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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 5 December 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

The Clerk at the Table having informed the House of the unavoidable absence, through illness, of the Speaker from the sittings of the House this week, the Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Dental Services

1. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the commissioning of primary care dental services for vulnerable people. [900466]

16. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of levels of availability of dentistry appointments on other NHS services. [900482]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): May I, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, wish Mr Speaker a very speedy recovery?

As Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I want to reform our NHS and social care system to make it faster, simpler and fairer. Dentistry is a critical part of that. Integrated care boards are responsible for identifying areas of local need and determining the priorities for investment. NHS England published guidance in October this year to help ICBs use their commissioning flexibilities within the national dental contractual framework, and I will be looking carefully at how the boards are identifying need and investment across England, including for vulnerable people.

Kim Johnson: I am glad that the Minister mentioned ICBs. Liverpool has a very high percentage of children with dental decay, and tooth extraction is the most common hospital procedure for five to nine-year-olds at Alder Hey Children's Hospital, yet there was a £10 million underspend for primary care dentistry, and instead of investing it in preventive care, NHS England gave permission to all ICBs, including NHS Cheshire and Merseyside, to use the balance to balance their budgets. Will the Minister agree, here and now, to reinstate the ringfenced funding to commission extra capacity for the most vulnerable patients?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to be able to inform the hon. Member that NHS England has provided guidance for ICBs that requires dental funding to be ringfenced, with any unused resources redirected to improve NHS dental access in the first instance. Interestingly, ICBs will report their expenditure against the dental ringfence to NHS England as part of their in-year financial planning, which will happen at the end of this financial year.

Kim Johnson: But the underspend is not being used on dentistry—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): No, no—you do not get another supplementary question. I was about to call Layla Moran for Question 16, which is grouped with this one, but unfortunately she is not present so I shall go straight to the Chairman of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The Government previously committed to publishing a dental recovery plan, which the former dental Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), said that the Government would publish shortly. He also told my Committee:

“We do want everyone who needs one to be able to access an NHS dentist”.

We were surprised, but he said it. We were told that the plan would be published during the summer or before the summer recess. When will the plan be published, if that is still the intention? Presumably it will come alongside the response to our “Dental Services” report, which was due on 14 September.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend and I look forward to being grilled by him and his Committee in due course—at least, I think I do. Perhaps I can assist him, first, on the very important dental report that his Committee published. I am looking through it myself this afternoon and I will be publishing the response and sending it to the Committee imminently. In relation to the dental plan, both the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), and I are looking carefully into the needs of communities in rural and coastal areas, as well as in more urban areas, to understand not just the need but the answers that we can provide to help with urgent care and, importantly, preventive care, particularly for our children and vulnerable people in our society.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last week another dentist in my constituency told my constituents that they were no longer able to provide NHS services. These people have literally nowhere else to go nearby. I want to come back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) asked about the underspend, because we had a meeting with the ICB and it was specifically told that the ringfence was being disappplied. Does the Secretary of State agree that that money should be spent on dental services and that that instruction should be given by her today?

Victoria Atkins: I agree, and that is why NHS England has provided guidance, as I set out earlier.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I welcome the guidance that ICBs have received. Cornwall ICB has committed to ringfencing money for dentistry next year, but the truth is that, before it took on that commitment, £4.5 million for unmet units of dental activity was returned to NHS England. What can the Secretary of State do to ensure that Cornwall gets the money that was intended for Cornwall to deliver NHS dentistry?

Victoria Atkins: A theme is emerging of underspend in dental work, which is one of the things that the ministerial team and I are looking at. NHS England emphasised in its guidance to ICBs that the funding should be ringfenced. I very much understand the pressures that my hon. Friend and other south-west Members have been raising over many months on the care that their constituents are getting. To ease pressures in the south-west, NHS England has commissioned additional urgent dental care appointments that people can access through NHS 111.

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

Abena Opong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I begin by welcoming the Secretary of State and her Ministers to their posts.

Last year, the Prime Minister pledged to restore NHS dentistry, including a specific promise to protect its budget, yet last month we learned that he will break that promise and allow ICBs to raid dentistry budgets to fill the gaps. Labour has a plan for 700,000 extra appointments, supervised toothbrushing in schools and a targeted dentistry recruitment scheme in left-behind areas. It is all fully funded by abolishing non-dom tax status. We have a plan, but the Government's plan is four months overdue. Where is it?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her warm welcome. I look forward to discussing these matters with her over the Dispatch Box.

Over the weekend, I was rather pleased to see the Leader of the Opposition's damascene conversion to the Conservative cause. As the shadow Secretary of State is on his world tour investigating what other health systems are doing, the Labour party may wish to bear in mind the words of wisdom from the great lady herself: "The problem with socialism is that at some point you run out of other people's money."

Future Pandemic Preparedness

2. **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** What recent steps she has taken to help prepare for a future pandemic. [900467]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Lessons from covid-19 have been incorporated into our planning for any future pandemics across a range of areas. That includes the need to prepare for infections through all five routes of transmission, and for the health and social care sectors to have flexible capabilities that can adapt to a range of health threats.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend may have heard that news is emerging from China of yet another respiratory disease spreading through that country. What mechanisms are in place to learn from the covid inquiry when it

finishes its work, so that if mistakes were made, we do not make them again in the event that, God forbid, we have another pandemic?

Maria Caulfield: First, early indications show that the respiratory illnesses in China are likely to be due to increasing levels of endemic infection. These are normal infections but at a higher level.

Secondly, we are not waiting for the covid inquiry before we implement lessons learned. One of the key changes we have already made is the introduction of the UK Health Security Agency, which carries out surveillance on both national and international threats. A good example of its work is last year's strep A outbreak, which it managed and contained very well. This year, the identification of a new covid variant—not a variant of concern—meant we brought forward our autumn vaccination roll-out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): For all of us who lost loved ones, covid-19 is still very raw. I have been following the covid inquiry, and two recommendations have so far come forward. The first is that the lockdown should have been earlier, and the second is that those with covid should not have been sent to care homes—covid went through care homes and cast death everywhere. Has the Minister taken those two lessons on board?

Maria Caulfield: I know the hon. Gentleman had a personal loss to covid, and he is absolutely right to highlight those lessons learned. We are learning lessons, but each pandemic or increase in infection is different. It may have been appropriate to have lockdowns for covid-19, but lockdowns may not be appropriate for other infections, such as strep A or other respiratory illnesses. We set up the UKHSA to provide expert advice. We are learning lessons from the covid inquiry, and we are already taking action.

Hospital Patients: Discharge into Social Care

3. **Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** What progress her Department has made on discharging patients from hospitals and moving them into social care. [900468]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): When someone no longer needs to be in hospital, it is better for them and better for the NHS for them to go home. That is why we have been working hard to reduce delayed discharges, and we have been making good progress. In England, delayed discharges are down 13% since January, meaning thousands fewer people waiting in hospital and freeing up nearly 2,000 hospital beds every day.

Wendy Chamberlain: In my constituency of North East Fife, an average of 14% of social care and social work roles are filled when first advertised, but yesterday the Home Secretary announced plans to make it harder to recruit care workers from overseas. What assessment has the Minister made of the effect of that announcement on hospitals' ability to discharge patients and free up hospital beds for those who need them?

Helen Whately: The hon. Member refers to yesterday's announcement on migration. First, I am very grateful to all the international workers who come here to help in our health and social care system and to care for our

loved ones. Clearly, we must get the balance right between migration and making sure that our health and care system has the workforce that it needs. That is what we are doing, both with the migration changes announced yesterday and with our reforms to the social care workforce to ensure that working in social care is appealing to home-grown talent.

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

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Thanks to their own internal chaos, the Conservatives have utterly failed in their promise at the last general election to fix the crisis in social care once and for all. We now have over 150,000 care vacancies and 390,000 care staff leaving their jobs each year, meaning that 60% of patients in England who are fit for discharge are being kept in hospital each day. Will the Minister therefore back Labour's plan to deliver a fair pay agreement, with better terms, conditions, training and pay, to ensure that we have the staff required to care for all those who need it?

Helen Whately: Labour really have not got a leg to stand on when it comes to social care reform. They did not do anything the last time they were in government, and they still do not have a plan for social care. In government, we are reforming social care careers—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady will take a look at what we are doing, we are introducing a new career structure for people working in social care, introducing new qualifications and investing in training for social care. We are doing what needs to be done to ensure that social care as a career works for UK workers. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. You won't get your turn if you shout from there.

Winter Pressure on NHS Services

4. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce pressure on NHS services in winter 2023-24. [900469]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): We know that winter is hard for the NHS, as it is for other health systems. That is why we started planning for this winter earlier than ever before—back in January, when we published our urgent and emergency care recovery plan, which funds more beds and new ambulances for our NHS, funds more social care in our communities, joins up care, and makes the most of technology, so that more people can get the care they need when and where they most need it.

Catherine West: Two accident and emergency departments serve patients in Hornsey and Wood Green. One is now serving double the number of visits by patients and is buckling under the pressure; and the other has seen 4,000 extra patients this year compared with last. What are the Government going to do about overcrowding in accident and emergency?

Helen Whately: The hon. Member is right that our hospitals are busier; we are seeing more patients in A&Es. That is why we are doing two things with our work on urgent and emergency care. One is providing

more capacity—more hospital beds, more hours of ambulances on the road, and more capacity in social care to help with discharges. We are also doing things differently by seeing more people out of hospital, avoiding people coming to hospital unnecessarily, and providing more care at home; for instance, our 10,000 “hospital at home” beds are helping people recover at home, which is better for them and better for the system.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I know the considerable work the Department and NHS England have done preparing for winter. Given the importance of the NHS workforce, who do such an incredible job, and noting that there are still a few months to go, will the Minister update the House on the delivery of our manifesto commitment for an additional 50,000 nurses?

Helen Whately: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the excellent work he did as a Health Minister. It was a real pleasure to work alongside him and see what a difference he made for our constituents across the country. He asks a very good question about the work we are doing to increase the capacity of the NHS and ensure that it has the workforce it needs, including by delivering on our manifesto commitment to 50,000 more nurses for the NHS, which we have achieved.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): One way the Minister could help Harrow's health services be better prepared for this winter and future winters would be to invest in new intensive care beds at Northwick Park Hospital, which serves my constituents. Given that the Government have been told repeatedly that their promised 40 new hospitals are about as real as the Prime Minister's meat tax, why do Ministers not invest in a hospital that actually exists and provide a new purpose-built intensive care facility at Northwick Park Hospital?

Helen Whately: I assure the hon. Member that we are investing in the national health service and, in particular, supporting it to prepare for this winter, ensuring there is more capacity in the system. There will be 5,000 more beds in hospitals around the country this winter, as well as 800 new ambulances on the road. But we are also doing things differently. The future of healthcare is not just about hospitals, but about caring for more people out of hospital. For instance, we are investing in proactive care, so that in every neighbourhood, the people who are more likely to go into hospital are known and reached out to, and the care is available for them. That is one of the things we are doing to ensure that people receive care when and where they need it.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Sleaford and North Hykeham is a beautiful rural constituency, but living in a rural area means people are further from specialist medical services, which is a particular challenge in the winter months when the roads can be difficult to travel on. As the winter approaches, what is the Minister doing to ensure that constituents in rural areas are well looked after?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the additional challenges in rural areas. I want to ensure that this winter people get care when they need it and get it faster. We are already seeing

progress on that. For instance, we are investing in making sure there are more ambulance hours on the road, and we are seeing ambulances get to people quicker—in fact, this October, they got to people 20 minutes faster than last October. Ambulance handover delays are reducing and we are already seeing progress in A&E, where people are being seen faster, too.

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

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Under the last Labour Government, there was no winter crisis. Under the Tories, we have gone from no winter crisis, to an annual crisis, to a crisis all year around. Rather than tackling the crisis at source, this Government have only sticking-plaster solutions for a few months at a time. How will patients know that a winter crisis has been avoided if problems persist into the spring?

Helen Whately: I am really sorry, but the hon. Member's memory appears to be very short. I was working in healthcare when there was a Labour Government and I remember very well problems for the NHS during winter. She does not even need to look back into the past; she can look at the Labour-run NHS in Wales, where they are having so much difficulty with A&E performance that they even fudged the figures and hid a whole load of patients so people would not notice what was going on.

Vaping: Young People

5. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help reduce vaping by young people. [900470]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): The hon. Lady raises such an important question on a subject that is dear to both our hearts. We all know it is an offence to sell vapes to children under 18, yet one in five children tried a vape in 2023 alone and the number trying vapes has tripled in the last three years. We know the industry is targeting children, quite cynically. That is unacceptable. Our tobacco and vapes Bill will restrict the appeal and availability of vapes to children, and we are consulting on that right now.

Helen Hayes: As the Minister rightly said, under-age vaping has increased by 50% in just the past three years. Ministers had the chance to stop this trend two years ago, during the passage of the Health and Care Act 2022, when Labour tabled an amendment to prohibit branding that appeals to children, but Ministers would not support it and Conservative Members voted it down. Does the Minister regret the fact that the Government did not act sooner? When will the planned new legislation be brought to the House? The consultation is welcome, but there is consensus on the issue and action is urgently needed.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady knows full well that making decisions that change legislation requires consultation. That is both the convention and the requirement. The Government have brought forward the consultation as soon as possible. It will close tomorrow and we will introduce legislation as soon as possible in

the new year. I think the hon. Lady will find that that legislation really will tackle the problem of the cynical targeting of children.

Primary Care: Patient Access

6. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve patient access to primary care. [900471]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that, with huge thanks to all the superb GPs and health teams, our manifesto commitment for 50 million more general practice appointments a year compared with 2019 has now been delivered. Our primary care recovery plan is addressing access challenges by tackling the 8 am rush for appointments, cutting bureaucracy for GPs and, of course, expanding community pharmacy services.

