacists are under extreme pressure on multiple fronts—financial, workforce and regulatory, with many rules dating back to the 1930s. Medical supply instability is particularly acute. That puts operational pressures on pharmacists, imposes financial burdens on their businesses and creates worrying delays for their patients. Two of the biggest and interlinked challenges facing the sector, and indeed the whole of primary care, are access to services and the sustainability of the workforce. An increasing number of pharmacies are now providing core hours only, due to workforce challenges and financial sustainability. That means that fewer are offering services in the evening, at weekends and over bank holidays, and, in some cases, they are having to close much earlier during the day.

While the introduction of pharmacists working in general practice is to be welcomed, it has had the negative consequence of making it more difficult for community pharmacies to recruit pharmacists. A lack of access to pharmacy services cascades through other parts of the health system—to general practice, to the number of calls to NHS 111, to appointments to out-of-hours services and to visits to A&E.

Funding has been cut by 30% in real terms over the past seven years. As a result, so as to remain viable, community pharmacists are cutting back on the discretionary services that they provide. That ultimately leads to permanent closures—461 by Lloyds and 300 announced by Boots in June.

The 30% real-terms funding reduction, accompanied by inflationary pressures and workforce shortages, has driven up costs and has led to reduced hours and permanent closures. The £645 million for the new common conditions service announced in May is welcome, but it does not address the underfunding of existing core services. There is a need for a stable, long-term and sustainable funding commitment that can be delivered through a review of the community pharmacy contractual framework. This means not only additional funding, but alignment of care pathways and provision of incentives within primary care systems. The funding crisis has knock-on implications, including pharmacists being unable to spend as much time with patients as they would like, as well as the withdrawal of services such as free deliveries, particularly to care homes, and monitored dosage system boxes, which are important to many people.

To address these pressures and ensure that community pharmacies can realise their full potential, Community Pharmacy England has come forward with its own six-point plan. First, as I mentioned, pharmacy funding should be reformed to give pharmacies a long-term, economically sustainable funding agreement.

Secondly, a common conditions service should be developed and implemented so as to allow patients to have walk-in consultations for minor conditions. That would provide accessible care and ease pressure on general practice.

Thirdly, community pharmacies should look to build on other clinical service areas, such as vaccinations, women's health and long-term conditions management for, say, asthma and diabetes, using independent prescribing rights. In this way, pharmacy can do a great deal in key NHS priority areas and will help to get the health service back on a sustainable footing.

Fourthly, the medicines market must be reformed so as to get out of the situation we are now in, where pharmacies are dispensing some medicines at a loss and patients are facing long delays for medicines.

Fifthly, regulatory burdens should be reviewed and where necessary removed, so as to make running community pharmacies easier and to limit the increasing cost of service provision.

Sixthly and finally, a long-term plan for the community pharmacy workforce should be produced to ensure that pharmacies can keep their doors open and to enable them to retain pharmacists in local pharmacies.

In many respects, this debate is a trailer for the main attraction next Tuesday, when Community Pharmacy England launches its vision for community pharmacy, as prepared by the King's Fund and the Nuffield Trust.

In the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care, the Government undertook to continue to engage with the sector, with specific reference to the piece of work that is being published next Tuesday. I urge the Government to adhere to that commitment, which is vital not only to rebuilding primary care but to giving community pharmacies a sustainable and viable future, thereby ensuring that after 170 years they can remain part and parcel of the fabric of our towns and cities.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair):** Order. May I remind Members that they need to bob if they wish to be called?

3.14 pm

**Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab):** It is always a pleasure to take part in a debate when you are in the Chair, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on the timeliness of this debate and on the typically thoughtful way in which he presented his case. If I repeat some of his arguments, it is not that I am gratuitously copying what he said; the themes need to be emphasised, and I will try my best to do so.

At Prime Minister's questions on 26 April, I raised the need for a new pharmacy-first approach as a means of providing additional capacity to deal with minor medical problems and consequently help to relieve the pressures on GP and hospital A&E services. I was encouraged by the Prime Minister's positive response: he declared himself

"a wholehearted champion of and believer in the role that community pharmacies can play."—[*Official Report*, 26 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 732.]

Two weeks later, on 9 May, as the hon. Member for Waveney said, the Health Secretary made a statement to the House that set out the Government's primary care recovery plan. In the second part of that statement, he announced the adoption of a pharmacy-first approach as part of a new NHS service. Again, it was a potentially positive step forward. He pointed out

"the incredible role that pharmacists played during the pandemic—their capacity to innovate and deliver for the communities that they served, freeing up GP appointments in doing so".—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 219.]

As part of that approach, the Secretary of State committed to investing up to £650 million over the next two years, so that pharmacists can supply prescription-only medicine for common conditions such as ear pain, a urinary tract infection or a sore throat, without requiring a prescription from a GP. In the time available, I want to explore how that policy is developing and how the resources that the Government have earmarked meet the requirements for pharmacies to deliver such a service. I should add that the Secretary of State's list could easily be added to, and I hope it will be.

I am grateful to the Company Chemists' Association, Community Pharmacy England and Pharmacy2U for their comprehensive briefing for the debate, on which I will rely heavily. CPE points out:

"We are currently negotiating on how this funding commitment will be delivered to ensure that community pharmacies can meet patient needs and we welcome the confidence and additional investment in community pharmacy...Until those negotiations are complete, we do not know the extent to which this additional

[*Sir George Howarth*]

investment will help community pharmacies with these current pressures, but we do know that it will not address all of the pressures as outlined later in this briefing.”

Pharmacists refer to a funding black hole; I do not think the hon. Member for Waveney used that term, but he did use the figures involved. They point out that the recent announcement of funding is welcome but represents “new money for new workers”.

They go on to say that there is currently an annual funding shortfall of at least £67,000 per pharmacy. Consequently, there is insufficient money in the system to deliver the services that they are already contracted for, let alone to take on new ones.

The CCA also draws attention to the trend between 2015 and 2022, which saw the permanent closure of 720 pharmacies. On a recent visit to Asda in Huyton in my constituency, I saw the consequences at first hand. The Asda pharmacy, which by the way is admirable, is having to fill the gap created by the loss of other smaller, independent local pharmacies, and the pressure on the dispensers while I was there was relentless. There was not a minute to pause for thought or have a conversation with people coming to pick up their prescriptions, because they were so busy.

Of the pharmacies that closed, 40% were in the 20% most deprived areas of England. That is worrying for me as the MP for Knowsley, which is one of the areas of greatest deprivation. One way in which high levels of deprivation are reflected is in the number of people in Knowsley living with long-term health conditions, which account for 70% of the total healthcare spend, 64% of hospital out-patient appointments and 50% of GP appointments. If community pharmacies could be deployed to deal with some of those cases where appropriate, that could help immensely in easing the burden on the NHS services that currently have to deal with them.

As the Minister will be aware, and as the hon. Member for Waveney referred to, there is a workforce crisis in community pharmacies in England. There is estimated to be a shortfall of 31,000 pharmacists. The Asda community pharmacy I visited had vacancies, one of which was for a pharmacist; I think they had been trying for a year, unsuccessfully, to fill the position.

I also want to raise the issue of medical supply chains. The current level of allowable margin is £800 million; it was first agreed in 2014 and has not been reviewed since. That amounts to an annual reduction in the margin available. In practice, all pharmacies are faced with diminishing resources for the purchase of medical supplies. On 18 May, with my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), I held a roundtable event with local pharmacies. It was pointed out to us by independent pharmacies that they are unable to negotiate lower purchasing rates, as they cannot buy in bulk in the way that larger-scale national pharmacy companies can.

This problem will lead to more local pharmacy closures and reduced capacity to serve the new pharmacy-first policy. As CPE puts it, reforms are needed

“to the medicines market to avoid the situation we are now in, where pharmacies are dispensing some medicines at a loss and patients are facing delays for medicines.”

Pharmacy2U, which is a delivery service, has pointed out that stakeholders now have to deal with the issue. It notes the difficulty with the interoperability of IT systems and points out that

“there is significant variation in the systems used by GPs, and pharmacy services are often unable to easily access patient records, heavily restricting their ability to support patients with their medicines. Ensuring that pharmacists have swift access to this data is vital in empowering pharmacies to play a central role in a reformed and improved primary care system.”

It suggests that

“HSC and NHSE should consult with system-wide stakeholders to ensure all pharmacists are enabled to access and, where appropriate, update patient records in line with data privacy rights, ensuring that GPs and pharmacies have a complete picture of the patient they are caring for.”