Mohammad Yasin: I thank the Minister for her answer, but let me correct her. Since 2014, the number of GP practices in Bedford and Kempston has decreased from 18 to 11; there are fewer doctors, while the patient list has increased; and the number of patients per qualified GP now stands at 2,812, which is a rise of 60%. Will the Minister apologise to GPs and to my constituents, who face a daily struggle to access a GP because her Government have decimated NHS primary care services?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that 50 million more appointments between 2019 and now is a fantastic increase. There are just under 4,000 new GPs since 2019, and the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that through the post-covid recovery plan to improve access we have said to GP practices that they should provide urgent appointments on the same day and for every patient within two weeks. That has significantly improved access for patients, and GP appointments are now being hugely supported by access to community first, our flagship programme to improve healthcare throughout the country.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am incredibly grateful for the significant increase in the number of GP appointments offered to residents in my constituency. However, last week Aspire announced that it wishes to close the Lower Stoke surgery on the Hoo peninsula, where the council proposes to build thousands of homes. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how I can work further with the integrated care board? I have been trying over a number of years now to work with the ICB so that it can come up with a plan for how it will deliver much-needed services, so I would be very grateful for the Minister's help.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am of course always delighted to meet my hon. Friend to talk about issues in her constituency. I reiterate that 50 million more GP appointments is brilliant news. Our flagship Pharmacy First programme will mean that more low-level infections and problems—such as sinusitis, oral contraception, impetigo and various other conditions—can be treated by community pharmacists at great convenience to patients, and it will expand GPs' ability to deal with more complex problems. All these things are alleviating the pressures on primary care and are very good news right across the country.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): A primary care walk-in facility at Warren Farm in my constituency faces closure due to the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. The proposal to close the service will mean that services are relocated away from residents who need them. What is the Minister doing to fund the investigation and removal of RAAC in health facilities while making sure that communities can still access the healthcare that they so desperately need?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Lady's constituents. The issue of RAAC is one that the Government are determined to resolve. There has been a £698 million programme of new funding to eradicate RAAC from the healthcare system, and that work is under way. She will appreciate that it is for integrated care boards to ensure that the provision is there for all patients but, if she should need help with contacting or negotiating with her ICB, I will be delighted to help her.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): A recent report highlighted the fact that in September there were 15,000 missed GP appointments in Cornwall. That is 15,000 appointments that could have gone to people desperately waiting to see their GP. It is happening month after month. Does the Minister agree that that is completely unacceptable, and can she highlight what steps the Government will take to address the issue?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right; it is appalling that people book an appointment and then do not show up. In many GP surgeries now they post the numbers of patients who do not turn up for their appointments and urge people to make the effort to cancel. As part of our access to primary care, we are creating digital tools so that GP surgeries can notify patients that they have an upcoming appointment and say, "If you don't need it, press here and it will cancel the appointment." Measures such as that make it easier for people to cancel, but he is quite right that it is incumbent on us all, if we book that appointment, to turn up for it.

Health Inequalities

7. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What funding her Department is providing to help tackle health inequalities in Essex. [900473]

9. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help reduce health inequalities. [900475]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins):

I am pleased to reiterate to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) that Essex is receiving funding from the National Institute for Health and Care Research, which is funded by the Department of Health and Social Care, to promote research into health inequalities and support better health outcomes for her constituents and all residents in Essex.

Priti Patel: I thank the Secretary of State for her response and welcome her to her new role; it is a real pleasure to see her in her position today. My Witham constituents have one of the highest patient-GP ratios in the country. That brings many challenges in accessing

the NHS, from primary care to dentistry, social care and hospital appointments, some of which have been exacerbated by industrial action. Will she give an update on the work she is leading to address some of those issues and will she support my work and campaign locally to get a new primary health centre in Witham town?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for her kind words. She will remember how much I enjoyed sitting on the Front Bench alongside her when we were in the Home Office. In terms of her work in Essex, she is a formidable campaigner and she will know that the decision on such a healthcare centre lies with her integrated care board, to which the Government have given some £183 million of capital funding between 2022 and 2025. I am sure she will make a compelling case to the ICB for such a centre in her constituency. Interestingly, the Mid and South Essex integrated care board is one of seven sites receiving additional support and funding from NHS England to address health inequalities, and I know she will pay close attention to how that is spent.

Debbie Abrahams: There were multiple warnings from experts such as Professor Sir Michael Marmot of the widening health inequalities that started in 2015. Covid just exposed and amplified those inequalities, so that in the north there were 17% more deaths, or more than 2,500 avoidable deaths. While I welcome the new Health Secretary to her post and I welcome her announcement this morning, what else is she going to do to address in particular the socioeconomic inequalities that drive those health inequalities?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. Having grown up in Lancashire myself, I very much understand why she is speaking up on behalf of her constituents. There are many different ways that we deal with this, but let me use a couple of headline points. First, we are increasing the public health grant to local authorities, providing more than £3.5 billion this year, so per capita public health grant allocations for the most deprived local authorities are nearly two and a half times greater than for the least deprived.

There is also interesting work going on with family hubs. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who has responsibility for start for life, is leading on that. The family hubs and start for life programme will deliver a step change in outcomes for babies, children and parents in 75 local authorities in England with high deprivation. We believe strongly that if we can give the best start in life to our babies and children, it will bode extremely well for their future years.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): A report that is to be published shortly by the all-party parliamentary group for diagnostics, which I chair, has highlighted that community diagnostic centres are essential for tackling health inequalities. I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new role. Will she honour her predecessor's commitment to meet the all-party group to discuss the benefits of diagnostics in general and the preventive role that they can play in reducing health inequalities across the country?

Victoria Atkins: Not only am I delighted to accept my hon. Friend's kind invitation, but I am also extremely grateful for her work in that area. Of course, we think that community diagnostic centres are an important and exciting part of healthcare in this country. We have 136 centres operational at the moment, and we know that they have provided 5 million additional tests since July 2021. That is the future and we very much support it.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): We know that socioeconomic inequalities drive health inequalities and that poverty increases adverse health effects. Research by the Trussell Trust shows that one in seven people faces hunger across the UK because they simply do not have enough money. Will the Secretary of State raise with her Cabinet colleagues the Trussell Trust joint campaign with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation calling for an essentials guarantee in universal credit to ensure that the basic rate at least covers life's essentials so as to ensure that people can afford essentials such as food and heating and to mitigate against health inequalities?

Victoria Atkins: Of course, conversations continue between Ministers across Government in terms of helping not just with health inequalities but with inequality of opportunity. That is why I very much hope that the hon. Lady and her colleagues will welcome the thoughtful focus that both the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions have put into the back to work plan. We know that getting people into work can have enormous benefits, not just financially but, importantly, for their wellbeing. The idea behind the back to work plan is that we do it by working with people to draw out their full potential and help them to lead healthy lives.

Ehlers-Danlos Syndromes and Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder

8. **Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** If she will review the provision of health services for people living with (a) Ehlers-Danlos syndromes and (b) hypermobility spectrum disorder. [900474]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): We recognise that body-wide symptoms associated with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and hypermobility spectrum disorder can be disabling and can affect all aspects of life. General rheumatology services, which support people with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and hypermobility spectrum disorder, are locally commissioned by integrated care boards, which are best placed to make decisions according to local need. The major conditions strategy will focus on six groups of conditions, including musculoskeletal disorders such as these syndromes and disorders.

Mr Sheerman: That is all very well, but I do not think that will convince my constituents or the one in 500 people who suffer from that awful disease. This wonderful talented group of people on the Treasury Bench obviously inhabit an alternate universe. My GP said that these days there is no training or research, and that we do not have the capacity to look into these things. People with EDS have to be assessed by uptrained GPs, but they are not there. Our GP and medical services are on their knees. When will the Minister wake up to that fact?

Andrew Stephenson: With respect, the hon. Gentleman is as wrong as usual. NHS England is taking forward work to improve the ways in which services for rare diseases are commissioned, putting patients' voices at the centre of service delivery and ensuring co-ordinated access to specialist care, treatment, drugs, social care, mental health and special educational support. We will continue to work to improve services in this area.

Maternity Services

10. **Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to improve maternity services. [900476]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Since 2021, we have invested an additional £165 million a year to improve maternity neonatal care; next year, that figure will rise to £186 million. That investment is leading to progress on outcomes: stillbirths have reduced by 23%, and neonatal mortality rates are down by 30%.

Feryal Clark: Women continue to be failed by maternity services across England, as has been highlighted by a string of scandals including East Kent, Nottingham and Morecambe Bay. The Care Quality Commission's maternity inspections over the past year downgraded many maternity units, branding two thirds of them as dangerously substandard and highlighting shortages of staff, among other problems. What additional steps is the Minister taking to ensure that a woman can go into maternity services knowing that she and her baby will come out alive, and can she tell us whether the recommendations of the Kirkup and Ockenden reviews have been fully implemented?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady has touched on three inquiries. The Ockenden inquiry covered the period from 2000 to 2019, the Kirkup review covered the period from 2009 to 2020 and the Morecambe Bay inquiry covered the period from 2004 to 2013, so the Labour Government were also responsible for parts of all those periods.

We are introducing radical changes. We are increasing the number of midwives, which is up 14% since 2010, and the number of midwifery training places has increased by 3,650. We have introduced the maternity disparities taskforce to improve outcomes for those women who face the poorest outcomes, and have also introduced a maternity support programme for those trusts that do badly in CQC inspections—32 trusts are going through that improvement programme right now. Those are some of the things we are doing to improve maternity services.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for birth trauma, I recently commissioned a survey of mums across the UK via Mumsnet on this issue. I was shocked to discover that one in five mothers was not being offered a six-week GP check post-birth. That means that many women with physical injuries or mental health problems are unfortunately not being diagnosed or offered support, which is very troubling. Will my hon. Friend include birth trauma in the future update to the women's health strategy, and ensure that all mums receive a post-birth six-week check-up

with their GP? That check-up must include both the physical and mental health of the mum, not just focus on the baby.

Maria Caulfield: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in this place. She will be pleased to know that we are rolling out perinatal pelvic health services in every part of England, which should be in place by the end of March next year. In addition, we are rolling out obstetric anal sphincter injury bundles, which my hon. Friend raised in her debate on birth trauma; those have the potential to reduce the number of tears by 20%. She is absolutely right to be driving this issue forward. It will be covered in the women's health strategy, but we are not waiting for the second year: we are already making progress in this place.

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

Abena Opong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The Care Quality Commission now says that almost two thirds of England's maternity services are rated inadequate or requiring improvement in safety, up from 55% last year. The Government have been told time and time again to recruit more midwives, and to value midwives so that they do not want to leave the profession in the first place. As a result of ministerial failure, mothers—especially those from black and ethnic minority groups—do not get the safe, good-quality maternity care that they deserve. What is the Minister's plan to properly improve maternity care?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady may not have listened to my first answer. We have increased the number of midwives—it is up 14% since 2010—and increased the number of midwifery training places by 3,650. We have also introduced a maternity support programme that is providing intensive support for the 32 trusts that are going through it. The hon. Lady may want to speak to her ministerial colleagues in Wales, where Labour runs the health service, because Healthcare Inspectorate Wales recently issued an immediate improvement notice to Cardiff and Vale University Health Board for its maternity services.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will have to go a bit faster.

Access to Mental Health Services

11. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps she is taking to improve access to mental health services. [900477]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): We are improving mental health services, transforming them with an extra £2.3 billion a year. We have already seen some improvements in the delivery of those changes from giving mental health services parity of esteem with physical services.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The Minister will know, because it covers her constituency as well, that the Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust does vital work in mental health, but there simply is not the resource, and I am afraid that parroting about parity of esteem does not tackle the issues. Wait times are 190 days for children and young people in her constituency and mine. I recently spoke to a mother in Peacehaven whose son is waiting for an

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis. His performance at school is in rapid decline, but because of the wait times he is not eligible for support in school via any education, health and care plan to start to turn things around. What assurances can the Minister give my constituents, and indeed her constituents, that the wait times for mental health will come down and that resources will be given to these partnerships, rather than just empty words?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Member is absolutely right: we know that in Sussex we have higher rates of mental health illness than in many other parts of the country, with a 15% increase in Sussex A&E attendances. He might not be aware of them, but multiple schemes are available in Sussex. Health in Mind is offering psychological support to those suffering stress and anxiety, which can be self-referred. We have the Sussex mental health crisis line, now open 24/7, which is accessed via the 111 service. We have mental health professionals rolling out the blue light triage service in Sussex, and we have the Brighton and Hove mental health rapid response service, open 24/7, to which anyone can refer themselves urgently. Perhaps if he looks at some of the services provided locally, he will be able to reassure his constituents.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Minister mentioned the importance of parity of esteem, and she is quite right, but it is disappointing that the Government had a manifesto commitment in 2017 and 2019 to reform the Mental Health Act 1983, which they have not fulfilled, with no such Bill in the King's Speech. Would the Minister agree with me that the issues that existed prior to 2017 in relation to the Mental Health Act still exist today with the disproportionate number of black and minority ethnic people being sectioned under that Act, and people with learning disabilities and autism kept in inappropriate settings? Can she give any encouragement to those of us who want to see that reformed, particularly in relation to the appointment of a mental health commissioner to oversee changes to the Act and to advocate for the parity of esteem that she is looking for?

Maria Caulfield: It remains our intention to bring forward a mental health Bill when parliamentary time allows. We have the draft Mental Health Bill, which we have put through pre-legislative scrutiny. We are looking at the report from the Joint Committee and will be responding to that shortly.

Cost of Living: Impact on Mental Health

12. **Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in the cost of living on mental health. [900478]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): We are acutely aware of the impact that the cost of living has on mental health, which is why this Conservative Government spent over £350 billion during the pandemic on protecting people's jobs and over £60 billion during the recent cost of living pressures to pay for their energy bills.

Marion Fellows: The Centre for Mental Health, the British Psychological Society and others have raised serious concerns about the UK Government's new back to work plan, warning that the increased threat of applying benefit sanctions or coercing people into jobseeking will be detrimental to claimants struggling with their mental health. Does the Minister share my concern about this, and has she made any representations to her Cabinet colleagues about the mental health impact of these measures?

Maria Caulfield: That is the difference between the SNP and the Conservatives: we have aspiration for people, and we absolutely want to support people with mental health problems and illness to get into work. They should have the same opportunities to get into work, and not just to get a job, but to get a good job and get a career. If we look at its website, Mind supports people getting into work, saying that it is not just a source of income, but provides a "sense of identity" and "structure" as well as support, confidence and ambition.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): A recent study by Magic Breakfast and the British Nutrition Foundation found that eating a healthy breakfast can improve the nutritional intake of the most vulnerable children, improving their physical and cognitive development and their mental health. Will my hon. Friend work with colleagues in the Department for Education to consider expanding school breakfast provision in order to reduce the health impact of child food insecurity?

Maria Caulfield: We want a more cross-Government approach to mental health provision, and that is why in our suicide prevention strategy we are working with multiple Departments. My hon. Friend asks about support for nutrition in schools, and I will certainly raise that with colleagues in the Department for Education to see what more can be done.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role. Research by the Mental Health Foundation found that the cost of living crisis has left a third of UK adults feeling anxious, more than a quarter feeling stressed, and almost one in 10 feeling hopeless. What representations has the Minister made to Cabinet colleagues regarding the impact of the cost of living crisis on health outcomes since she took up her post?

Maria Caulfield: I have outlined some of the financial support that the Government have given during covid and the cost of living pressures. I also point to schemes that the Treasury has rolled out, such as the Breathing Space programme, which sees enforcement action from creditors halted, and interest frozen for people with problem debt who are experiencing mental health issues, and covers a 60-day period. That is the sort of practical help that this Government are giving to people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now move to topical questions. We are running late because questions have been too long, as have answers. I often make this plea. In any case, Members should not be reading their questions—questions are not meant to be read; they are meant to be questions. Can everybody please cut out those bits that say their constituency is

beautiful, for example, and just ask a question? We all believe that our constituencies are beautiful, and none more so than mine.

Topical Questions

T1. [900491] **Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): My priority as Secretary of State is to reform our NHS and social care system to make it faster, simpler and fairer. Since my appointment, we are making progress. To make our system faster, we have hit our manifesto target to recruit and retain 50,000 more nurses for our NHS, and to deliver 50 million more GP appointments, achieving both commitments months ahead of time. We have made an offer to health unions that I hope will end the consultants' strike, which has disrupted care for the public and put a strain on staff. To make our system simpler, we have announced Pharmacy First, which will make it quicker and easier for millions of people to access healthcare on the high street. To make our system fairer, we have agreed a deal with pharmaceutical companies that will save the NHS £14 billion in medicine costs and give patients access to more life-saving treatment. The NHS is one of the reasons I came into politics—*[Interruption.]* I know Labour Members do not like to hear that, but I look forward to working with patients and staff across the country—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not need any help, thank you. The Secretary of State has answered the first question at length. I am sure that means she will answer the other questions much more briefly.

Marion Fellows: People with disabilities and serious health conditions already have higher living costs, and the proposals in the work capability assessment activities and descriptors consultation will mean that if they are reassessed they will lose £390 a month. I appreciate that the Secretary of State is new to her role, but will she commit as a priority to taking this up and consulting Cabinet colleagues, to ensure that people who are disabled and have serious health conditions are not pushed even further into dire poverty?

Victoria Atkins: As I said earlier, careful thought has gone into the announcements that were made in the autumn statement, and of course I will work with the Secretary of State and the Chancellor to ensure that the commitments we already have to people living with disabilities are maintained, and that we have their wellbeing at the heart of all our policy making.

T4. [900494] **Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** The Secretary of State's predecessor took a strong interest in the deaths that took place in the Essex mental health trusts, and a statutory inquiry is now taking place. Will she meet me and our Essex colleagues, and the families, to discuss that important inquiry, so that they can have justice for the loved ones they have lost?

Victoria Atkins: I would be very pleased to meet my right hon. Friend, the families and other Essex MPs to discuss that important inquiry.

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

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I welcome the Secretary of State and the new members of her Front-Bench team to their roles. I am honoured myself to stand at the Dispatch Box today for the first time on behalf of the shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who is currently in Australia exploring international best practice in healthcare.

Talking of best practice, on this Government's watch, people with suspected breast cancer are not getting it. The two-week target from GP referral to a first consultant appointment for breast cancer has not been met since March 2020. I know from my own experience of breast cancer that the waiting is terrifying, wondering whether it has been left too late and the cancer has become incurable. How much longer will patients have to wait before the Government can meet their own targets and deliver the timely care that patients need and deserve?

Victoria Atkins: I genuinely thank the hon. Lady for her warm welcome, and indeed I welcome her to her first outing at the Dispatch Box. As she was describing where the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) is, I had images of "I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!" Sadly for citizens in Wales, they are experiencing what it is like to live under a healthcare system run by Labour, and they might fully agree with that sentiment.

The hon. Lady raises the important issue of breast cancer, and the NHS has an ambition to diagnose 75% of cancers as stages 1 or 2 by 2028. In January last year we provided £10 million of funding for 28 new breast screening units and nearly 60 life-saving upgrades to services in the areas where they are most needed, because we understand our constituents' concerns and also their determination that we continue to improve cancer survival rates.

Ashley Dalton: Unfortunately, the reality is that cancer referrals have only got worse with the Conservatives in government. In September 2023, only 74% of urgent cancer referrals to a consultant met that two-week target. That is the second-lowest rate for two-week referrals since 2009. When can the public expect this performance to improve?

Victoria Atkins: We have in fact made progress by delivering record numbers of urgent cancer checks, and levels of first treatments following an urgent cancer referral have been consistently above pre-pandemic levels, with activity in September standing at 108% of pre-pandemic levels on a per working day basis.

T6. [900496] **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): Some six months ago, the dentist based at Firthmoor community centre, serving 8,000 of my constituents, handed back its contract to the integrated care board. I was shocked last week to learn that the ICB has still not commenced the tender process to replace that provision. What advice can the Minister give me to ensure that our ICB is doing what it needs to do?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): My hon. Friend has already raised this issue with me several times in the almost two weeks I have been in this post,

so he is doing a great job, and he is right to raise it. Tendering exercises for NHS dentistry are bound by current procurement law, but I am happy to meet him to discuss how much faster we can go to get this sorted out.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Brexit broke Britain and it is continuing to wreak havoc on supply chains. The shortage of ADHD medication is now set to drag on into next spring. The shortage has seen 70% of patients forced to ration their supply of ADHD drugs, with 62% reporting an increase in suicidal thoughts. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that supplies of these vital medications are reaching pharmacies across the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): The shortage of ADHD medication is a global issue; it is not Brexit-related. We are hoping to have some positive news over the coming weeks.

T9. [900499] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): My local practice, on Heath Lane in Earl Shilton, released its "did not attend" figures. Between 20 November and 24 November, 69 appointments—including 36 GP appointments and 28 nursing appointments—were missed. That was 12 hours lost in five days. If that is happening up and down Hinckley and Bosworth and across the country, that is thousands of hours being missed. I know that the Government are keen to see more on data, so will they consider statementing patients on how much missed appointments cost, because clinically that would make a big difference to the awareness of what people are cashing out on?

Victoria Atkins: May I thank my hon. Friend for bringing his professional expertise to the Chamber? Of course, minimising "did not attends" is a critical part of ensuring that clinical time is optimised, and I will take his suggestion away and mull it over.

T2. [900492] **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): I understand that pathology staffing levels at Royal Blackburn Hospital have not been reviewed for 15 years and the workload is up 300%. The national deficit in pathology is a ticking time bomb, as hospitals are unable to offer surgical and emergency services. What steps is the Minister taking to address recruitment and ensure that staff and patients are safe?

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): I understand the hon. Lady's concern. As she knows, we share a local NHS hospital trust. I am very keen to work with her on this issue. Of course, this Government are the first to introduce a long-term workforce plan for the NHS, which will deliver thousands more clinicians for a range of services across the NHS in the years to come.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Last month, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence said that Kaftrio, Orkambi and Symkevi are effective treatments against cystic fibrosis, but are too expensive to put on the NHS's list. CF is a death sentence, so what can the Secretary of State do to make sure that this medication is put on the shelves to save thousands of lives in the future?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. NICE has yet to publish its final guidance and is continuing to work with all parties to address the issues raised in the draft guidance. The Government encourage manufacturers to work with NICE in setting a price that represents value for the NHS. I can assure the House that existing and new patients who are started on treatment while the NICE evaluation is ongoing will have access after it has issued its final recommendations, irrespective of the outcome.

T3. [900493] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): As we know, there are strong links between financial difficulties, mental health and suicide. The poorest 10% are twice as likely to die from suicide than the wealthiest 10%. With so many people struggling to make ends meet, how is the Minister going to ensure that those seeking financial support get access to mental health support, and that those seeking mental health support get access to help with their finances?

Maria Caulfield: May I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work on the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention? She knows that financial difficulty is a priority area in the suicide prevention strategy, because we know it is a high risk factor. That is why suicide is now everyone's business—not just the Department of Health and Social Care, but our colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and all Government Departments. Anyone who has financial stress and pressure will be given support to reduce their risk of suicide.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): My constituent Dan Archer runs the highly successful Visiting Angels care agency, which has an annual staff turnover rate of just 13%, compared with an industry average of 60%. The secret to his success is very straightforward: paying decent wages, investing in training, valuing staff and prioritising client satisfaction. As a consequence, an enormous amount of money is saved on recruitment and invested into training and retention instead. Would the Minister meet my constituent to learn more about the success of Visiting Angels and how it can be shared more widely to help solve the shortage of workers in the care sector?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Can Members please cut their questions in half? Otherwise, I will have to stop this questions session and people will not get a chance at all.

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend's constituent. What the employer does is really important for retention and recruitment of adult social care staff, along with our ambitious workforce reforms for the care workforce.

T5. [900495] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): The Health Secretary declared at the weekend that the Government will miss their target to cut NHS waiting times if doctors strike to defend their pay and conditions, but she seems to forget that since the Tories took power in 2010, waiting lists for hospital treatments are up, A&E waiting times are up, cancer referral times are up and ambulance response times are up. The only thing that has fallen is not waiting times; it is public confidence

in the Government. Will the Minister finally admit that the threat to waiting time targets is not striking doctors, but her party being in government?

Victoria Atkins: I assume from the hon. Gentleman's question that he fully supports our efforts to get consultants back into hospitals as well as junior doctors and doctors in training. It is all very well to sit there commenting, but we on the Government side of the House are working with doctors to try to help them look after the NHS for us all.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): While I recognise that money does not grow on trees, neither do teeth. Can my right hon. Friend advise me of how quickly my North Devon constituents will be able to see the NHS dentists they so desperately need?

Dame Andrea Leadson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there is a lot more that we can do. We are working at pace to see what announcements we can make on the dental recovery plan as soon as possible. In the meantime, she will be aware that, in the south-west, NHS England has commissioned additional urgent dental care appointments that people can access via NHS 111.

T7. [900497] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Last week, the former Health Secretary admitted at the covid inquiry that sick pay across the UK is "far too low". It is far lower than the European average and encourages people to go to work when they should be getting better. Does the Secretary of State agree with her predecessor? What discussions will she have with her Cabinet colleagues to improve the inadequate sick pay system?

Victoria Atkins: I will not comment on evidence from the covid inquiry, given that it is an independent inquiry. However, on the general principle of encouraging people back into work, we have the plans set out by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Chancellor at the autumn statement. We want to encourage people back into work and to support them when they fall ill and need help from the state.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Last year, I asked the Government to show me the money with respect to £118 million of long-awaited capital funding for south Essex hospitals. With £8 million now delivered and the other £110 million now confirmed to be on its way, will the Secretary of State please come with me to Southend Hospital and see how that vital money will transform care in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea?

Victoria Atkins: I will be delighted to visit that hospital with my hon. Friend—I suspect that I will be visiting a lot of hospitals.

T8. [900498] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Was the Secretary of State consulted about yesterday's announcement by the Home Secretary? If she was, did she agree with him that it will have no impact on overseas recruitment, or does she hear the fear of care providers about its consequences?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, I was. What is more, we looked carefully at the figures in relation to overseas care workers. We are grateful to all international people who work in our NHS and our care system, but we need to

tackle the migration rate, which is too high. The package presented yesterday by the Government is a thoughtful and careful one to tackle legal migration.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Stroud Maternity Hospital is doing a great job, but the post-natal beds are still not open. We have been chasing a ministerial meeting about that for some time. Will my hon. Friend meet me and the Gloucestershire NHS scrutiny chair, Andrew Gravells, to discuss the issue? We think that we need some help with the Care Quality Commission.

Maria Caulfield: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that specific issue. We are doing a piece of work on a capital survey of all maternity units as well as working with the CQC on how capital infrastructure—beds and so forth—are impacting on maternity performance.

T10. [900500] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder medications are essential to many people. In response to my written question last month, the Department outlined “disruptions to the supply”, which are expected to “resolve in early 2024”. How have the Government allowed that to happen? What plans does the Department have to prevent a similar situation from occurring in the future?

Maria Caulfield: As I said in an earlier response, there is a global shortage of ADHD medication. As we set out in our response to her written question, we expect that to be resolved shortly.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Lobular breast cancer treatment must be improved. Will the Minister meet my constituent and me to discuss how?

Andrew Stephenson: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Excellent—that is how to do it.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Cancer remains the leading cause of death by disease in children and young people, with nearly 500 dying every single year, yet the Government continue to reject calls for a dedicated children’s cancer plan. Why is that?

Andrew Stephenson: As the hon. Member knows, cancer will be part of the Government’s long-term strategy for diseases. Improving cancer treatment wait times is a top priority for the Government, with a key focus on the elective care recovery plan backed by an additional £8 billion in revenue funding across the spending review period.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): In response to a written question that I submitted, I was told that the Department of Health and Social Care holds no central data for diagnosis and treatment of those with eating disorders and has no idea how many mental health nurse appointments are available in GP surgeries, despite all the funding. Do Ministers agree that that is a disgrace?