I will make one final point before asking some questions. I wrote to the Secretary of State on 17 July, following some written questions that I had tabled concerning hub-and-spoke provisions and the use of third-party hub providers; the answers seemed to indicate a specific problem in Northern Ireland. I would be grateful if the Minister chased up my letter, which has had no response, and if he could give an indication in his speech as to how the issue can be resolved.

I will conclude with a few questions. First, how do the Government propose to address the funding black hole that I have referred to? Secondly, what is the Government’s strategy for halting the alarming number of pharmacy closures? Thirdly, how do the Government intend to address the workforce shortages? Fourthly, will the Minister agree to consult stakeholders on how to deal with the issue of interoperability of IT systems? Finally, how does the Minister propose to enable all pharmacies, including independent pharmacies, to fund the gap between the cost of acquiring medicines and the resources available?

3.26 pm

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Sir Mark. Well done to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), my dear friend with whom I entered Parliament in 2010: as always, he has set out the issues beautifully, with the forensic ability for which he is known. The people of Waveney are very lucky to have him, as is this House. It was my hon. Friend who inspired me to speak in this debate: he collared me in the corridor, as he often does. I am only too pleased to do so, both as MP for Winchester and Chandler’s Ford and as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

When I was pharmacy Minister, I spent many happy hours where the Minister is sitting today, answering debates on the subject. We have moved on a lot, and I give credit to the Minister, the Secretary of State and this Prime Minister of all Prime Ministers—if they had not understood community pharmacy, we were never going to get there. All credit to them for the investment and the work that has gone on. As somebody once said, “Much done, more to do.”

My fellow Committee members, one of whom is here today, and I are all too aware of the challenges facing community pharmacies in all our constituencies. Nevertheless, there is great cause to be positive. In my opinion, pharmacies have huge untapped potential to transform the way patients access and receive healthcare services, and to support the building of a preventive

healthcare approach, which the Minister knows I am passionate about and which I suggest is central to the future sustainability of the NHS itself.

Earlier this year, the Select Committee launched an inquiry into pharmacy. It will look broadly at pharmacy services including hospital pharmacy, which is often overlooked but is very important, but community pharmacy will form the largest part of it. The terms of reference include specific questions about funding, which my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney and the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) both mentioned; the commissioning arrangements for community pharmacy, which I know we will come on to; the locations of community pharmacies; and, of course, achieving the ambitions of Pharmacy First in the primary care recovery plan. I trialled Pharmacy First in the north-east when I was pharmacy Minister; I am a great believer in it, so it is great to see how the Minister has taken it forward.

A key question that our inquiry seeks to answer is, “What does the future of pharmacy look like, and how can the Government ensure that it is realised?” We will be very forward-looking, considering how the challenges of today can be addressed to ensure that the potential is realised. However, we will also look at the services that community pharmacies are already offering or are set to offer through the pharmacy-first approach. Crucially, we will also consider the areas in which there is a chance to go further.

Community pharmacists are highly trained clinical professionals. They are not retailers; they are clinical professionals. They want to do more, they can do more and we should trust them to do more. We will also consider some of the innovations in the sector—for example, how automation and hub-and-spoke arrangements, which we have not talked about much today, will come in and help. We will also look at the workforce challenges, which we have heard about, including issues around the retention of pharmacists in the community pharmacy sector and around training.

The inquiry will be wide ranging. We are looking forward to getting started with oral evidence, hopefully in November. There is no shortage of enthusiastic people in the community pharmacy sector who are willing to share their experiences with us. We are incredibly grateful to all those organisations and individuals who sent in their written evidence, and we hope to continue seeing that positive engagement from the sector when we start the oral evidence sessions.

The Committee has the benefit of drawing upon the work of our expert panel, which is chaired by Professor Dame Jane Dacre, whom the Minister will know. The panel, set up by my predecessor, now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, evaluates the Government’s progress on meeting their commitments on an area that I ask it to look at. It delivers a Care Quality Commission-style rating as to where we are, which can range from “outstanding” to “inadequate”. I asked the panel to look at the pharmacy sector, based on its own members’ expertise and research and submissions by stakeholders, as well as some roundtable events with patients, people in receipt of social care, and pharmacy professionals.

The panel recently published a report on its evaluation of Government commitments in the pharmacy sector. It was assisted by several pharmacy professionals and leaders who steered its decision on which commitments

to evaluate. Community pharmacies were an obvious area to focus on. The panel looked at two specific community pharmacy-related commitments, rating the position on both as “requires improvement”. I take a glass half-full perspective. There are good things in the report; I know that the Minister will look carefully at it. The first commitment was to maintain the pharmacy access scheme, which aims to protect access to local, physical NHS pharmaceutical services in areas where there are fewer pharmacies. The chemist may be the only shop in town—that is often the case in coastal communities.

The second commitment was to review the community pharmacy funding model and the balance between the spend on dispensing and new services within the community pharmacy contractual framework, which is negotiated between Community Pharmacy England—formally the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee—the Government and NHS England. The panel concluded that community pharmacies are struggling to meet increased demand. It is a good thing that demand is increasing, because it means that people are increasingly turning to the chemist, but they are struggling to meet that demand, to deliver services, and even to remain open with the current funding model, which was set in 2019 for five years and has not been reviewed significantly during that time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney suggested, pharmacies are also struggling as their staff are encouraged to take up roles in primary care, funded by the additional roles reimbursement scheme. The right hon. Member for Knowsley touched on the fact that IT systems can make it difficult for patient information to be shared between community pharmacies, hospitals and general practices. Taken together, those challenges can negatively impact community pharmacies’ ability to deliver services and support other parts of the health and care system.

The National Pharmacy Association does great work in this space and has been in touch with us. It commissioned an EY report, which found that almost three quarters of pharmacies in England face a risk of closure if a serious funding shortfall is not addressed, with 72% of them forecast to be loss-making within the next four years. The Minister will be aware of that report. It is sober reading, but it would be wrong to overlook it. It is a serious piece of work.

Going back to the expert panel, members also raised concerns about the lack of data collected on the performance of schemes designed to improve community pharmacy services, especially whether they were delivering the positive outcomes that we want for patients and people in receipt of social care. There is a lot for the Government to consider in the panel’s report. We still await their response, which, I hasten to add, has not timed out yet. We look forward to that.

I want to touch on a couple of other points. First, I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS. We are calling for the HIV prevention pill, PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—to be available through community pharmacies, with clear financial accountability for its provision. I think that would be a game changer for HIV prevention. It would be a critical part of ending new cases of HIV by 2030, urged by the HIV Commission, which I commissioned as the Minister and, after leaving Government, became a commissioner on, along with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon.

[Steve Brine]

Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). The Opposition Front Benchers have signed up to that 2030 ambition, and the Government have committed to it too.

Community pharmacies are well placed to prescribe PrEP. They carry out medicine use reviews for patients, and I think that they would be well placed to counsel on PrEP and to manage the prescriptions alongside other medications, because it is critical that medicines are prescribed in conjunction with each other. Community pharmacies are well connected to other parts of the health service, where integrated care boards have ensured that the IT is right and that the relationships are right. Furthermore, services provided by pharmacies act as a bridge between secondary and primary care, so that would complement sexual health prevention and treatment services and the advice that goes on. Will the Minister, in his summing up, touch on what progress has been made towards the commitment to make PrEP available beyond sexual health services and when it will be available in community pharmacies?

On the supply side, we have talked a lot about the bricks and mortar and the workforce, but the medicines supply chain, also mentioned by both previous speakers, is in need of serious love from Ministers. Pharmacies often have no idea of the prices being charged by wholesalers for some key generics, so they have no idea what is short, while pricing of products is often much higher compared with other European countries; consequently, margins in community pharmacies are often being eroded by uncertainty in the supply chain. I urge the Government to look at a robust system to plan for future pandemics and address shortages of key pharmaceuticals, because that undermines the sector and some of its great work.

There are so many things we could talk about, such as the ill-health prevention inquiry by the Select Committee, where I see pharmacies playing a key role. Much has been achieved. When I walked into the Department, I asked the special advisers what should be on my worry list, and they said: “General practice, Minister.” Some things never change. However, I passionately believe that community pharmacies are part of primary care, or pre-primary care as I used to call it. When I talked to parts of the primary care sector as the Minister, they would say to me: “We want to do more. We can do more. We are trained clinical professionals who can be trusted to do more.” The Government have picked up the mantle of that through the reform of, and new investment in, the contract, with the Prime Minister putting his personal authority behind the sector.