Maria Caulfield: NHS England holds some of that data. Central data is one of the things that we are introducing right now to improve our access to data. It

makes it difficult to plan services when we do not have that dataset, but we are working to resolve that as quickly as we can.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Farmers face many serious mental health challenges, including the financial precipice that this Government have led them to. According to the Farm Safety Foundation, 95% of young farmers in this country identify poor mental health as their biggest hidden challenge. Will the Minister meet me and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss how we can best support farmers and farm workers to develop robust mental health strategies?

Maria Caulfield: I attended the National Farmers Union session in Westminster just before the launch of our suicide prevention strategy. We recognise that isolation and loneliness in rural communities is an issue. I am happy to meet any hon. Members who wish to discuss how we can better support farmers, improve their mental health and reduce suicide rates.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the primary care Minister join me in congratulating the Conservative Mayor of Bedford borough for proposing council money to invest in primary care facilities in Great Barford, Wootton, Wixams and Kempston? Will she condemn Labour and Liberal Democrat councils for voting it down?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. He is absolutely right; in local authorities we need mayors and integrated care boards supporting primary care and not listening to the Opposition, who talk it down the whole time. The 50 million more GP appointments is something to celebrate.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given that obesity now costs the NHS and our economy much more than smoking, why does the Secretary of State support a total ban on smoking but think that measures to tackle obesity are nannyish?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman raises a completely artificial barrier. Smoking is totally preventable; it is the cause of one in four cancers and 75,000 deaths. It is unbelievably appalling. Obesity is a complex area and one that the Government are focused on. We need to tackle it, but it is entirely different.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Would the Health Secretary please agree to meet me to discuss improved access to GPs and dentists in Bracknell Forest and Wokingham boroughs?

Victoria Atkins: I will; it would be a pleasure.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): My constituent Air Marshal Dr David Walker, an inspirational leader and academic, sadly died of glioblastoma in June. When diagnosed, he and his wife Catherine were shocked to learn of the woefully low funding for brain and other less survivable cancers and established the charity the Right to Hope with Cancer. Will the Minister show the courage and leadership so

epitomised by the life of Air Marshal Walker, and properly resource and fund less survivable cancers, so that everyone living with cancer has some sort of hope?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. My 23-year-old constituent Laura Nuttall, from Barrowford, died in May, five years after being diagnosed with a glioblastoma, having been given just a year to live. Before her diagnosis, Laura did work experience in my parliamentary and constituency offices. She was one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. As I get up to speed in my new ministerial role, he can rest assured that I will make as much progress as possible in this area. It is a personal priority to me.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We have gone considerably over time because I have endeavoured to ensure that everyone whose name is on the Order Paper has had a chance either in substantive questions or in topical questions to ask questions on these important subjects on behalf of their constituents. Again, I appeal to Members: they are not meant to read questions, they should just ask them. It is not meant to be a speech, and it is certainly not meant to be drafted for Twitter or Instagram. It should be a question to the Minister. Let us hope for some improvement.

I apologise to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) for keeping him waiting to ask his urgent question.

Middle East: UK Military Deployments

12.44 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to make a statement on UK military deployments to the middle east.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Since Hamas's horrendous attack on Israel on 7 October, we have increased our military presence in the region. This is to support contingency planning, monitor the evolving situation, and be ready to react and respond. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, I deployed a Royal Navy task group to the eastern Mediterranean, including RFA Lyme Bay and RFA Argus, three Merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines as a contingency measure. HMS Diamond is sailing through the Red sea to provide maritime security. HMS Lancaster is already in the middle east.

This morning, I provided a written ministerial statement notifying the House that unarmed military surveillance flights will begin in support of hostage rescue. The UK Government have been working with partners across the region to secure the release of hostages, including British nationals who have been kidnapped. I will move heaven and earth to bring our hostages home. The UK Ministry of Defence will conduct surveillance flights over the eastern Mediterranean, including operating in airspace over Israel and Gaza. The surveillance aircraft will be unmanned. They do not have a combat role and will be tasked solely to locate hostages. Only information relating to hostage rescue will be passed to the relevant authorities responsible for those rescues.

The MOD is working on land, air and maritime routes to deliver urgently needed humanitarian aid. Four RAF flights carrying over 74 tonnes of aid have landed in Egypt. I am considering whether RFA Argus and RFA Lyme Bay can support medical and humanitarian aid provision, given that their original purpose was potentially to take non-combatants out of the area. The MOD routinely deploys significant numbers of military personnel in the wider middle east for operations such as counter-Daesh, training, maritime security and other reasons. There is currently a force laid down across the region of nearly 2,500 military personnel.

Later this week, the Chief of the Defence Staff and I are visiting sovereign base areas, the Republic of Cyprus, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel. I will, of course, report back to the House after that visit. Our objectives include to demonstrate and reaffirm the UK's continued support for Israel, while continuing to press for adherence to international humanitarian law; to emphasise the importance the UK places on humanitarian aid reaching Gaza; to facilitate a deeper understanding of Israel's planned next steps in Gaza now that the current pause has ended, and activity along the northern border; and to reaffirm the United Kingdom's continued belief in a two-state solution and support for a viable and sovereign Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel.

John Healey: Across the House, we welcomed last week's pause in fighting and we are all deeply concerned about its restarting. It was a glimmer of light in the recent dark days to see hostages reunite with families,

aid reach desperate Palestinians and diplomacy extend the initial pause. There can only be the long-term settlement the Secretary of State talks about if Hamas cannot carry out a terror attack again like that on 7 October, but the military operations in north Gaza cannot be repeated in the same way in the south. Far too many innocent civilians have been killed. As the US Defence Secretary said:

"you can only win in urban warfare by protecting civilians."

Israel must take all steps to protect civilians, meet the duties of international law and secure flows of aid into Gaza.

I welcome the Secretary of State to the Dispatch Box for his first statement, particularly as this week marks 100 days in the job. The UK has an important role to play to strengthen regional stability in the middle east. That is why the Leader of the Opposition has met and spoken with leaders in the region, including from Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Qatar. That is why the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), has visited the region twice in recent weeks, and that is why we welcomed the initial deployment of UK forces on 13 October. They will do the job with total professionalism, and we thank them for that.

Since then, however—according to an answer given to me by the Secretary of State—the total number of UK personnel has risen to at least 4,500, and the escalation risks have risen as well. How will the Secretary of State ensure that UK surveillance flights support hostage rescue and not Israeli operations? How many British hostages remain in Gaza? How will the UK Navy ships that the Secretary of State has deployed protect commercial shipping routes? What action is the Secretary of State taking to boost protection for UK personnel, especially those at joint allied bases? What is he doing to open up the maritime routes for humanitarian aid that he has told us about today? Finally, how many more RAF aid flights will take off this month to get much-needed aid into Gaza as the winter cold sets in?

Grant Shapps: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I should just say that unarmed but not necessarily unmanned aircraft—initially, the Shadow R1—are taking on the task of looking for the hostages.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the information flow; I can reassure the House that only the United Kingdom will have the ability to provide that information, and that is how we will ensure that it is used for the appropriate purposes. He asked about the number of hostages; the United Kingdom has not confirmed exact numbers, partly because it is still unclear whether some may have died in the original 7 October event or in subsequent events, and whether some may be being held. We do not want to cause additional stress, but we know that there are still British hostages being held.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about protecting the ships. They are, of course, extremely capable ships—the last ship to be deployed, HMS Diamond, is capable of looking after herself, one might say—and we are benefiting from a great deal of co-operation with allies in the region to assist with that force protection. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about British forces in the wider region who may be in, for example, Syria or Iraq. Again, we take their force protection very seriously. As

[Grant Shapps]

the right hon. Gentleman will understand, I cannot go into operational specifics, but we keep it under constant review.

Lastly, the right hon. Gentleman asked about humanitarian aid. This country has provided £60 million-worth of additional aid made available for Palestinians, and four flights have taken off so far. Members on both sides of the House will realise that the problem is not just providing the aid but getting it into Gaza. The Rafah crossing presents a considerable barrier to that, for all sorts of security reasons. I am actively looking at different routes, and the right hon. Gentleman will understand that that is one of the reasons I am going to the region this week.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's answers, including his confirmation that, as has been reported, the Shadow R1 is being deployed. I note that the intention is to use a range of surveillance aircraft. Will the Secretary of State tell us what other assets he is intending to use? Given the significant tasking, the threats to shipping and the ongoing commitments to, for example, Operation Shader, will he comment on what is being deprioritised to allow this mission to take place? Finally, in view of the recent threats to the Rivet Joint aircraft—I know that there are defensive aid suites on board—will he confirm that due consideration is being given to the protection of crews, given all the likely threats in the area and the presence of Iran?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will know that we have a number of capabilities for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. The Rivet Joint, which he mentioned, has been involved in carrying out missions elsewhere, and—as I think he hinted—has attracted unprofessional behaviour from other air forces. We have the P-8 available as well, along with the Shadow R1 and others. Exactly which aircraft and machinery perform these roles will depend on operational circumstances, but I can confirm that we have not had to pull resources away from other urgent work to provide this cover.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is important to repeat the denunciation of the death cult known as Hamas. Given the war of attrition that is now taking place in south Gaza, let me reiterate from the SNP Benches the call for an immediate ceasefire, because I am afraid that a pause will not suffice. The view from here, at least, is that without a ceasefire we will see yet another graveyard from which fundamentalism will rise.

Let me ask a specific question. The Secretary of State mentioned reconnaissance missions looking, rightfully, for UK citizens being held by Hamas. Does he agree that any information coming out of those reconnaissance missions that sees illegal activity under international law should be handed over to the International Criminal Court for its ongoing investigation into the operations in Gaza?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is right to stress the abominable, disgraceful, disgusting behaviour of Hamas. He calls for a permanent ceasefire; I suggest that that would be a heck of a lot easier if Hamas released the hostages they are holding right now.

As I stressed earlier, we will be in charge of the reconnaissance information, which will focus exclusively on hostage recovery and will be passed only to the appropriate authorities.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Those on both Front Benches seem to agree that Hamas must not remain in control in Gaza. Is any thought being given to how, once they have been removed, they can be prevented from coming back? There will need to be policing, and a moderate major Arab neighbour of Israel has said that a two-state solution can happen only if it is enforced. Will we have a hand in that enforcement? If not, how can it possibly happen?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is an expert on these matters, and he is right: there has to be an international outcome to this, and a solution. I am afraid that in recent decades there has not been sufficient global focus on a two-state solution because it seemed to be an unsolvable problem, and it has slipped into the background. My right hon. Friend is also right to say that there must be a global coalition which will need to include Arab states. A huge amount of work is being undertaken for what some people call “the day after”.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): May I ask a slightly wider question? What are the Government doing specifically to prevent escalation and promote regional stability?

Grant Shapps: I think that if on 7 October we had projected forward eight weeks and known what we know now, we would have been very concerned about this leading to a widescale regional escalation. It is a credit to the United Kingdom and the professionalism of our services that, after the United States, we have deployed the most military assistance to the area. I have been told by a fair number of the Arab states that they appreciate the deterrent that that has placed on Iran and its many proxies in the area. Certainly the fact that eight weeks later we have not seen that expand is a credit to the British laydown.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): In recent weeks we have seen Houthi rebel attacks on shipping in the Red sea, and back in June there were reports of harassment of shipping in the strait of Hormuz by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iranian attempts to consolidate control of contested islands. What action is the UK taking with our allies to protect freedom of navigation?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is right. We have seen the Houthi, out of Yemen, try to take advantage of the situation and, for the first time in a very long period, we have seen Somali pirates becoming involved. That is why I have sent HMS Diamond to the Gulf, and it is why HMS Lancaster is there as well. Let me reassure my right hon. Friend: I am working very closely with our international partners on how we can dissuade people from engaging in activity of this kind in what are international shipping waters. That includes the

conversations that I had in the United States last week with my opposite number, the American Defence Secretary, Lloyd Austin.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): How can the Secretary of State reassure me that the defence resources and attention now been focused on the middle east will not in any way reduce what we are able to commit to in support of our friends in Ukraine?

Grant Shapps: I hope the right hon. Gentleman will know of my personal interest in and dedication to Ukraine. I can absolutely reassure him that this is not defocusing that work in any way, shape or form. We are ensuring that we continue to provide daily support to our Ukrainian friends, and I have a very close relationship with the Ukrainian Defence Secretary Umerov, Deputy Prime Minister Kubrakov, President Zelensky and many others within their system.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is important that Israel abides by the law of armed conflict, but in that context I welcome the deployment of these assets, not least to try to locate the British hostages. The Secretary of State will know that, ultimately, Hamas and Hezbollah are funded and trained by Iran, so what discussions has he had with our new Foreign Secretary about when, oh when, we will finally declare that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps should be banned?

Grant Shapps: The IRGC and its position are kept under constant review. I know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is constantly looking at the region. He has been out there already and will be weighing up the advantages of things such as being able to have a post in-country against what it would mean to carry out such a ban. I also know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) will know how to take that up with the Foreign Secretary.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), with the International Criminal Court stepping up its work in Gaza and the Government again confirming their surveillance flights over Gaza, will the Government hand over any and all evidence of war crimes to the ICC, whether they are committed by Hamas following the 7 October atrocities or in the ongoing massacre of Gazan civilians, particularly children, by the Israel Defence Forces?

Grant Shapps: The easiest way to bring this to an end, as I hinted earlier, would be for Hamas, a terrorist organisation, to release the hostages that they have, to stop firing rockets into Israel in a completely indiscriminate way, which I think the whole House should condemn, and to allow this thing to be brought to a close. As I have said repeatedly, it is important that Israel should adhere to international humanitarian law. I will be making that point publicly and have made that point all along to my Israeli counterpart, Minister Gallant. I wonder why, however, the concern is not about the hostages who are being held and how this situation could be brought to a conclusion much faster if they were released.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I am pleased to hear that contingency planning is taking place. Would the Secretary of State consider tasking the aircraft carrier to the region as well? Behind Hamas sits Iran, behind Iran sits Russia, and behind Russia sits China. We are seeing new alliances forming, and the world's ability to deal with these challenges is being severely tested, as are our own armed forces, who are now increasingly overstretched. What conversations is he having now with the Chancellor about increasing the defence spend in the Budget in the spring?