There is therefore much to be proud of, but we have to be careful that we do not end up losing community pharmacies. If we lose them, once they have gone, they will not come back, and we will have a supply-side problem in the bricks and mortar, as well in some of the pharmaceuticals. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney for securing the debate—it is, as always, an excellent subject for the House to discuss—and thank you, Sir Mark, for calling me to speak.

3.38 pm

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this important and timely debate. I say “timely”, because only last week I delivered a petition

to Parliament on this very subject, with the support of hundreds of people in my constituency. I know the strength of feeling across Bradford South on this issue, and about the value people place on community pharmacies.

I speak in defence of funding for our community pharmacies’ core services, which have been cut in real terms in recent years. Furthermore, I reiterate the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) that our remarks cover many of the same areas, because they are so important to our constituents.

Community pharmacies are essential pillars of our national health service. The Government’s independent review described the open secret that community pharmacies are an “under-utilised resource”. As many of my constituents have put it to me, they are far more than just a place to get medicines; they are part of the very fabric of our local community. They are valued. Community pharmacies offer vital, immediate face-to-face services, often supplementing GP services, though without some of the vital resources that they need and deserve. When this country faced the covid pandemic, community pharmacies were there for us all. They stepped up bravely, maintained access to vital medicines, provided healthcare advice and delivered a record number of vaccinations. Now is the time to both thank them and show them that we value our community pharmacies, and not to abandon them to what one of my local chemists described to me as “funding starvation”.

After 13 years of under-investment, the NHS is at breaking point, and pharmacies are suffering from lack of funding. More than 700 pharmacies closed permanently between 2015 and 2022, and over 40% of these closures took place in the 20% most deprived areas of the country—cuts, yet again, where services are most acutely needed. In the words of one of my Bradford South chemists, James Currie, this

“is yet another clear demonstration by this Government of their detachment from the realities and needs of the communities we serve.”

Pressures on pharmacies have been worsened by a workforce crisis, with an estimated shortfall of 3,000 community pharmacists in England. I will be grateful if the Minister clarifies how the additional roles reimbursement scheme will be “carefully managed” to ensure that we are able to recruit, train and, importantly, retain the pharmacists we so desperately need. We know that pharmacy funding was cut by 30% in real terms between 2015 and the beginning of this year. More and more work is now being piled on our community pharmacies, without adequate additional resources—a familiar pattern for our public services in the UK today. That has created a serious funding black hole, with an annual shortfall in England of an estimated £67,000 per pharmacy.

The pattern of reckless under-investment is simply not sustainable, so it was welcome news that NHS England’s delivery plan for recovering access to primary care said that further funds will be devoted to community pharmacies to expand their services. The new Pharmacy First common conditions service is a strong step towards easing pressures on GP services, but pharmacies are already overstretched and support for their delivery of core services is still inadequate. I ask the Minister to clarify the extent to which the additional investment will be earmarked for addressing existing pressures on core services.



In preparing for the debate, I found it useful to look back at the Government's independent review of community pharmacies, published seven years ago. In the report, it was made clear that community pharmacies would be urgently required to help deal with

“immediate financial and operational pressures”

in the wider health service. Seven years later, however, the NHS is still struggling to deal with an historic backlog. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members present will recognise that community pharmacies are part of the wider solution to this very serious problem.

It is high time that we broke the cycle of crisis after crisis, followed by rushed solutions. Fair funding for community pharmacies will not only help support the local communities they serve, but strengthen the wider national health service and enable a vital and much-needed “prevention first” approach.

3.43 pm

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate with you as Chair, Sir Mark. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate on community pharmacies, which are a crucial part of our healthcare ecosystem. I also thank him for his thorough explanation of the current state of community pharmacies and their needs.

I am often reminded that when we feel unwell or something has gone a bit wrong, our first point of call is often to walk into a pharmacy to get advice, support and medicine. Somebody there can put one's mind at ease. Those who are vulnerable or elderly can also get their medicines delivered to them, which adds to the wellbeing of the local community. However, despite community pharmacies' immense importance, they face huge challenges. Increasing demands and ongoing pressures are threatening their sustainability. Tatton currently has a healthy number of local pharmacies—18—supporting nearly 70,000 residents. However, pharmacies are disappearing across the country—and in Tatton, too. Government figures show a decrease of 222 between December 2022 and June 2023. The reasons for those closures include inadequate funding, rising operational costs and difficulty in recruiting and retaining community pharmacists.

Tatton community pharmacist Lee Williams, along with his wife and fellow pharmacist Caroline, were two of the first constituents I met at their pharmacy in Knutsford when I became the MP for Tatton back in 2017. They have since had to close their pharmacy. Lee explained to me that, despite it being a busy community pharmacy and having a good reputation—I can vouch for that, as I went there, too—they had very much a hand-to-mouth existence as funding fell and things such as rent, utilities and wages increased, squeezing their profit margin to the point where their business became unviable and the only thing they could do to safeguard their 12 years of tireless work was to sell it. It was a sad day for them, because their dream was for the two of them, married, running this community pharmacy and supporting the local community, but it had become abundantly clear to them for some time that the only way for such pharmacies to exist was to find efficiencies through having multiple branches. But now, even the large multiple retailers such as Lloyds and Rowlands have had to sell off their community stores as they move to remote delivery and go online in an attempt to become profitable. Even they cannot make community pharmacies work.

Adding to the problem of underfunding is, as we have heard, a shortage of medicines, which often results in community pharmacists dispensing medicines at a loss. Even when the NHS decides to increase the price it is willing to reimburse pharmacists for those medicines, it often comes after weeks of pharmacists gambling on what price they will have to pay, which creates huge uncertainty for them and their businesses. Ironically, it is the very low prices that the NHS is willing to pay that drive the shortages. If a manufacturer can sell those medicines for a higher price in other countries, it will prioritise those markets over our own. Community pharmacists find that their staff, in their role as pharmacists, are spending a lot of their time trying to find stock, on top of their crippling workload.

Community pharmacy is therefore at a low—the pharmacists would say an all-time low—which corresponds to much of the results of Community Pharmacy England's 2023 pressures survey. It found that 92% of pharmacies are dealing with medicine supply issues daily, which was an increase from 67% in 2022; 97% of pharmacy owners reported significant increases in wholesaler and medicine supply issues; 81% of pharmacy staff said they were “struggling to cope” with the significant increase in workload; and 84% had experienced aggression from patients due to medicine supply issues. Worse—if things could be worse—pharmacists face more abuse from the public because of drug shortages.

To keep our community pharmacies afloat, Lee Williams advocates a complete overhaul of how community pharmacies are viewed and remunerated. I therefore welcome the Government's announcement of £645 million of new funding for Pharmacy First. The Government realise that things need to be done. Much has been done but more needs to be done, and they need to pursue that as well as they can. We can say that with our Prime Minister as an advocate. However, in the light of the first-hand experience of my constituents that I have just shared and those survey results, how is the Minister ensuring the security and consistency of supply of medicines? How will the Government compensate pharmacies for the extra costs of offering additional services such as annual health checks, which require more skilled staff? I appreciate the difficulty of finding more funding for the sector, but I know that the Government will be looking to do that, so will the Minister explain how? Local pharmacies want to be at the heart of the health sector and take more of the workload off the NHS, but in order to do that they need to be adequately recompensed. They provide a vital service, and I know that they want to do even more.

3.51 pm

**Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate and highlighting the challenges faced by the pharmacy sector. He spoke with great knowledge about many of the challenges around funding, and the opportunities for the pharmacy sector to address some of the primary care challenges faced by the NHS. I highlight the points made by the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who has been very supportive of the pharmacy sector and has played a key role in pushing for the Committee to publish a report on the role of the sector and the challenges it faces.

[*Taiwo Owatemi*]

I declare an interest as a registered pharmacist, the chair of the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group, and a member of the Health and Social Care Committee. I apologise to Members present, as I might end up repeating some of the points that have already been made, but I will try my best not to focus on them.

The first challenge I will highlight is the massive issue of the medicine supply chain. Every time I speak to pharmacy owners and pharmacists they raise the impact that uncertainty has on their profit margins. I recently started engaging with the pharmaceutical sector to understand the issues. There are issues around medicine distribution in this country, and there are middlemen supply chain distributors who keep hold of medicines and who are sometimes involved in driving up the prices, but we also have challenges around the manufacturing of generics, which account for about 80% of medicines used by the NHS.

About 2.2 million generic drugs are prescribed every single day in this country and used by the NHS. Despite that, it seems there were some oversights in this area when we negotiated our exit from the EU. Currently, legislation allows EU generics to be recognised in the UK but does not allow the EU to recognise UK generics. That means that British manufacturers are unable to submit their marketing authorisation applications easily within the EU. Therefore, they have no incentive to produce these medicines, or increase their manufacturing of these medicines, in the UK. It also means that they are unable to compete with their European competitors.

A great example of what is happening is that the EU has started investing about £20 billion in the manufacturing of generics since we left. So far, the UK, according to figures that I have seen recently, has invested nothing. Essentially, our UK manufacturers are being left at a competitive disadvantage. Aside from that, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is facing significant challenges. It has lost a large amount of its workforce and is currently unable to process the regulatory applications coming through its doors—again, making it difficult for generic drugs to enter the UK. Essentially, there are regulatory difficulties and there seem to be limited financial incentives.

Secondly, I want to address the challenges of finance, which have been a massive issue facing the pharmacy sector. The sector has not been adequately funded in line with inflation for a very long time. That has led to many high street pharmacies closing down. In my constituency, Boots in Jardine Crescent had to close down because it was not financially viable for the business to continue. That has had a significant impact in an area of great deprivation and high health inequality.

Despite the challenges that community pharmacies face, there are also wonderful opportunities, which I have to admit the Government have started to recognise. I welcome their more than £600 million investment in the Pharmacy First programme, but there is a long way to go to fully take advantage of the potential that community pharmacies can offer.

Community pharmacies play an important role because they are the first point of call for patients, but they can play a bigger role in healthcare. Not only can they deliver the Pharmacy First scheme—I hope that will be rolled out and that the Government will add more clinical

conditions to the list—but they can play an important role in other primary care services, such as vaccination, sexual health and the management of conditions such as cardiovascular disease.

I have always found it weird how a patient will come up to me in the pharmacy and say, “I have high blood pressure. I’m a bit concerned.” I say, “Sit down. Let’s check your blood pressure” and then I have to message the doctor to let them know. Then I will tell the patient to go to their GP to get a medication. In reality, that could have started and ended in a community pharmacy. That is something that hospital pharmacists easily do, and we regularly do it, so I encourage the Minister to look into the wider roles that community pharmacists can play in supporting GPs and primary care and in reducing some of the challenges it currently faces.

Many Members have spoken about the workforce crisis. To be able to fully take advantage of the potential of community pharmacy, we have to acknowledge the fact that, like many other healthcare professions in this country, pharmacies face a significant workforce crisis. We do not have enough pharmacists, and we are struggling to recruit and train more and to retain the community pharmacists we have.

Again, I welcome the Government’s workforce plan, but unfortunately it lacks the finer details of how community pharmacy will be supported in the long term. An integrated and funded workforce plan for pharmacy is needed if we are to enable pharmacies to support the community as well as the rest of the NHS. A larger number of designated prescribing practitioners is needed if community pharmacies are to assist with the provision of primary care. A clear pathway to ensure that that happens is important.

I know that the Government aim to ensure that we get as many prescribers as possible by 2026, and that is something I welcome. I am really happy that pharmacists are able to graduate with the ability to prescribe. However, there are many pharmacists in the workforce for whom there is no clear plan as to how they can become prescribers by 2026. I have spoken to many different pharmacy schools and they do not know how that is going to happen.

As the hon. Member for Waveney has explained, the process for getting sign-off is not easy. People have to ensure that they have found the right healthcare professional to shadow, as well as take time off work to do all the documentation and paperwork that is needed. Changes therefore need to happen, and further funding needs to be made available to incentivise healthcare professionals to take on more pharmacists and to mentor them and train them to become prescribers.

I also want to address areas that have not been mentioned in the debate so far. The first is technology, which has played a significant and positive role in the provision of the healthcare system. Since covid, technology has played an important role in allowing patients to have easy access to healthcare and allowing them to feel empowered. That is the reason we have seen an increase in the number of online pharmacies that are available, which has been quite positive.

However, I have some concerns. Figures recently published by the General Pharmaceutical Council, which is responsible for inspecting community pharmacies and online pharmacies, show that at least one in five of

the online retailers it inspected in the past year did not meet at least one standard. If that was a community pharmacy, the store would be put on a clear supervision pathway to ensure that patients' health was not put at risk. I would like to see the same happen to online pharmacies to ensure that they are better regulated as they continue to provide better access to medicines for patients.

I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at the supervision rules, which are outdated and were created at a time when we were making medicines in pharmacies and playing around with different active pharmaceutical ingredients. Pharmacy has changed since then, and the information available and the regulation around drug manufacturing has significantly improved. I welcome the consultation that is being carried out, and I encourage as many pharmacists as possible to give their feedback and engage with the consultation.

Lastly, I want to turn to the regulation of non-clinical managers. Community pharmacies either have a pharmacist as a manager or have non-clinical managers leading them. In the light of the Lucy Letby case, which highlighted the important role that non-clinical managers play, it is important that community pharmacists are also considered. Any new regulatory framework for unregulated management and leaders in healthcare should apply to not only those working in the NHS but those who have direct involvement in the provision of healthcare in our communities, such as community pharmacy.

Before I end, I would like to ask the Minister a few questions, which I hope he can answer today or respond to in a letter. Has any consideration been given to the generic industry, which, as I said earlier, accounts for a large amount of medicine supplies within the NHS? Can he direct me to the Minister who is responsible for drug manufacturing in this country, the changes in EU legislation and how we can bring about positive changes for our generic manufacturing industry? Do the Government have any plans to prevent future medicine shortages? I am already hearing pharmacies expressing concerns about the fact that winter is coming and they are expecting to have further shortages.

Are there any updates on the mutual recognition of medicines within the EU, and are any negotiations happening? Can the Minister provide an update on the prescribing scheme for healthcare professionals and whether any steps have been taken to address the issues I have raised? On funding, it would be helpful for many pharmacists to know whether there are any plans to help address some of the financial challenges they face. Lastly, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group, I wonder whether the Minister could spare some time to come and speak to key stakeholders in the sector, who would love to meet him and share some of their experiences.

**Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair):** I thank Members for keeping to time. I call the shadow Minister.

4.4 pm

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate, and I congratulate him and Members on both sides of the

Chamber on putting forward a compelling argument for supporting our community pharmacy sector and increasing its role in the provision of localised community healthcare. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth); the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who chairs the Health and Social Care Committee and who made some excellent contributions; my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who has been campaigning on this issue; the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey); and my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who is a pharmacist and who shared her first-hand experience of some of the challenges. We have heard some great contributions in this debate.

It is a great pleasure to take on this important portfolio covering primary care and public health. In this year—the NHS's 75th—its founding mission, to deliver care to everyone who needs it, when they need it, free at the point of use, is clearly under threat. Thirteen years of Conservative Government have left the NHS flat on its back, and the rightful expectation of my constituents and people across the country of an NHS with time to care for them when they need it is being trampled. We see longer waiting times, a postcode lottery in care and, shamefully, for the first time in decades, healthy life expectancy falling in many regions across the United Kingdom, including the west midlands, which I represent. That is one of the starkest indicators of how this Government, far from levelling up the country, have let it down.

The NHS is Britain's greatest institution and my party's proudest achievement, and nothing gives me fire in my belly like the prospect of what a Labour Government will do to fix it. Community pharmacy is a huge part of that, relieving pressure on overstretched GPs and delivering first-class care and advice to patients. As many hon. Members have highlighted during the debate, it is high time we realised the potential of pharmacies; as with the vaccine roll-out during the pandemic, they have proven time and again that there is so much more they can deliver as part of the primary care mix.

Pharmacists are the third biggest profession in the NHS, with around 13,000 community pharmacists across the UK, and together they prescribe more than 1 billion medicines a year. Not only are pharmacists medicine experts within the NHS, but colleagues have acknowledged their wider skills and knowledge, which are under-utilised. It is estimated that pharmacists give around 58 million informal consultations to walk-in patients a year, saving 20 million GP appointments. We also know that drug-related problems, often resulting from poor medicine management, cause around 15% of hospital admissions and cost the NHS hundreds of pounds a night, so pharmacies have an enormous contribution to make to the wider system.

Chemists do far more than just dispense repeat prescriptions and sell shampoo. They provide a range of clinical services in prescribing for common ailments and have a key role to play in public health and preventive services. There are great examples of innovative public health work that pharmacists are doing, such as in Bradford, where the "Wise Up to Cancer" initiative promoted health literacy among south Asian women, or the Jaunty Springs Health Centre in Sheffield, where a shared care agreement between the pharmacy and GP

[Preet Kaur Gill]

surgery meant that a majority of health interventions could be delivered in the pharmacy consultation room, freeing up the GP and cutting waiting times.