Grant Shapps: I will go for the last of my right hon. Friend's many good questions. This Government are committed to 2.5%, as conditions allow. I know that he will be making his own representations to the Chancellor. I have previously talked about my own belief that we need to reach not just that 2.5% but 3% and higher.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It was reassuring last week, in answer to my question, to hear the Minister for Armed Forces, the right hon. Member for Wells (James Heapey) telling us that UK surveillance flights would not involve the use of intelligence for target acquisition. I also welcome the Secretary of State talking today about how information that would be helpful to hostage recovery will be passed to the so-called appropriate authorities. We have now heard two questions about the International Criminal Court. Will the UK pass any evidence that it gathers of any breaches of international humanitarian law by combatants in Gaza to the ICC?

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Gentleman says, that question has been asked, and I have answered it a couple of times. The intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance—ISR—flights are to look for British hostages and indeed other hostages. That is the information that will be gathered from those flights. Of course, if we saw anything else, we would most certainly alert our partners, but the purpose is to find our hostages and bring them home.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): We all ultimately want peace in the region, and we all want to see humanitarian aid getting through. I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said about HMS Diamond joining HMS Lancaster, because does that not send a signal to Iran that its support for terror groups is not acceptable and must not continue, and that through this action we will prevent further bloodshed in the region?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we send that deterrent message, and it is working. I have called on all parties not to think that this is an opportunity to get involved and cause further regional escalation, and so far, I am pleased to say that our deterrent has helped to keep a lid on that.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): This conflict has already cost over 15,000 Palestinian civilian lives and over 1,200 Israeli lives. The US Defence Secretary has said:

“You replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat...I have repeatedly made clear to Israel's leaders that protecting civilians in Gaza is both a moral responsibility and a strategic imperative.”

[Rushanara Ali]

We know that regional escalation is a real threat. What will the Secretary of State be doing to work with Arab states and the US to apply pressure on the warring parties to bring an end to this war so that we do not see other countries, including our own and the US, becoming engulfed in a wider regional conflict?

Grant Shapps: I was actually with Lloyd Austin, the US Defence Secretary, when he spoke those words, I believe, and we agree entirely. To make it absolutely clear, Israel needs to comply with international humanitarian law. It needs to go out of its way to warn people when it goes after the terrorists, who use those people as human shields as a matter of routine. The hon. Lady rightly asks what we are doing with our Arab partners in the region. This will be my second visit to the region and I speak to my Arab counterparts all the time. They have welcomed our deterrents, but they also want us to work with the international community on making sure that, on the following day, when this is complete, the solution is not left to chance as it was before and that we are all working together to bring about a safer, more peaceful middle east for Israel and for Gaza.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the deployment of HMS Diamond and HMS Lancaster and the potential deployment of two further ships, but what discussions has my right hon. Friend had with our NATO and EU partners about perhaps sharing the burden? What progress has he made on that? Shadow R1 is a slow-moving specialist manned aircraft, but it is unarmed in a region that has Iranian proxies with quite good capabilities, as well as Syria and Russian activity. How confident is he that the advice he has received has not put those servicemen in extreme harm's way?

Grant Shapps: To clarify the record on the two ships that my right hon. Friend mentions, HMS Lancaster was already there and HMS Diamond is there now, and there are two Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships, which I sent right at the beginning of this conflict. In answer to his broader question, for security, making sure that our personnel are kept safe is always at the heart of what we do. I appreciate his concern, and I know that he will understand that I cannot go into the detail of how we ensure that protection, but it is very much upmost in our minds wherever and whenever we deploy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Yesterday I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), whether the UK Government were in a position to contribute to the International Criminal Court's call for evidence in its investigation of potential breaches of international humanitarian law. He said:

"Not at this stage, but we will continue to take note."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 34.]

Surely, if the UK Government are actively collecting drone and surveillance images of the war zone, the answer to that question should have been yes?

Grant Shapps: I would have thought that the No. 1 concern would be to locate the British hostages, and

that is where the surveillance work will focus. The FCDO will be best placed to answer the hon. Gentleman's specific question.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I am grateful to the Defence Secretary for confirming that the MOD is currently rightly focused on regional security and containment but, inasmuch as the UK has a responsibility to Israel, we also have a responsibility to the people of Gaza. Can he therefore reassure me that His Majesty's forces will not become involved in any military action unless it is in direct support of British interests or British nationals?

Grant Shapps: Yes.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) mentioned future arrangements. Can the Secretary of State give the House an assurance that there will be no deployment of British troops on the ground in Gaza, Israel or the west bank without the approval of this House?

Grant Shapps: There simply is not going to be a deployment, so that will not be required.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): The Houthis, who are attacking British and American cargo ships, and Hamas are basically two sides of the same coin. They are Iranian-funded, Iranian-trained and, of course, Iranian-guided terrorist groups that are publicly committed to the destruction of Israel. Does the Defence Secretary agree that using UK military assets in support of our ally is crucial to deterring further escalation? None of us wants further escalation.

I particularly welcome the UK's deployment of drones to help locate hostages, including British hostages. In the days after 7 October, the Defence Secretary said:

"No nation should stand alone in the face of such evil".

Will he repeat that crucial support today and in the difficult days ahead? I thank him for his support.

Grant Shapps: I clarify again that these are not necessarily only drones. Some will be piloted or will be unarmed. My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that no nation should stand alone. It is easy to forget how this all began, when the Hamas terrorist group thought it was a plan to go into Israel to butcher men, women and children, cut off heads and rape people.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): One of the keys to securing and sustaining any ceasefire, pending a wider political solution, may be a UN, or UN-authorized, peacekeeping or monitoring presence on the ground. For various reasons, historical and otherwise, such a presence may have to be led by the Arab states. Does the Secretary of State foresee any situation in which the MOD could provide back-up support to such a presence? Is any planning being done for such a scenario?

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Gentleman can imagine—and this was included in my conversations in the States last week—there is a huge amount of international work about what happens afterwards and how it will be structured. It is rather too soon, I am afraid, to predict

exactly how it will look, but I do not think he is too far off the mark to think that this needs to be a truly global response. It will need to involve Arab partners. We will do whatever we can to support that, but I see no circumstances in which British troops would be on the ground.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend elaborate on the efforts the Government are making to de-escalate the conflict, in the hope that this would reduce civilian casualties?

Grant Shapps: Of course, the single biggest thing that could happen to escalate this conflict would be for it to turn into a regional conflict. I am thinking, in particular, of Hezbollah on the northern border with Lebanon, as well as what could happen from Syria, from Iranian-backed terrorists in Iraq and, of course, from the Houthis. This could get worse in a variety of places, which is why sending ships and military for deterrent purposes has been so vital and has been our primary approach to preventing this conflict from turning into a bigger regional conflict.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State tell us what role the RAF base in Cyprus is currently playing in this situation? Is any military matériel being moved through that base?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady will know that the RAF bases in Cyprus are a very useful asset. They are being used, for example, to provide support to our military in the area. To answer her specific question, I can assure her that we have provided no offensive military weapons to Israel during this conflict. In fact, our military exports to Israel are quite low. Last year's figure was something like £48 million, which is not a very significant amount of money. During the conflict, we would provide only defensive matériel, or matériel that might help with the recovery of hostages.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I applaud the decisive actions of my right hon. Friend and the Government to defend our strategic ally, Israel, against Hamas, but the grim reality on the ground right now is that Hamas continue to fire dozens of rockets at Israeli towns and cities. The Iran-backed terror group have fired more than 10,000 rockets since 7 October and show no sign of stopping their violent attacks against Israel. Will my right hon. Friend not only commit to continuing his support for Israel in defending itself against Hamas, but reassure the House that every possible step is being taken to counter Iran's links across the region, which are causing instability?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that the conflict would be over immediately if hostages were released and Hamas stopped firing rockets into Israel—there would not be a cause for conflict. Indeed, that is the policy Israel followed for many years, hoping that, even though rocket attacks continued, Hamas would not take advantage of their own population by using them as human shields and building infrastructure under hospitals, schools and homes. Unfortunately, that is not the Hamas way. That is what they have done, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify Iran as being behind this whole evil business.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Secretary of State needs to be very clear with the House: 15,000 people have already died in Gaza, and 1,200 have died in Israel. Israel is clearly pushing the entire population southwards, if not out of the Gaza strip altogether. Is Britain involved in the military actions that Israel has taken, either physically or by providing information in support of those military activities? I think the House needs to be told. What is the long-term aim of British military involvement in Gaza?

Grant Shapps: The simple answer is no, and I hope that clears it up. I am surprised to hear the right hon. Gentleman talk just about people being killed. They were murdered. They were slaughtered. It was not just some coincidental thing. I understand and share the concerns about the requirement on Israel, on us and on everyone else to follow international humanitarian law. When Israel drops leaflets, when it drops what it calls a “knock” or a “tap” and does not bomb until afterwards, when it calls people to ask them to move, when it issues maps showing where Hamas have their tunnels and asks people to move away from them, that is a far cry from what Hamas did on 7 October, when they went after men, women and children.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on increased UK military deployment in the middle east. Thanks to the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have been privileged to meet some of the highly skilled RAF and Royal Navy personnel who serve our country. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to their exemplary professionalism and sense of duty as they undertake this extremely important work in the middle east, not just on behalf of our country and people in the middle east, but on behalf of every civilised democracy in the world?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely join my hon. Friend. They are the most remarkable people, often operating in very difficult circumstances. I am very much looking forward to meeting some of them in the region this week.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): We have seen increased bombardment in southern Gaza after the pause. We are also seeing increased violence in the west bank, supported by extremist settler Ministers. What talks is the Secretary of State having with Israel to stop the increase in settler violence in the west bank?

Grant Shapps: I certainly will not be pulling my punches when I speak to my Israeli counterparts. The violence in the west bank is unacceptable and it must be controlled—stopped, in fact. None of that, in any way, shape or form, separates us from our utter condemnation of how this whole thing was started in the first place with Hamas, but the hon. Lady is right about that settler violence.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Medical Aid for Palestinians has warned that Israel's indiscriminate bombing and siege is making it impossible to sustain human life in Gaza. With 1.8 million civilians displaced and a lack of clean water and sanitation, it is just a matter of time before a cholera outbreak kills many thousands more. The Secretary of State has been

[Alan Brown]

unequivocal that the main purpose of surveillance is to help find hostages, which is fine, but for the fifth time of asking: if clear evidence is found of breaches of humanitarian law, will the UK Government share that evidence with the International Criminal Court?

Grant Shapps: The simple answer is that we will always follow international humanitarian law and its requirements. I want to say, with reference to the aid picture on the ground, that one of the primary reasons for my visit this coming week is to work on ensuring that the international community can get more aid into Gaza, and the United Kingdom will be leading on that point.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much thank the Secretary of State and the Government for the stance they have taken. It is one that I and my constituents very much support, as we do finding a solution. May I also thank the Government for working tirelessly with partners abroad to bring home British nationals trapped in Gaza? Will the Secretary of State perhaps provide assurances that surveillance flights will continue to fly over the eastern Mediterranean as long as there are still risks to British nationals remaining in Gaza?

Grant Shapps: I can certainly provide an assurance that we will always do whatever we are able to do in the circumstances. During the recent pause, for example, part of the deal was that surveillance flights were not flown, but we would always ensure that we are trying to assist. In particular, given that this entire episode began with something of a surveillance failure, the UK has always been keen to help; from the very early days of this conflict we have provided additional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance over the eastern Mediterranean. What is new now is for that to be over Gaza, relating to the hostages specifically.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is absolutely right that innocent hostages should be released, and that steps should be taken to release them. It is absolutely right that those responsible for the crimes of Hamas are held to account in international law. But why is the Secretary of State so reluctant to give a clear, simple "yes" to the question whether the Government will provide any evidence of war crimes to the International Criminal Court? Is it because he has already seen such evidence? Is it because Israel has asked him to promise not to share such evidence? What is the reason?

Grant Shapps: I have already said that the United Kingdom is bound by, and would always observe, international humanitarian law.

Opposition Day

1ST ALLOTTED DAY

Town Centre Safety

1.22 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Government's failure to tackle town centre crime; is concerned that shoplifting has reached record levels, with a 25% rise over the past year and 1,000 offences per day, while the detection rate for shoplifters has fallen; believes that immediate action must be taken to stop the increasing number of unacceptable incidents of violence and abuse faced by shop workers; notes that the number of neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers has been reduced by 10,000 since 2015; and calls on the Government to back Labour's community policing guarantee, which includes scrapping the £200 limit on crown court prosecutions for shoplifting in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, creating a new specific offence of violence against shop workers, rolling out town centre policing plans and putting 13,000 extra police and community support officers back in town centres to crack down on antisocial behaviour.

It is a pleasure to open this debate on a motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Home Secretary, myself and colleagues.

Safety in our town centres is a subject that the public are deeply concerned about. It has a totemic impact on how we feel about where we live; people love their community and hate it when a small number of people are able to wreck it for everyone else. Nevertheless, it is an undervalued aspect of public policy and we are currently being let down by the Government's lack of ideas and lack of interest in tackling this scourge.

Criminal damage in our town centres increased by 30% last year. There were 150 incidents of damage in public places each and every day. Every one of those incidents is another reason for people to stay at home, shop online or not go to the pub, and contributes to a sense that it is just not worth the bother of leaving the house. That is devastating for local bricks-and-mortar businesses, destroys the viability of our town centres, runs down patronage of public transport and creates an inexorable sense of decline.

Those who perpetrate such incidents do it because they think they can get away with it. In this country we now tolerate 90% of crimes going unsolved; last year there were 2 million crimes unsolved. Criminals are now half as likely to be caught as they were under the previous Labour Government. What an extraordinary indictment of 13 years of Tory leadership.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In a rural area such as my constituency, where the town centres are small and spread out, one of the problems the police have is getting from place to place, partly because they have a shortage of basic kit such as police cars. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is not just about community policing, but about resourcing the police with the physical things that they need to get about?

Alex Norris: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It becomes more pressing, as she says, with rural communities, because the thin blue line can feel very thin indeed. It is important that we have the right number of officers and the right kit to meet the needs of the community.

Levels of retail crime, alongside violence and abuse towards shopworkers, have increased substantially in recent years. Figures provided by the British Retail Consortium, the retail trade body, show that retail crime was up by more than a quarter in England and Wales last year. Again, that is terrible for business and creates a public environment that people do not want to be part of—another reason to stay at home.

Similarly, violent and abusive incidents in stores have risen significantly. In aggregate, we are talking a staggering 850 incidents every single day. That is goods being lifted and staff being abused physically, threatened, intimidated or spat at—all those horror stories. This is theft and violence on an epidemic scale, happening across every town centre, every single day.

We have a special duty in this place to stand up for shop workers—yes, because everybody should be able to go to work without fearing violence and abuse; yes, because while we told everyone else to shutter themselves away during the pandemic, they still went out to work so that we had the food and supplies we needed; but particularly because we ask them to restrict the sale of dozens of products that in the wrong hands could be dangerous, such as acid, knives, alcohol and cigarettes. In that moment they are of course working for their employer, but beyond what it might say on their name tag, they are public servants, and we know that that creates potential flashpoints, each decline of sale a possible moment for violence or abuse. The continued lack of action is failing these people.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): May I check something with the shadow Minister? What is the difference between his proposal and that which was enacted under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2023, which upgraded offences against shop workers, who do very brave work indeed, to aggravated offences?

Alex Norris: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for seeking to explain to me my own amendment to that legislation. I promise him that I will get to that point. I will not break that promise; I will explain the difference in detail shortly.

Retailers, unions, representative bodies, staff and management are totally aligned on the need for action—action that I will set out shortly when I detail our alternative, which is expressed in the motion. But first we must address this question: how did we end up here? The blame lies squarely at the door of this Government, following 13 and a half years of making the lives of criminals easier. Take first the disastrous decision to cut 20,000 police officers—a decision so damaging that they have spent the past five years desperately seeking to plug the gap. The loss of each officer from the frontline emboldened those who seek to do down our town centres. Those who cause disruption and crime today learned their skills and gained their confidence in an environment of hollowed-out policing.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a link between the 10,000 cut in the number of neighbourhood officers and police community support officers since 2015 and the increase in shoplifting? Does he also agree that it is irresponsible of the Government to call for citizen's arrests instead of being tough on crime and the causes of crime?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that intervention. The causality is there: the lack of availability of neighbourhood policing has created an environment in which people feel that they can steal without consequence. On citizen's arrest, I share my hon. Friend's view that it is not something that we should be asking people to do. I know that the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire is enthusiastic about it, but is it practical? Take the Co-op, a retailer that is making huge strides to protect its staff. In general, it does not ask its staff to detain shoplifters, but some of its covert teams do. In incidents where they detain someone who has committed or is alleged to have committed a crime, four times in every five, having taken them to the back, they have to let them go again because there is no one to make the arrest. The idea that we can citizen's-arrest our way out of this is for the birds.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pity that the Scottish National party Members are not here, because normally they would waste no opportunity to stand up and say how well they do things in Scotland, and how much better they do them than the rest of the UK. We have six police officers for the whole county of Sutherland, which is 2,028 square miles. I can tell hon. Members that in the biggest conurbations in my constituency, such as Alness, Wick and Thurso, we do not see cops on the beat and old people feel very vulnerable indeed. I know that it is a devolved matter, but I will not waste this opportunity to point out that things are far from right in Scotland, and I wish that the Scottish Government would catch a grip.

Alex Norris: Policing is a reserved matter, as the hon. Gentleman says, but the experience of communities like his is reflected across all our four nations. That is why I said to his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), that we ought to have that staffing kit as well as the equipment in order to try to protect the public.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I represent the Labour and Co-operative party and I have great sympathy for shop workers who are being harassed and attacked, and having a really tough time. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need not only more community police, but far better co-operation with the big supermarkets and their staff, and for them to bring together a whole team to protect both shoppers and those who are serving?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that intervention from my Co-operative party colleague, because I can express our pride that the Co-operative party is spearheading this work in Parliament. I agree that there needs to be work between retailers and staff, but we should take pride in the work that has already gone on between retailers and the unions. They are in lockstep on this, which is not always the case, and that co-operation is a great asset in this fight.

Even when the Government have attempted to reverse the disastrous implications of cutting 20,000 police officers, they have failed, because in adding back officers, they have squeezed out police staff and moored warranted officers away from the frontline, so we are 10,000 neighbourhood police short of the previous

[Alex Norris]

figure, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) said. Each officer is another gap in that thin blue line, allowing criminals to run amok. Half the population say they rarely see police on the beat, a figure that has doubled since 2010.

However, we know that the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire has a cunning plan, which he unveiled last week at Home Office questions. To beef up the number of neighbourhood police, the Government are now going to count response police as neighbourhood police. That is risible nonsense. The clue is in the name: neighbourhood police are out on the streets, in their communities, providing a named presence, and building trust and relationships. The dynamic is different.

Neighbourhood police can be proactive, go to local community projects, get to know people, and build trust and relationships. That is a different dynamic from response police, who might attend a community event, but then a day later be in a situation down the road where they have to put in someone's door or supervise a significant or difficult moment in a community. The relationship with the community is inherently different.

Similarly, response police can be called away at a moment's notice, to the other side of the force area. It is simply not the same and it is deeply worrying that the Government think that it is. It represents a triple failure: officers cut, officers added back in the wrong place and now other types of officers being rebadged. They are failing communities and failing our hard-working police.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend talks about rebadging officers, but our wonderful police community support officers are worth a shout-out. They do day-to-day work and often stay in the job for a long time. When I am on doorsteps in Hackney, the residents often know the name of the local PCSO. Obviously, we need more police, but it would be good to have more PCSOs as well.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend is exactly right and I will come on to our plans for more PCSOs. They provide a neighbourhood link and, as she says, a more sustained connection to a community. They also ensure our police forces are more representative of the communities they serve, so they add an excellent dimension to our policing.

However, policing has not been the only problem. We are still reaping the pain from the catastrophic decision to downgrade thefts of £200 and under in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which has been a godsend to shoplifters. It has created a generation of thieves who think they will not be caught or even investigated. On the back of that, high-volume organised retail crime has been generated, with huge criminal enterprises that we are now asking the police to dismantle—what a dreadful failure of public policy. Even now, when we know the impact that has had, the Government will not match our call to scrap that measure. Instead, Ministers cling to the idea that the police are geared up to follow all reasonable lines of inquiry and that, once again, they can do more with less. Of course they cannot do that. Our officers, police staff and communities deserve better than being set up to fail.

The Government weakened antisocial behaviour powers 10 years ago and brought in new powers that were so useless they are barely used, such as the community trigger. Getting rid of powers of arrest has proved a poor idea, even though they were warned not to do that. Community penalties have halved and there is a backlog of millions of hours of community payback schemes not completed because the Government cannot run the scheme properly. That is before we get to the failures with early intervention, with £1 billion taken out of youth service budgets and the dismantling of drug and alcohol services. The disruption we see in our town centres today stems from a litany of bad decisions taken by those on the Government Benches over the last 13 years. The Government have failed and our communities are paying the price.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The shadow Minister is talking about bad decisions. Does he agree that the Labour police and crime commissioner made a bad decision not to reopen Dinnington police station when he had a £2 million budget underspend a few years ago? He was happy to reopen Edlington police station in Doncaster, but when it came to Rother Valley and Dinnington police station, he said no.

Alex Norris: As the hon. Gentleman knows, those are devolved decisions where that individual has the mandate to make such decisions. His constituents have the right to change the police and crime commissioner at the next election. They also have the chance to change the Member of Parliament at the next election, so we shall wait for those judgments in due course.

Alexander Stafford: I am pleased that he raises the matter of elections, because in July there was a council election in Dinnington, where the police station should be reopened, and the Conservatives increased their share of the vote by over 10%. It is clear that people want the police station to be reopened and they rejected Labour's lack of policing in our area.

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman wishes to express confidence and ease, but I am afraid he is not doing a very good job of it.

There is a better way: where the Government have failed, the Opposition have a plan to wrest back control of our streets. [Interruption.] Government Members might be interested in some of the concepts, including the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who chirps at me despite having asked me a question that I am going to address.

We make a community policing guarantee to our country. It starts with policing back on the beat, with 13,000 more police and police community support officers in neighbourhood teams. With funding based on conservative estimates of available savings identified by the Police Federation, we will restore visible police and PCSOs back on the streets, deterring and detecting crime, and building relationships and confidence.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The shadow Minister will be aware that here in London, the Metropolitan police and Sadiq Khan, the Labour police and crime commissioner, were given significant funding by the Government to increase police numbers, but the

force was the only one in the country not to hit its recruitment target, costing London over 1,000 police officers. How would his plan work here in London, with Sadiq Khan?

Alex Norris: I will not take lectures on police numbers from a member of a party that cut them. As I said to his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), those are devolved matters. As a Government, we will make available the resourcing for 13,000 more police and police and community support officers.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. We want to protect shop workers and stop shoplifting—it would be wrong to say that we did not—but in my constituency, which is similar to that of my hon. Friend, poverty stalks our land. The gap between rich and poor means that the country is the most divided I can remember in my 44 years in Parliament. There are desperate people in our communities. I do not approve of any of them breaking the law, but does my hon. Friend agree that it would be dishonest for any of us to pretend that poverty does not stalk this land?

Alex Norris: I do agree. One of the core missions of a future Labour Government will be to tackle that poverty and give everybody the opportunity to live full, productive and happy lives.

Secondly, on our policing guarantee, we will tackle antisocial behaviour in our town centres head on. In particular, we pledge to introduce new respect orders that will give the police and local communities the right tools to exclude from town centres those who repeatedly disrespect them. They will be a quick, effective tool that tilts the balance back to the vast majority of people who do things the right way.

Thirdly, we will stand up for shopworkers. We will scrap the disastrous £200 downgrade in the 2014 Act and thereby make it clear to thieves that open season is over and to retailers that we value their businesses. In the same vein, we will heed the call from USDAW, from all the major retailers and from all the representative bodies for a new specific offence of assault against a retail worker. As a Labour and Co-operative party Member of Parliament, I am proud to have spearheaded attempts to recognise assault against retail workers as an aggravating factor in sentencing, but we need greater clarity in the law. Having it as a sentencing factor alone does not seem to be acting as a deterrent, so we need a specific offence, as there is in Scotland thanks to the excellent work of Daniel Johnson MSP. That will send a clear signal to those who perpetrate attacks that it is not acceptable, and make it easier for the police to police this scourge.

Fourthly, we want to put communities back into community policing. Too often, people tell us that they feel policing is done to them rather than with them, and that they do not think that local policing priorities necessarily match their own. Much of the problem is about resourcing, given the Government's denuding of police our forces. Our commitment is for town centre planning so that those who live, work, play and trade in our town centres will get to have a say in how they are protected. There will be proper community police plans to reflect the community's priorities, with a named officer to work with as the plans develop.

Fifthly, the final component of our community policing guarantee is that we will restore the value and cachet of community policing. We will ensure that the path to career progression in policing is through officers getting to know their community, and that all neighbourhood officers have the skills and training to be problem solvers as well as recorders of crime. We will also work with the College of Policing and police chiefs to ensure that neighbourhood policing has access to cutting-edge technology and methods, including data analytics and hotspot policing.

That is our community policing guarantee. Taken in its aggregate, it is by far the boldest commitment to keeping our town centres safe that has been made in recent memory. That is the scale of ambition that we ought to see from the Government, but we simply do not.

This is good moment to talk about the Criminal Justice Bill, which is to some degree an attempt to address some of the issues we are debating. We did not oppose it on Second Reading and intend to work constructively in Committee to improve it. There are good things in the legislation—we are glad to see an enhanced focus on fraud; to see the police given powers to address issues that annoy our constituents, such as the search and seizure of stolen items that are GPs tracked; and to see greater flexibility around public spaces protection orders—but is that really it? This is the final year of this parliamentary term and we have a crime Bill that is tougher on homeless people than it is on those who terrorise our town centres. There is nothing on retail crime and nothing on neighbourhood policing. We will look to add measures in Committee, but we should not have to.

The Government can take the first step to addressing the situation by accepting our motion, but I fear that they may well not be minded to do so. I fear that we will hear the same messages we always hear: an attempt to convince the British public that they have never had it so good on policing—record this or record that—or that in some way our proposals will happen soon. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire has not learned from the Home Secretary the lesson about chirping from the Front Bench. I say to him that the British public do not buy those arguments and deserve better. If he genuinely believes that the status quo is better than what is offered by those on the Opposition Benches, let us let the British public decide. Ask them whether they have never had it so good, or are ready for change. I will take my chances with them any day.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the Minister, I remind colleagues that if they want to intervene, they are expected to stay for the entire speech by the person on whom they intervened. I do not want to set a time limit on speeches, but my advice is that after the Minister has finished I suspect there will be about eight minutes per Member.

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris): I am glad to have this opportunity to speak and hope to set the record straight. Forgive me if I do not recognise the counsel of despair

[*Laura Farris*]

emanating from the Opposition Benches. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) invites us to believe that there has been a catalogue of failure and that everything is getting worse, but the facts tell us something different. I do not pretend that everything is perfect—of course we need to protect our town centres and the people who use them, and I will come to all that in a moment—but for all the noise that these debates can generate, we do the public a disservice if we seek to distil everything into a row across the Dispatch Box without sometimes acknowledging the merits of the other side and the meaningful progress they have sometimes made.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): On that conciliatory note, could we all just pay tribute to what the police do, because they are the focus of the debate? They put on the uniform in the morning and say goodbye to their loved ones not knowing how their day is going to turn out. As we argue about where things should go in future, perhaps we can all agree that they do such an important job for our society and that we owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

Laura Farris: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I accept without reservation that there is considerable courage and selflessness in being a first responder whose job and duty is to run towards danger when everybody else is running away from it.