There is good practice in pockets across the country that we should be building on. I know that Ministers have belatedly acknowledged that, and there has been some expansion of the clinical services that pharmacies offer in recent years. However, a few sticking-plaster proposals really miss the opportunities that are there. Will the Minister update us on how negotiations with the sector over the Pharmacy First launch are progressing, and can he promise that it will be operational in time for the flu season? What consideration has he given to expanding Pharmacy First to establish a community pharmacist prescribing service covering a broader range of common conditions?

The Minister will know that in some countries, which are way ahead of the Government on this, such as Canada, pharmacists can prescribe for dozens of common conditions, freeing up millions of appointments in general practice every year. What is his long-term strategy to equip pharmacies for a future where their talents, capacity and expertise can be fully utilised and to fix the front door of the NHS?

Hon. Members have also raised a number of concerns about the financial pressures facing pharmacies. I know that the sector appreciates the additional funding announced in May, but that is of course tied directly to its expanded responsibilities as part of the primary care recovery announcement and does not recognise how current cost pressures are impacting the sector. Since the community pharmacy contractual framework was signed in 2019, the cost of doing business has continued to rise—especially since the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) crashed the economy.

The result has been many pharmacies closing their doors for good, disproportionately in the most deprived areas, as analysis from the Company Chemists' Association has found. Last year alone, 110 pharmacies shut up shop, and many more have had to reduce opening hours, services and staffing. Will the Minister say what assessment he has made of the risk of more pharmacies closing down and reducing operations before the end of the current funding settlement in 2024 and what impact that will have on the NHS medicines supply, the knock-on pressures on other parts of primary care and the prospects for extended clinical services in the community setting?

As the Minister will know, the 2019 funding agreement was made on the promise that the Government would drive wider efficiency savings and regulatory changes across the system. For many community pharmacies, the roll-out of the hub-and-spoke model was an answer that would allow them to streamline their services. However, it has been 14 months since the Department of Health and Social Care's consultation on hub-and-spoke dispensing closed, and we have still had no response from the Department, nor the secondary legislation that was promised. Can the Minister please give us answers today about the considerable delay in progressing with hub-and-spoke reform? What is the hold-up?

I would also like to raise the issue of staffing with the Minister. The community pharmacy workforce survey released last month revealed that, compared with 2021, there was a 6% reduction in the full-time equivalent workforce in 2022. The vacancy rate for pharmacy

technicians was about 20%, whereas it was 16% for pharmacists and 9% for dispensing assistants. Two thirds of contractors said that they found it very difficult to fill pharmacist roles last year, and in turn, the bill for locum pharmacists rose by 80% last year alone. Many chemists are struggling to cope with those pressures, contributing to thousands of unplanned closures every month. That is bad for the taxpayer and bad for patients, so what assessment has the Minister made of the challenges faced by community pharmacies in hiring, training and retaining skilled pharmacy staff? Does he recognise that the Government's workforce strategy has not kept pace with the scale of change in the sector? Does he share my concern that without a functioning community pharmacies network, the Government's primary care recovery plan is built on very shaky foundations?

The next Labour Government have a plan to reform the NHS to shift care from acute settings to the community. As part of our plans to build a neighbourhood health service, we will realise the potential of community pharmacies, giving people services that they can rely on and access earlier on their doorstep. That will mean accelerating the roll-out of independent prescribing to establish a community pharmacist prescribing service that covers a broad range of common conditions. It will mean cutting unnecessary red tape to allow pharmacy technicians to step up, ensuring that pharmacists can work to the top of their licence and make more of their considerable expertise in prescribing and medicines management, rather than having repetitive dispensing processes. All of that will be supported by greater digital interoperability, allowing the profession to support GPs in the management of long-term conditions.

The Minister will have heard the broad support for the sector in today's debate, as a trusted and cost-effective measure for addressing some of the chronic challenges we have come to expect under this Government. I look forward to his answers on what more he is doing to support this important sector and realise the potential of the pharmacy profession.

4.12 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this important debate. I start by echoing his thanks to our hard-working pharmacists, who do such a brilliant job. He raised six main points in his speech, and I can confirm that we are working on all of them.

Community pharmacies play a crucial role in our health system and a greater role in looking after people's health than ever before. Pharmacies are easily accessible, and about nine in 10 people who visit one are positive about the advice they receive. The Government are investing in pharmacy to do much more. The delivery plan for recovering access to primary care announced an investment of up to £645 million in a new Pharmacy First service—a whole new NHS service will be created—as well as an expansion of the existing blood pressure check and contraception services. Pharmacy First will enable patients to see a community pharmacist for seven common conditions and be supplied with prescription-only medicines without the need for a GP. We are consulting Community Pharmacy England on the proposals in that delivery plan, with the aim of starting Pharmacy First this winter.

Pharmacy First builds on the community pharmacy contractual framework 2019 to 2024 five-year deal. That deal commits £2.592 billion a year to the sector and sets out how community pharmacy will be more integrated into the NHS, delivering more clinical services and effectively becoming the first port of call for minor illness. Under that deal, we have introduced minor illness referrals from GPs to community pharmacies, which have been a great success. A&E and NHS 111 can also now refer patients for an urgent medicine supply without a prescription from their GP. More than 2.8 million consultations have been provided at community pharmacies for a minor illness or urgent medicine supply since the start of those services.

We also introduced blood pressure checks, and community pharmacies have delivered 1.4 million checks since October 2021 and more than 150,000 in May 2023 alone. Huge numbers of potentially life-saving checks are being done. NHS England estimates that in 2023, more than 1,300 heart attacks and strokes will be prevented thanks to those checks, so I repeat my thanks to this fantastic sector.

In April this year, we introduced an oral contraception service, making it easier for women to access contraception.

In addition, community pharmacies now support and advise more than a quarter of a million people a month when they start new medicines, through the new medicine service, and 10,000 patients every month who have had their medicines changed following a visit to hospital, through the discharge medicines service. That supports medicines adherence, prevents GP visits and hospitalisations, and gives people a much better sense that they are taking the right medicines.

Community pharmacies are also playing a growing role in our vaccination programmes. Last winter, they administered 29% of adult flu vaccinations and more than a third—36%—of covid-19 vaccinations.

We have talked about the funding issue. In addition to the £2.592 billion a year, we added an extra £50 million last and this financial year, and we have made the additional sum of money that I mentioned available for Pharmacy First and the expansion of existing services. On top of that, we pay separately for flu and covid vaccinations, which, as I suggested, provide an increasingly important income stream for pharmacies.

The current five-year deal is of course coming to an end, and we will need to consider what comes next for pharmacy. As part of that, NHS England has committed to commissioning an economic study to better understand the cost of delivering pharmaceutical services. That study will feed into any future funding decisions on community pharmacy.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of the number of pharmacies, and we monitor that very closely. Our data shows that despite a number of pharmacies closing since 2017, there are about 10,800 pharmacies today, which is still more than in 2010. Despite the things that have happened to other high street businesses, we still see that there are more pharmacies and there are an awful lot more pharmacists—I will come on to that when we talk about the workforce.

However, rather than focusing merely on numbers, we should look at access. We know that 80% of the population live within 20 minutes' walk of a pharmacy, and that there are twice as many pharmacies in more

deprived areas. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) is right that they play a crucial role in providing access in deprived areas. We ensure that that continues to be the case. Proportionally, the closures that we have seen reflect the spread of pharmacies across England.

We are seeing changes in the market, with some of the large pharmacy businesses divesting. That has an impact on the make-up of the sector: we are seeing the number of small independent pharmacies increase, while the number of pharmacies that are part of bigger businesses decrease. We are monitoring the market very closely as it evolves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney mentions, through the pharmacy access scheme, we are financially supporting pharmacies in areas where there are fewer pharmacies and where there might be a challenge in getting access. To address the disproportionately high rate of closures of pharmacies that must be open for a minimum of 100 hours—the so-called 100-hour pharmacies—legislation was amended in April to allow those pharmacies to reduce their hours to a minimum of 72, which is still a huge number of hours to be open. That will support those pharmacies to remain open, providing extended hours, particularly for weekend access.

The same legislation gave integrated care boards the possibility of introducing local hours plans. That enables the local co-ordination that will ensure that there is something available locally at all times when people need it. It allows temporary closures in an area if there are significant difficulties with access and ensures that a pharmacy is always open somewhere in an area.

Some pharmacies struggle to find staff, and in some instances they have had to close temporarily, because a pharmacy cannot open without a pharmacist. There is more demand than ever for pharmacy professionals—an issue raised by various hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). Since 2010, the number of registered pharmacists in England has increased by 82%, from 28,984 to 52,780. That means nearly 24,000 more pharmacists registered in England this year than in 2010. It is a huge increase, even compared with the huge increases elsewhere in the NHS.

On top of that, we have published the “NHS Long Term Workforce Plan”, backed by more than £2.4 billion to fund further additional increases and more training places over the next five years. The plan sets out the steps that the NHS and education providers will take to deliver an NHS workforce who meet the changing and growing needs of the population over the next 15 years. Our ambition is to increase training places for pharmacists by nearly 50%—building even further on what we have already done—to around 5,000 by 2031-32, and to grow the number of pharmacy technicians.

Employers clearly have a key role in retaining staff and making jobs in community pharmacy attractive. To support employers, we are investing in training to help private contractors to deliver high-quality NHS services. NHS England has provided a number of fully funded training opportunities for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians—the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) raised an interesting and important point on this matter. That is why we are providing 3,000 independent prescribing training places—applications

[Neil O'Brien]

for this year are now available to pharmacists—and, on top of that, another 1,000 fully funded training places for designated prescribing practitioners, or DPPs. As well as growing the number of people entering the workforce, we are making provisions to upskill those who are already in the workforce. We are as just excited as other hon. Members present about the huge potential of independent prescribing in pharmacy to build even more on what we are doing to grow the range of services in community pharmacies.

I have talked about what we are doing on funding and the workforce, but I also want to talk about structural reform and efficiencies, and enabling pharmacists to do more with the skills they have—an important point raised by a number of hon. Members. The plan for primary care sets out some of the things we are doing, including modernising legislation to make it clear that pharmacists no longer have to directly supervise all the activities of pharmacy technicians, who are, in fact, registered health professionals in their own right.

Hon. Members are right to point out that the nature of work in pharmacy has changed, and we must change the legislation to match that. We also plan to enable any member of the pharmacy team to hand out appropriately checked and bagged medicines in the absence of a pharmacist, remedying frustrating instances where patients are delayed, having to wait perhaps because the pharmacist has popped out for lunch. We are also consulting on changes to the legislation to enable pharmacy technicians to use patient group directions, which would enable pharmacy technicians to do more.

Last week, the House debated legislation to give pharmacists the flexibility to dispense medicines in their original packs, so that pharmacists use their high-end clinical skills rather than spending time snipping out blister packs, which is not a good use of their time. We are progressing legislation to enable hub-and-spoke dispensing—the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), rightly mentioned that—following public consultation on the changes.

Finally, we are also working with medicine suppliers to identify medicines that could be reclassified from being available only on prescription, known as “POM”, to being available in a pharmacy, known as “P”.

This is a huge package of structural reforms and a huge liberalisation of the structure of pharmacy, enabling pharmacists with ever-growing clinical skills to do more and not be caught up in bureaucracy.

The Government are thinking beyond that about what pharmacy can do in the longer term. Hon. Members are right that Pharmacy First, the fantastic new NHS service, could be added to over time. NHS England is also starting independent prescribing pilots, with a view to implementing pharmacy prescribing services in the future, based on what we learn from them. That has huge potential to take further pressure off GPs and make the best possible use of all the new skills in the pharmacy workforce.

The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, raised an important point about access to PrEP, as an example of an advanced service that pharmacies could provide. As he will know, partly because of his work in initiating

this, the PrEP access and equity task and finish group was established in 2022 as a sub-group of the HIV action plan implementation steering group, to improve access to PrEP. That steering group is working to develop a PrEP road map based on the task and finish group's recommendations. I can say today that the road map will be out before the end of the year, and it will deal with how we will work through all the knotty issues in enabling community pharmacy to provide PrEP.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney for raising these hugely important issues, which are crucial to community pharmacy. The sector is doing more than ever before, seeing more people, providing a wider range of services and becoming more clinically advanced than ever. There are pressures in the sector, but we are injecting further funding. We have grown the workforce hugely. We will continue to build on what community pharmacists do to further improve community pharmacy across the country.

**Taiwo Owatemi:** Will the Minister give way?

**Neil O'Brien:** I will pause at the point of my peroration, because there is a question.

**Taiwo Owatemi:** There is a question: will the Minister return to my earlier question about whether he can come to the APPG to meet key pharmacy stakeholders?

**Neil O'Brien:** That is a brilliantly timed question, to which the answer is yes.

4.25 pm

**Peter Aldous:** This has been a very informative and helpful debate. We clearly have an enormous challenge in this country in improving access to primary care, and the key role played by the community pharmacy in addressing that challenge will be vital. We have heard about the three shortages that the industry faces, and I urge the Minister to reflect on those: the shortage of funding and finance, the shortage of staff, and the shortage of medicines.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) highlighted the impact of community pharmacy closures on deprived areas. It is clear from the maps that have been produced that the impact is disproportionate, including in some coastal communities, such as the one I represent. He also highlighted the key role that community pharmacies play in treating the long-term health conditions found in such areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, rightly showed that this issue is on its register. I looked at the registers in the Select Committee report and I look forward to the amber and red warnings turning into green notices in due course. He highlighted the importance of PrEP being available for community pharmacies—the Terrence Higgins Trust brought that to my attention—and I welcome the update that the Minister provided.

The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) clearly emphasised the importance of a prevention-first approach. We got the first-hand knowledge that is so important in forums such as this from the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi). I was particularly struck by her emphasis on the importance of using technology and the specific problem with the

manufacture of generic medicines—she made her point very well. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), reinforced the potential of the sector and what an alternative Labour Administration would do.

The Minister highlighted the whole range of work that community pharmacies can do. He touched on the closures but said that there are actually more community pharmacists now than in 2010. I just highlight, from talking to community pharmacists, that when there are closures, getting consolidation of the sector across the country, so there is an even spread and we retain community pharmacies within 20 minutes of people, is not straightforward with the current regulations. I urge the Minister and his Department to look at that.

The Minister also said there has been an 82% increase in registered pharmacists since 2010, but a lot of that increase may have been in hospitals and medical practices.

The feedback that I get from community pharmacists is that they have challenges with recruitment and retention in their settings, and we need to address that. I was heartened by what the Minister said about regulatory reform; it appears that the Government are embracing that particular challenge.

Let me say, in the few seconds I have left, that this debate has served the purpose of highlighting the key role of community pharmacies and the challenges they face. I urge the Minister to continue to engage with the sector—I know he will—particularly when the extra report is produced on Tuesday.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered community pharmacies.

4.29 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Thursday 14 September 2023

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

### Appointment of Director of Public Prosecutions

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** I am today announcing the appointment of Stephen Parkinson as the next Director of Public Prosecutions.

Under the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985, it is my duty to appoint a person to be the Director of Public Prosecutions, who shall discharge their functions under my superintendence.

This appointment was conducted in line with civil service guidance and the process was overseen by the First Civil Service Commissioner.

[HCWS1022]

## TREASURY

### Draft Finance Bill Legislation: Stamp Taxes on Shares

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):** The Government will legislate to ensure that the existing 0% charge, under stamp duty and stamp duty reserve tax, on the issue of UK shares, or other chargeable securities, on to foreign markets and on certain related transfers of shares, will remain in place and be brought permanently into UK law following the changes in the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 taking effect.

In line with this commitment, and with the tax policy-making framework, the Government are today publishing draft legislation ahead of its inclusion in an upcoming Finance Bill. While the final contents of the next Finance Bill will be a decision for the Chancellor, the draft legislation is being published to seek stakeholder views at this stage. This allows for technical consultation and provides taxpayers with predictability over this area of tax policy.

This draft legislation is designed to ensure the competitiveness of the UK's tax code in relation to financial services as the Government take steps to provide additional certainty within the stamp taxes on shares regime.

The draft legislation is accompanied by a tax information and impact note and an explanatory note. All relevant documents can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stamp-taxes-on-shares-removal-of-15-charge-on-issues-and-certain-related-transfers>

[HCWS1025]

## DEFENCE

### Service Complaints Ombudsman Annual Report 2022: Formal Response

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** I am pleased to place in the Library of the House today the MOD's formal

response to the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Force's annual report for 2022 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

The ombudsman's report assessed the service complaints system and the work of her office in 2022. The response sets out the MOD's comments and approach to each of the ombudsman's recommendations and includes a summary of our position on recommendations that remain open from previous annual reports.