Let me begin with the simplest facts. Since 2010, neighbourhood crime—the crimes that undermine the fabric of communities and make people feel unsafe in their homes and on their local streets—has fallen. The crime survey for England and Wales, which the Office for National Statistics described as

“the best estimate of long-term trends in crimes against the household population”,

shows that since 2010 overall crime levels are down by more than 50%. Violent crimes as a whole, which include crimes that involve any form of offensive weapon, are down by 52%. Theft overall, which includes domestic burglary and the theft of a vehicle—some of the most invasive thefts that go directly to a person’s sense of personal security—has almost halved since we came into office. Domestic burglary currently stands at its lowest ever level.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister accept that the workplace is a personal place for those who work there? The Co-op Group has reported that in the year to date some 300,000 incidents of abuse and violence have taken place in shops up and down the country. Employees who are just there to sell to the public in their community are the victims of abuse and, in some cases, violence, but the police do not even turn up to 76% of reports, so how can people feel safe going to work?

Laura Farris: I will come specifically to shop workers. I have no difference of opinion with the Opposition on the points about the role of shop workers and some of the issues that affect them personally, and I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I will come to that.

There are today more police officers in England and Wales than at any other point in our nation’s history—

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Laura Farris: If I could just finish my sentence, I will of course give way to the hon. Lady. The most recent figures we have are from March 2023, when the figure for police officers in England and Wales was 149,566. It has never been higher. With that, I give way.

Jess Phillips: I wonder whether the Minister can provide the per capita of population figures.

Laura Farris: I do not have that figure, so I will have to write to the hon. Lady.

It is right that decisions about how police resources are deployed, including the number and composition of people in neighbourhood and local policing roles, are for the determination of chief constables, who know their beat better than anyone and are accountable to democratically elected police and crime commissioners. Nevertheless, the numbers have a broader significance, and I want to draw the Opposition’s attention to four points.

First, due to the investment in the police uplift programme, the number of police officers in local policing roles is the highest since comparable data began to be collected, with an increase of 6.5% in the 12 months to 31 March. We have more female officers and more officers from minority ethnic backgrounds than ever before—something that I hope the hon. Member for Nottingham North will agree is consistent with some of the conclusions that were certainly implied, if not made explicit, on the nature of representation in Baroness Casey’s report into conduct in the Metropolitan police.

We have more officers receiving specialist training for specific categories of crime. I will give the House one example, because yesterday I visited Avon and Somerset Police, the pioneering force conducting Operation Soteria Bluestone in the investigation of rape. They made it perfectly clear to me that the increase in numbers that they have seen locally has facilitated a huge increase in the number of specialist trained rape and serious sexual offences police officers. In fact, there are 2,000 nationwide. I noted that the hon. Gentleman said that we were setting the police up to fail. That could not be more different from the information that that force gave me yesterday—and if they are incorrect, I would appreciate it if he would explain why when he closes.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I put on record my support for the police, particularly Thames Valley Police—like the Minister, I represent a constituency in Berkshire. Can she update the House on the proportion of new officers who are still in training? It seems to be a very serious issue in Reading and the surrounding areas that, while officers have been recruited, they are still in training, as opposed to the fully trained and experienced officers who were lost through austerity.

Laura Farris: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question, and I will have to get back to him on that. I know that the number in my part of the Thames Valley is quite low, but that may not extend to Reading. He deserves an answer on that, and I will get one to him.

The Government have also ensured that the police have the resources they need. This year they received record funding of above £17.2 billion. That is an extra

£550 million for frontline policing compared with last year. I gently remind those on the Opposition Benches that they voted against our police funding settlements every single year between 2016 and 2019.

I want to draw our attention down to community level and make a few observations. We have had a commitment from the National Police Chiefs' Council—it was announced in August, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North will recall—that the police will follow up on all reasonable lines of inquiry and that there is no offence too small. That commitment is intended to offer huge reassurance to the public. It was also this Government who introduced the safer streets fund, which has been in receipt of £120 million already, for 270 projects covering all 43 police forces in England and Wales, and which is complemented by the StreetSafe app.

All that kind of thing can seem quite microscopic, as though it only affects individual streets or individual parks, reporting a broken light or a dark and dangerous corner of a popular area for jogging. The point is that people can report the area and action will be taken, and all that contributes to improving the fabric of communities up and down the United Kingdom.

I want to spend a moment on retail crime, which I will deal with in two parts: first I will cover shoplifting itself, and then I will move on to assault on retail workers. I take issue, very respectfully, with the suggestion that somehow the Government are being complacent in shoplifting. The Government are clear that we expect the police to take a zero-tolerance approach to shoplifting and violence towards shop workers. I want to disabuse anyone of the notion that somehow we have decriminalised shoplifting offences below £200.

I gently draw the shadow Minister's attention to the following. In 2020, the National Business Crime Centre surveyed police forces in England and Wales, asking whether they had a policy of not responding to shoplifting if the goods were worth less than £200. Not one force in England and Wales said that it had such a policy. He will know as well as I do that the National Police Chiefs' Council recently produced a retail crime action plan, which included a commitment to prioritise police attendance at the scene where violence had been used against shop staff.

Jim McMahon: I accept the explanation that it is not a written policy, but how does the Minister explain that in 76% of the 300,000 sample cases, the police did not turn up?

Laura Farris: It is difficult for me to identify every single complaint and whether somebody has attended, but one thing I think is relevant is that the increase in shoplifting that we have regrettably seen over the past 12 months has been met by a corresponding and equivalent increase in the volume of charges for shoplifting offences. Charges are up by 29% in the past 12 months. I gently draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to that.

I want to talk specifically about offences against retail workers. I invite the hon. Member for Nottingham North to answer this point when he closes—it is not put in an aggressive way, because I recognise the role that retail workers perform and it is completely unacceptable that they should be subject to violence in the line of their duties, but it is already unlawful to commit an act of assault. It is criminalised under the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and the Offences against the Person Act 1861.

The hon. Gentleman knows, because we have already had this discussion, that there is a statutory obligation to treat the fact that an individual is a retail worker as an aggravating factor. He has identified the fact that the trade unions support a new law, but I say very respectfully that the judges do not, the Crown Prosecution Service does not and the police forces I have spoken to do not. The practitioners in this area of the law do not support a new law. Even though he has made that point, he has not identified any case where he considers there to have been a miscarriage of justice because the laws were not sufficient to offer protection. It is not enough simply to assert that we need new laws without setting out clearly why the existing statutory protection does not succeed.

Let me now turn to the issue of antisocial behaviour—it is not minor or trivial, and I make no bones about that. It is probably the principal crime that all MPs hear about, irrespective of the constituencies we represent. I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have taken a range of legislative and non-legislative action. A new antisocial behaviour action plan was introduced earlier this year, backed by £160 million of funding to ensure that our commitments have real teeth. He will be aware of the hotspot patrolling pilot that has been conducted across 10 police forces and is about to be rolled out on a national basis because of its success.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister for the £2.4 million given to South Yorkshire Police for antisocial behaviour hotspots, including in Maltby and Dinnington, areas in my constituency that are plagued by antisocial behaviour. When I met the police and the police and crime commissioner, they said that that money is making a real difference to getting boots on the ground and on patrols. I thank the Minister for the extra funds to clamp down on antisocial behaviour in Rother Valley.

Laura Farris: It is very heartening to hear that those funds are making a real difference in my hon. Friend's constituency.

I also draw the shadow Minister's attention to some of the new teeth, if I may call them that, in the Criminal Justice Bill. He will be aware that we have lowered the minimum age at which a community protection notice can be ordered to 10 years old. That is not just to achieve consistency with other aspects of criminal justice, but because we recognise that in reality quite a lot of antisocial behaviour is committed by those in the age 10 to 16 bracket. That is a common complaint that many in this House will be familiar with.

We have extended police powers to implement a public spaces protection order. I mention that simply because I could not differentiate between that and the respect order that the hon. Gentleman was describing, but it gives the police greater powers for a rapid response. We have also expanded the minimum exclusion period by 50%, from 48 hours to 72 hours, to give authorities more powers to implement dispersal arrangements.

Moving on to our Criminal Justice Bill, I think I noted the shadow Minister's qualified agreement with at least some of its contents, and certainly those on the Opposition Benches did not vote against it on Second Reading. We respectfully say that the Bill takes the fight to the criminals, introducing new powers to enter premises and seize stolen goods—the example given repeatedly

[Laura Farris]

during the debate was of stolen mobile phones, the everyday theft that people endure. It contains new powers on knife crime to seize, retain and destroy a bladed article found on private property, without evidence that it has been used in conjunction with a criminal offence, but where there is a reasonable belief that it may be, and new laws on possession of a knife with intent.

I would add one or two other measures that are just as important to community safety. This Bill, for the first time, recognises coercive control as the cancer of a crime that it is, by putting those convicted of a serious offence in that regard under the multi-agency public protection arrangements and then putting them on the violent and sex offender register.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North was critical of the Criminal Justice Bill, but he neglected to say anything about the Sentencing Bill, which has its Second Reading tomorrow. That Bill will put some of the worst offenders away for longer, so some of the men who maraud on our streets to carry out the most grotesque offences against women—we all know their names—can anticipate a whole-life order without the possibility of parole, even if theirs was a one-off offence. Rapists, who under the last Labour Government served just 50% of their sentence behind bars under section 44 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, can now look forward to spending the entirety of their sentence in custody without the possibility of parole.

Mr Sheerman: I am not sure that I like the language of “taking the fight to the criminals.” The fact of the matter is that we want to deal with criminals in the right way. If only the Minister would look at the injustices of joint enterprise, under which almost 1,000 young people are in prison with long sentences for crimes in which they did not actually physically take the fight to anyone.

Laura Farris: The hon. Gentleman has been a compassionate campaigner on the issue of joint enterprise, and I have listened to him a lot over the years. I know that the matter was considered by the Court of Appeal, and its decision was not consistent with some of his remarks, but that conversation should be continued because it is a developing area of the law.

I will conclude with a quotation from a non-political figure. His Majesty’s chief inspector of constabulary, Andy Cooke, said recently:

“England and Wales are arguably safer than they have ever been.”

I make no apology for ending where I began: neighbourhood crime has fallen by 50% since 2010, and I am proud of that. Of course, we can go further, and we are building and developing police powers, new laws and community measures so that we can get there, protecting the law-abiding majority and cherishing the town centres in our communities by keeping them safe.

2.1 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I hope that anyone who has visited Halifax recently would agree that, despite the years of austerity and the challenges typically facing northern Pennine towns, we are doing pretty well—thanks largely and in no small part to good decisions taken by our ambitious Labour council.

It is a particularly busy time of year. With the Christmas markets, the festive event season at the magnificent Piece Hall, and the cultural and independent retail offer at Dean Clough mill, we have a lot to be very proud of stretching right across the town. However, as in almost all town centres and the communities beyond, staying on top of antisocial behaviour and criminality is an ongoing challenge. We are the home of “Happy Valley”, but despite all our pride for the stunning backdrop that wraps around that gripping drama, we need to grapple with some of the darker realities that have inspired the show.

Research undertaken by Tom Scargill at the *Halifax Courier* shone a spotlight on exactly that. The *Courier* found that between August 2020 and September of this year, 355 people have been arrested for knife-related crimes in Calderdale, including two arrests for murder in August 2021, and five arrests for attempted murder. Offenders ranged from children as young as 12 to adult males in their 70s. Alongside harrowing incidents of sexual crime, there were 71 arrests for threats to kill, and 107 arrests for assault with injury involving knives. Those statistics are shocking, but behind every number is the harrowing experience of a victim.

Those statistics were published prior to the devastating events in the early hours of 2 October, when a triple stabbing in Halifax town centre claimed the lives of two young men aged just 19 and 21. The senseless tragedy sent shockwaves across the town, and our thoughts and condolences continue to be with the families and friends of those two young men who never came home from their night out. The tragedy occurred after a night out in Halifax’s thriving night-time economy. Knives should not be on our streets at any time of day, and the Government must strain every sinew to reverse that shameful trend.

I pay tribute to Pubwatch chair Martin Norris and vice-chair Simon Woodcock, who work incredibly hard to bring partners together to ensure that Halifax is a safe night out for everyone. However, they need help and support from the police, Calderdale Council and wider partners to embed best practice, responsible management and behaviours into the night-time economy, to the benefit of revellers and the wider community. I commend them for their efforts.

When I spend time knocking on doors and speaking to town centre businesses, people’s fear and experiences of crime feel more real than ever. Reports of drug dealing, antisocial behaviour and speeding in busy pedestrian areas come up on almost every street. I pay tribute to our local police officers, particularly our neighbourhood policing team, which is so ably led by Inspector Jim Graham. They are on the frontline of efforts to ensure that our town centres and wider neighbourhoods are safe and welcoming places. However, there are still 10,000 fewer neighbourhood police than in 2015, and teams are almost always carrying significant numbers of vacancies.

We will not improve safety in towns or across communities without looking after police officers themselves. The Police Federation of England and Wales has just launched its annual pay and morale survey for 2023. Last year’s survey revealed that 95% of the nearly 37,000 officers who responded said that their treatment by the Government had harmed their morale, while 87% said the same about their pay, so

although there has been a great deal of consensus in the Chamber about paying tribute to police officers for the great work that they do in our communities, it is incredibly important that we establish a consensus on that point as well. The survey found that nine in 10 police officers feel that they are worse off financially than five years ago, and that nearly one in five officers plans on handing in their resignation as soon as possible, or within the next two years, because of reasons that include unfair pay.

Independent research carried out by the Social Market Foundation last year revealed that police officers' pay had declined by 17% in real terms, making the police an outlier among protective services workers, public sector workers and all workers, who, over the same period, have had real-terms pay rises of 1%, 14% and 5% respectively. What it is about police officers, who have no industrial rights, that has made them such an easy target for attacks on their pay in recent years?