The MOD values the strong independent oversight that the ombudsman brings to the service complaints system and remains committed to having a system in which our personnel can have confidence.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-09-14/HCWS1023>

[HCWS1023]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Alleged Serious and Significant Offences 2019 to 2022: Diplomatic Immunity

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** Between 2019 and 2022, 15 serious and significant offences allegedly committed by people entitled to diplomatic or international organisation-related immunity in the United Kingdom were drawn to the attention of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office by parliamentary and diplomatic protection of the Metropolitan Police Service, or other law enforcement agencies. We define serious offences as those which could, in certain circumstances, carry a penalty of 12 months' imprisonment or more. Also included are driving under the influence and driving without insurance.

Around 25,500 people are entitled to diplomatic or international organisation-related immunity in the UK and the vast majority of diplomats and dependants abide by UK law. The number of alleged serious offences committed by members of the diplomatic community in the UK is proportionately low.

Under the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations 1961 and related legislation, we expect those entitled to immunity to obey the law. The FCDO does not tolerate foreign diplomats or dependants breaking the law.

We take all allegations of illegal activity seriously. When the police or other law enforcement agency bring instances of alleged criminal conduct to our attention, we ask the relevant foreign Government or international organisation to waive immunity where appropriate. For the most serious offences, and when a relevant waiver has not been granted, we request the immediate withdrawal of the diplomat or dependant.

Listed below are alleged serious and significant offences reported to the FCDO by UK law enforcement agencies between 2019 and 2022.

2019

*Domestic servitudelmodern slavery<sup>a</sup>*

Saudi Arabia 1

*Sexual Assault*

Iraq 1

*Fraud by abuse of position*

Commonwealth Secretariat 1

*Causing death by careless driving*

USA 1

*Driving under the influence of alcohol*

Oman 1

*Driving under the influence of alcohol*

Kyrgyzstan 1

a) Historical allegations

2020

*Common assault/cruelty to a child*

Nigeria 1

*Driving under the influence of alcohol*

India 1

2021

*Driving under the influence of alcohol*

Saudi Arabia 2

*Driving under the influence of alcohol*

Ethiopia 1

2022

*Driving without insurance*

Myanmar 1

*Common Assault/Threats to kill*

Greece 1

*Fraud by false representation/perverting the course of justice/money laundering Democratic Republic of the Congo 1**Sexual Assault*

USA 1

Figures for 2018 are available in the then Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs' written statement to the House on 25 February 2020 (HCWS119) which can be found at: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-02-25/debates/20022539000011/AllegedSeriousAndSignificantOffences\(DiplomaticImmunity\)2018](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-02-25/debates/20022539000011/AllegedSeriousAndSignificantOffences(DiplomaticImmunity)2018)

[HCWS1028]

### British Indian Ocean Territory/Chagos Archipelago

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** Since the written ministerial statement made on 17 March, *Official Report*, 55WS, the UK and Mauritius held further constructive negotiations on the exercise of sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)/the Chagos archipelago on 2 to 3 June 2023 and 31 July to 1 August 2023. The Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) and Prime Minister Jugnauth met in the margins of the G20 summit on 9 September in New Delhi. The two Prime Ministers assessed the progress made in the negotiations

since they spoke in February, and agreed to meet again soon. The next round of negotiations will take place later this month.

[HCWS1029]

### Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations: Debts Owed in the United Kingdom 2022

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** Coronavirus restrictions imposed in March 2020, even though since lifted, have affected the compilation of debt information for national non-domestic rates and parking fine debts by the responsible authorities. As a result this WMS includes details only of congestion charge debt owed by diplomatic missions and international organisations in the UK.

*London Congestion Charge:* The value of unpaid congestion charge debt incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London since its introduction in February 2003 until 31 December 2022 as advised by Transport for London (TfL) was £145,411,143. TfL publishes details of diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines at <https://content.tfl.gov.uk/cclez-online-factsheet-embassy-debt-dec22.pdf>

The table below shows those diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines of £100,000 or more.

We consider that there are no legal grounds to exempt diplomatic missions and international organisations from the London congestion charge, which is comparable to a parking fee or toll charge they are required to pay. Under the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations diplomats have an obligation to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving state. The British Government therefore expect all diplomatic missions to respect UK laws and regulations, which includes payment of the congestion charge.

| <i>Country</i>                                       | <i>Total outstanding</i> |
|--|--------------------------|
| Embassy of the United States of America              | £14,643,495              |
| Embassy of Japan                                     | £10,044,758              |
| Office of the High Commissioner for India            | £8,547,985               |
| High Commission for the Federal Republic of Nigeria  | £8,383,735               |
| Embassy of the People's Republic of China            | £7,928,360               |
| Embassy of the Russian Federation                    | £5,993,625               |
| Embassy of the Republic of Poland                    | £5,266,160               |
| Embassy of France                                    | £4,835,820               |
| Office of the High Commissioner for Ghana            | £4,789,295               |
| Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan                | £4,651,235               |
| Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany           | £4,629,330               |
| The Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan             | £3,516,070               |
| High Commission for Kenya                            | £3,254,280               |
| High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan | £3,116,830               |
| Embassy of the Republic of Korea                     | £2,625,880               |
| Embassy of the Republic of Cuba                      | £2,465,520               |
| High Commission for the United Republic of Tanzania  | £2,285,390               |
| Embassy of Spain                                     | £2,178,120               |
| Embassy of Algeria                                   | £2,160,130               |

| <i>Country</i>   | <i>Total outstanding</i> |
|--|--------------------------|
| High Commission for the Republic of South Africa                   | £1,975,200               |
| High Commission for Sierra Leone                                   | £1,914,495               |
| Embassy of Romania   | £1,865,560               |
| Embassy of Ukraine   | £1,670,950               |
| Embassy of Greece  | £1,660,690               |
| Embassy of the Republic of Turkey                                  | £1,575,760               |
| High Commission for the Republic of Cyprus                         | £1,415,430               |
| Embassy of Hungary   | £1,373,880               |
| High Commission for the Republic of Zambia                         | £1,146,050               |
| Embassy of the Republic of Yemen                                   | £1,055,100               |
| High Commission for Botswana                                       | £954,120                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria                                | £919,910                 |
| High Commission of the Republic of Mozambique                      | £861,760                 |
| High Commission for the Republic of Malawi                         | £836,225                 |
| Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia             | £822,550                 |
| Uganda High Commission   | £811,100                 |
| High Commission for the Republic of Zimbabwe                       | £795,385                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire                           | £784,560                 |
| High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon                       | £759,660                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Belarus                                 | £733,285                 |
| High Commission for the Republic of Namibia                        | £726,550                 |
| High Commission for Malta  | £712,335                 |
| Embassy of the Slovak Republic                                     | £691,720                 |
| High Commission for Mauritius                                      | £669,735                 |
| Embassy of Belgium   | £666,420                 |
| High Commission for the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka | £652,120                 |
| Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco                                  | £651,790                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania                               | £650,505                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Liberia                                 | £627,150                 |
| Embassy of Austria   | £626,020                 |
| Kingdom of Eswatini High Commission                                | £620,540                 |
| Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan                     | £605,040                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea                       | £557,690                 |
| High Commission for the Kingdom of Lesotho                         | £530,360                 |
| Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam                       | £518,280                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Guinea                                  | £501,170                 |
| Embassy of the Czech Republic                                      | £480,190                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Iraq                                    | £473,580                 |
| High Commission for Jamaica  | £473,020                 |
| Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo                    | £427,680                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan                             | £417,990                 |
| Royal Danish Embassy   | £403,835                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia                                | £384,290                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Latvia                                  | £346,190                 |
| High Commission for Antigua & Barbuda                              | £345,795                 |
| Embassy of Portugal  | £325,240                 |
| Embassy of Luxembourg  | £320,195                 |
| Embassy of Tunisia   | £294,820                 |
| High Commission for Belize   | £280,050                 |
| Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea               | £275,960                 |
| Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt                              | £243,820                 |
| Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan                         | £243,590                 |
| Embassy of Estonia   | £218,420                 |
| Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia                                      | £211,290                 |
| High Commission of the Republic of Maldives                        | £201,250                 |
| High Commission for Guyana   | £186,490                 |
| Embassy of the State of Eritrea                                    | £185,350                 |
| High Commission of the Republic of Seychelles                      | £169,935                 |

| <i>Country</i>                                | <i>Total outstanding</i> |
|---|--------------------------|
| Embassy of the Dominican Republic             | £164,650                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines    | £156,840                 |
| Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania | £140,930                 |
| Embassy of El Salvador                        | £129,805                 |
| High Commission for Saint Lucia               | £127,460                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Albania            | £124,480                 |
| Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic                | £120,680                 |
| Embassy of the Republic of Moldova            | £114,310                 |

Figures for previous years are available in the then Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs' written statement to the House on 25 February 2020 (HCWS120) which can be found at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-02-25/HCWS120>

[HCWS120]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### NHS and Social Care System: Preparation for Winter

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay):** I am pleased to inform the House today that we are spending an additional £240 million to support health and care services over winter.

This includes:

£200 million in new and additional funding for the NHS to ensure patients continue to get the care they need through its busiest period, and

£40 million funding to improve social care provision, £30 million of which forms part of the £600 million social care workforce package previously announced in July and a further £10 million identified from existing departmental budgets.

We know that winter is the most challenging time for the NHS and our preparations began very early. In January we published the urgent and emergency care recovery plan, which aims to deliver one of the fastest and longest sustained improvements in waiting times in the NHS's history. This includes delivering an additional 5,000 permanent staffed hospital beds this winter, backed by £1 billion of dedicated capacity funding. We have seen progress, including a marked improvement in ambulance response times compared to last year. Innovations such as virtual wards have been put in place towards a target of 10,000 before winter, and money allocated to successful capital schemes build on the progress made in implementing ambulance hubs and discharge facilities.

More widely, we have already made available up to £14.1 billion for health and social care over this year and next, including £7.5 billion to support adult social care and discharge—the biggest funding increase in history—and £3.3 billion in each of 2023-24 and 2024-25 to support the NHS in England, and enable rapid action to improve urgent and emergency, elective, and primary care performance to pre-pandemic levels.

This follows the £38.9 billion cash increase by 2024-25 (as compared to 2019-20) confirmed at spending review 2021, to help place the NHS in England on a sustainable footing and tackle the elective backlog.

The pandemic has put enormous pressures on the NHS with elective waiting lists growing, but we remain committed to ensuring people get the right care at the

right time. That is why we are delivering record staffing numbers, and putting in record levels of funding, to help the NHS recover and transform services.

In February 2022, NHS England published its delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care. This set out a clear vision for how the NHS will recover and expand elective care and cancer services in the next three years.

There is a new covid 19 variant—BA.2.86. While we do not yet know if it will be a variant of concern, as a precautionary measure we have brought forward the autumn vaccine programme for covid and flu, which will deliver greater protection, supporting those at greatest risk of severe illness and reducing the potential impact on the NHS.

As we move toward the winter period I am pleased to be able to report that there are record numbers of staff working across NHS trusts and integrated care boards, over 63,000 compared to more than a year ago, including over 6,000 more doctors. We are currently on track to meet the 50,000 nurses manifesto commitment, with nursing numbers over 45,000 higher in June than they were in September 2019.

Thanks to the hard work of all those NHS staff, we met our target to eliminate long waits of two years or more for elective procedures in July 2022 and virtually eliminated 18-month waits in June 2023. The new investment of £200 million will help ensure NHS trusts can keep up this vital work over winter as we look to mitigate the impact of ongoing industrial action.

I would also like to provide a further update on the allocation of an additional £40 million to improve social care provision, £30 million of which forms part of the social care workforce package of £600 million over two years announced on 28 July. This will allow local authorities to strengthen admissions avoidance services and boost discharge rates this winter. The funding is being targeted at areas facing the greatest urgent and emergency care challenges.

The funding announced today will be vital for the NHS, and wider health and care sector, through its most demanding period and will help the health service drive forward our plans to cut waiting lists and deliver for patients.

[HCWS1027]

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Slough Borough Council

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):** Today I am updating the House on the intervention at Slough Borough Council. I was extremely concerned by the content of the commissioners' second report, which was submitted on 22 December 2022, and made it clear that many in leadership roles in the council were not fully committed to the improvement journey and that a fundamental shift in behaviours was needed. I highlighted these concerns in my statement to the House on 16 March 2023, in which I made it clear that things had to change.

On 13 July 2023, I received a copy of the commissioners' third report on the progress of the intervention, which I am publishing today on gov.uk and also placing a copy in the Libraries of both Houses. This report was submitted after a period of change for the council. Following the resignations of Max Caller CBE, the lead commissioner, on 1 March, and Margaret Lee, the finance commissioner, on 12 March, two new commissioners, Denise Murray and Ged Curran, were appointed on 22 May, and the existing commissioner Gavin Jones was made lead commissioner. In addition, May's elections brought new political leadership and, over recent months, the corporate leadership of the council has also gone through significant change.

This latest report provides a more positive update and evidence for cautious optimism that things are beginning to move in the right direction. I am pleased to see that the council has made progress in some areas, including improvement in report quality and financial oversight, improved scrutiny arrangements and a successful move to all-out elections.

At the same time, and while acknowledging those improvements, the scale of the challenges facing Slough remains significant. I have today written to commissioners to set out that it will be vital for the council to demonstrate a commitment to accelerating the pace of improvement, to provide evidence of further implementation, to show a clear change being embedded over the coming months and to demonstrate greater grip on the financial position. I have acknowledged that the new leadership of the council is keen to resolve the challenges facing Slough. I know that they will be keen, as I am, to see that a resolution moves forwards as quickly as possible.

Given the changes at Slough in recent months, this is an excellent opportunity for the council to make substantial progress towards resolving their best value failure. I know that they will be keen to take it.

[HCWS1024]

## PRIME MINISTER

### Intelligence and Security Committee China Report: Response

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** On 13 July 2023, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament published its report on China. We are grateful to the Committee for devoting time and attention to the subject.

Today, the Government are publishing their response to this report. This response sets out the Government's overall approach to China, which is closely aligned with our allies, and provides significant detail on the measures and legislation we have put in place to support it. The Government have already taken actions that are in line with many of the Committee's recommendations and will consider further action where necessary.

The Government published the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy in 2021, and their subsequent IR refresh in 2023. Recognising the epoch-defining and systemic challenge that China represents, these reviews considerably strengthened the United Kingdom's position on China, set out as a comprehensive approach comprising three integrated themes to protect, align and engage. The IR refresh recognised China's size and significance on almost every

global issue and, in close alignment with all G7 partners, outlined the UK's preference for a relationship in which there was room for co-operation, understanding, predictability and stability. Equally, it was clear on the need to increase our protections and do more in concert with close partners to ensure that our vital interests and values are protected.

I am particularly conscious that many of the issues detailed in the Committee's report, and wider concerns about foreign interference, highlight the necessity for a robust approach to any and all state threat activity. It remains an absolute priority for the Government to take all necessary steps to protect the United Kingdom from any foreign state activity which seeks to undermine our national security, prosperity and democratic values. I am clear-eyed about that challenge and will call out unacceptable behaviour directly just as I did last weekend with Premier Li at the G20 summit in New Delhi.

We recognise that the report identifies areas where we can do better and welcome these insights and recommendations as we further develop our approach. Earlier this year, the Government passed the National Security Act which overhauled legislation applicable to espionage, sabotage and any persons acting on behalf of foreign powers against the safety and interest of the United Kingdom. We also passed the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act to further protect our campuses from threats to lawful freedom of speech, whether those relate to China or any other source. Measures in these Acts will enable our law enforcement and intelligence agencies to deter, detect and disrupt the full range of modern-day threats, including from China.

I am acutely aware of the particular threat to our open and democratic way of life. In 2022, the Government established the defending democracy taskforce. Chaired by the Security Minister, the taskforce co-ordinates cross-Government activity to protect the integrity of our democracy from the threats of foreign interference. It works with Government, Parliament, the UK's intelligence community and the devolved Governments on a range of threats including to electoral security. The taskforce established a new joint election security and preparedness (JESP) unit to lead on work to ensure the security of the next election and beyond. The taskforce is also undertaking a review to understand how diaspora communities in the United Kingdom are threatened by foreign states and make recommendations to address this harm to our society and communities. The taskforce is working with Parliament and the National Cyber Security Centre to develop an enhanced cyber-security offer for elected officials, including MPs, and their teams to help better protect them from the cyber-attacks that threaten them personally and our national security. Finally, the taskforce is working with the Government's partners to better understand and mitigate the threats of AI and is developing new means for tackling mis- and disinformation during elections, both of which have the potential to harm our democracy and the people of the United Kingdom.

Copies of the Government response have been laid before both Houses.

[HCWS1026]



# ORAL ANSWERS

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