Hon. Members might remember that I started the Protect the Protectors campaign back in 2016 after I had been forced to call 999 from a police car to call for back up for the single-crewed police officer I was shadowing when a routine vehicle stop suddenly turned very nasty. The Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 was passed thanks to an outstanding campaign by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). Although that legislation has not delivered the societal change of eradicating assaults on emergency service workers, as we had hoped, it did send out a strong message that that was not acceptable and would not be tolerated.

That legislation recognised the somewhat unique responsibilities of emergency service workers, who we ask to run towards danger on our behalf, but it is incredibly depressing that we now have to consider as a matter of urgency what further protections should be made available to retail workers. The results of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers "Freedom from Fear" survey of 2022 are shocking. They revealed that three quarters of retail workers have experienced verbal abuse, half had been threatened by a customer, and 8% had been assaulted. The survey revealed that nearly a third were considering changing their job, and more than four in 10 felt anxious about work, all because of high levels of abuse, threats and violence.

That comes as shoplifting has reached record levels—up 20% in West Yorkshire and 25% across England and Wales over the past year—with the number of offences reaching 1,000 per day, which paints a particularly depressing picture of what retail workers, store managers and business owners have to deal with. Despite that, the detection rate of shoplifters has actually fallen, as set out in Labour's motion. I heard what the Minister said, but surely the Government's decision in 2014 to bring in legislation to downgrade enforcement when the value of stolen goods is below £200 has had a detrimental impact on detection rates and completely diminished justice for shopkeepers who face brazen thefts from their stores. I hope that the Minister will be explicit about how that failure will be addressed.

The police and their partners work hard to keep our town centres safe, but it feels increasingly as if they are fighting a losing battle. Far from being tough on crime and the causes of crime, it feels like the past 13 years have been tough on policing, tough on the criminal justice

system, and devastating for youth services. We need to rebuild those services if we are to start to reverse the ugly trends in our town centres and our communities. We need a Labour Government.

2.9 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I know that in an Opposition day debate, it is customary for the Opposition to have a pop at the Government and for the Government to have a pop at the Opposition. However, on a serious note, even if I do not agree with some of the points that the Opposition are making and the conclusions they are drawing, the theme they have raised this afternoon is important. It is important that we debate it and discuss the work that has gone on. I will focus on three points: the high street generally, shops in particular, and the legislative framework that we are working under.

This subject is important, because economically, our high streets have had a difficult time recently, and it is important that we do what we can to get them to thrive. Covid has had an effect on many shops nationally, and the growth in online shopping has perhaps made our high streets not as attractive as they were in the past. We need to make sure that our high streets are an attractive place to shop. We have been celebrating Small Business Saturday recently; in that context, where crime and antisocial behaviour is a problem, it acts as a deterrent to shopping on the high street. We need to take that seriously and deal with it. In 2019, I stood on a manifesto that promised to recruit 20,000 extra police officers, and I am very pleased that that target has been smashed, with 418 extra officers in Nottinghamshire. Among other things, that has enabled us to have higher-profile local policing on the back of the cuts in neighbourhood crime, which, as has been set out, is down 51% since 2010.

To contextualise this matter, and on a personal note, I would like to thank Mark Stanley, my local neighbourhood policing inspector in Gedling, for his work. Faced with a particular problem with antisocial behaviour in Arnold in my constituency, the police did a lot of proactive work locally to put on more patrols and create a visible presence in the town centre. That is starting to have an effect; the extra resources that are now available have helped us to have proactive, intelligence-led policing. There is much more work to be done in Arnold and elsewhere, but we have made a good start.

Turning to shops in particular, retail is in focus as we approach Christmas, and the issues affecting retail workers have been much in the news, but they are a year-round issue. I agree with the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) that the work of the Co-op—the shop, not the Co-operative party—has been helpful in raising the profile of incidents that have been affecting its staff. I have found the information it has supplied me with about Co-ops in my constituency very helpful; I am thinking in particular of the one on Coppice Road in Arnold, which I shopped at very regularly when I lived nearby. The Co-op has given very graphic explanations of some of the issues its staff have been facing, and I have had an opportunity to speak to staff there as well.

In that context, I welcome the launch of the Government's retail crime action plan and the commitment to urgently attend scenes of shoplifting involving violence,

[Tom Randall]

where security guards have detained an offender, or where assistance is needed to secure evidence. I also welcome the introduction of the new specialist police team Pegasus to create a comprehensive intelligence picture of the organised crime gangs that are behind many shoplifting incidents, and locally, I welcome the fact that part of the £750,000 safer streets fund has been awarded to Netherfield and Colwick in my constituency. That will enable us to bring forward a whole raft of measures to cut crime, including CCTV, safer streets wardens, better street lighting, a burglary reduction officer and a Shopwatch radio scheme. Victoria retail park in Netherfield has been particularly affected by crime, and I hope that when these measures are introduced, they will target the specific issues that that area faces. I welcome the investment in that community.

In this debate, we have considered aspects of the legislative framework that underpins this issue. As legislators, we have two things that we can do: we can scrutinise those who have power, and we can make and repeal laws. If we feel strongly about a subject, there is a strong temptation to create new laws to try to deal with it. That is a very natural human reaction—as legislators, there are only so many levers that we can pull—but I would be reluctant to follow all of the recommendations in the motion. There is well-established legislation, from the Offences against the Person Act 1861 through to the Theft Act 1968 and beyond, that deals with these issues. If person A attacks or threatens person B, that is a bad thing in itself; we do not need to create extra offences to deal with it. What we have is sufficient, and there is danger in creating new offences.

To summarise, I am pleased with the great investment in dealing with crime, the extra police officers on our streets in Gedling and the extra measures that are being introduced, but there is obviously much more to be done. I look forward to the legislation that will come before the House shortly.

2.15 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The reason why we are all in the Chamber for this debate is that we understand the importance and significance of our town centres and high streets. They are our community, they are our economy, and in large part they are the heritage of our place—that is why we hold them so dear. Every town centre is different, unique in its character; even within constituencies, we recognise that. I see it myself in Oldham, Chadderton and Royton: each has its own identity, its own place in history, and its own role in the community.

Over the past decade or more, though, we have not just seen the usual changes that take place over a lifetime. Town centres have always had to change: they had to change when the rise of the shopping centre changed the traditional long high street, when the retail parks opened and when online retail took off. They have always adapted and changed, but now it feels like a combination of factors are undermining the potential of our town centres to thrive and have a place in the future, and some of them come at the direct behest of the Government. If we accept that our town centres are important for our community, our economy and our heritage, those are the things that will be affected if we do not take action.

Let us list some of the changes that will be familiar to every single community—almost nowhere in the country is protected from these changes. Banks, including banks that were bailed out by the taxpayer and are owned by the state, are closing high street branches. In the past 10 years, nearly 8,000 branches have closed, which of course affects local jobs, but also reduces the footfall in town centres and high streets. In some cases, if people cannot go to the bank, they do not have a reason to go into town at lunchtime. There are some exceptions—Nationwide, a mutual, has made a commitment to ensure that its branch network is maintained—but we do not see the same commitment from many high street operators. That is undermining our town centres.

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very important and valuable point. The development of banking hubs in some towns, such as in Stone following the loss of Lloyds bank, will have a big impact. Does he agree that banking hubs should be rolled out across many more towns in his constituency and mine?

Jim McMahon: I do agree with that—in fact, it is Labour party policy to create those banking hubs—but we should not have got into this position to begin with. It should have been required by law that the last bank in town has a community responsibility. There is not a single bank in Royton or Chadderton district centre; we would have to build a hub from scratch, because when the Lloyds and Halifax closed in the respective towns, the Government took no action to say, “Hang on. We have already lost five, six or seven banks. We need to make sure at least one remains, so that there is consumer choice.” There will be a lot of making-up to do when the election comes; it will be done, but I am afraid we will be starting from a very low point. However, I accept the right hon. Gentleman’s generous point about the importance of those banks.

We have had 9,000 shops close in the last decade, affecting 125,000 jobs in their communities: 41% of those were clothing shops, 19% sold household goods and 10% were convenience stores. Thinking about convenience stores, whether it be the local Co-op, Tesco Express or Morrisons, where will the cash machine be after the bank closes? The bank closes, the post office closes and the convenience store closes, and there is no cash machine for people to take out money from the bank, leading to financial isolation in many places.

Pubs are the beating heart or the anchor of many communities, and the place where people can get together to tackle loneliness and isolation. Particularly in industrial towns such as mine, the buildings of significance on the high street—where the heritage is really brought out and we get the character of the place—are the church, the pub and the town hall. In many places, those big assets are under threat. Some 13,600 pubs have closed in the last 10 years—the numbers are down 22%.

If we look at the public sector, in my town of Oldham—a town of a quarter of a million people—thousands of jobs are being taken away from the town centre. Those are people who do not go out to lunch to buy a sandwich and do not support local retail. More than that, it removes a sense of identity and of belonging in a place, and it has an impact on how safe people feel there. The Government have not just closed our county

court and our magistrates court, but caused the closure of so many police stations that there is not a single custody cell in our town. Even if somebody was arrested for violence against a shop worker, they would be taken out of town to be processed. The chief superintendent in my town says that that has a material impact on the decisions officers take about arrests being made and people being taken to custody, because they cannot afford to take a whole day out from the frontline on the beat for that. It is having a material impact.

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend talks about the time that takes up for police officers. I was sat recently with my ill father for 24 hours in A&E—not just a TV programme—and I noticed that there were three shift changes of police officers to sit with somebody who was also waiting for 24 hours in A&E, so the crushing of public services elsewhere is detrimental for our police forces.

Jim McMahon: We do see that, as I will come on to say a bit later. In Oldham town centre, we have a lot of conversions from offices, pubs and retail to houses in multiple occupation. A lot of complaints are caused by that concentration of high-demand social problems, but there is not the back support that used to be there for drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and on-street offences. In the end, the police are the only number people call because they are the only ones who might turn out. The point about attendance at A&E is absolutely right. In many places, the police are not just upholding the law, but trying to keep society together because all else has given way.

We see these problems much more broadly, even beyond the public sector and in local government. Our HMRC office has closed and the Department for Work and Pensions office has closed, taking hundreds or thousands of staff away from the town centre. We are also seeing cuts to arts and culture: local theatres have closed and local community organisations have withdrawn services away from towns.

More than that, in the face of such decline, local authorities have been disempowered in dealing with what follows. We have seen offices that used to provide footfall and jobs for the local community being converted, with no consideration of the capacity and infrastructure of the local community, to substandard accommodation—we call them guinea pig hutches because they are so small, and they do not provide the right living standards—or to HMOs in which people have shared accommodation. The Government's housing benefit changes in relation to financial provision for under-21s are adding to that social problem. The market has been completely changed, so when we walk down a high street, what used to be a pub, a bank or a shop is completely blank. We can walk from door to door without seeing a single shopfront because they have been converted to that type of residential use, with all the issues that brings.

Another issue is ownership. The Government could bring in a register of beneficial ownership so that we know who owns our high streets. The trouble many local authorities have is that a building can be empty and boarded up for decades or generations, attracting antisocial behaviour, but they are not able to take any action because they cannot find out who the owner is. If the owner is registered at that address, but they are not

there, how on earth does the local authority find out who owns it? Many owners are offshore or around the world. The Government could make that change, but they choose not to do so.

On taxation, how odd is it that with business rates, someone is taxed before they can take a penny through the till? They are taxed to open the shop door. They can take not a single penny through the till during a trading day, and they will pay to exist. There is no other form of taxation that charges people to exist; it is usually charged on the income they receive or the profits they make. That is not the case with business rates, and that is having a material impact on the survival of shops.

On transport and accessibility, how many bus routes have been cut so people cannot get into town? Especially in rural and coastal communities where the service is not as frequent, when it gets cut, how on earth do people get anywhere near their town centre?

On crime and antisocial behaviour, many MPs in the Chamber will have attended their local high street and town centre for Small Business Saturday, when we of course celebrate independent retailers, and they will have heard the same story that I have heard from Maggie Hughes, who owns a clothing shop called Zutti in Oldham. It is a staple of our community: it has been there for 40 years, and everybody knows and loves Maggie and the staff who work there. She is also the vice-chair of the town centre board. She said that she is fearful for the street and the way it is declining, because of antisocial behaviour and crime. For the first time ever, I had to wait to be buzzed in before I went through the door because, for her own safety and that of the shop workers, she has had to put a security lock on the door. That is not right.

It is not right that people go to work fearful for themselves and for their staff, let alone for their stock. Most retailers accept that, to a degree, they are going to get some marginal loss of stock, as they call it. However, they do not at all accept that the staff who are there to work—by the way, many of the employees in retail jobs in town centres are female—are vulnerable not just to theft, but to people turning violent if they are challenged. Even more than that, if when they are challenged they are detained, staff can call the police, but the police do not even turn up in the majority of cases.

We can see how all this is adding to the perfect storm, which is why the Co-operative party, USDAW, the Labour party and Co-operative Retail Services are demanding a change in the law to protect shop workers. It is not enough for this to be an aggravating factor; it has to be a stand-alone offence. This Parliament makes laws that we expect shop workers to uphold—on cigarette sales, on alcohol, on knives, on fireworks—and they deserve the protection of this Parliament in protecting our communities, so no more words; let us see action on that front.

2.26 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I commend this debate. When it comes to safety in town centres, my constituency of Northampton North has seen knife crime, and it has had a very painful impact. We all want safety in our town centres, and at the moment that is particularly true of the Jewish community, who have been subject to numerous antisemitic incidents in the last few weeks.

[Sir Michael Ellis]

I would like to tell the House about a shocking example. I can relate this to an incident way back in 1963—60 years ago—in Bristol, when a boycott of the buses was organised by the people of Bristol because black people were barred, believe it or not, from working as crew on the Bristol Omnibus Company's buses. Nowadays, the Bristol bus boycott of 1963 is rightly celebrated—I can see that Opposition Members know about it. It is celebrated as a reason for the racial discrimination laws that were passed later in the 1960s.

I mention that case because something similar is happening today, and over the last few days. That was 60 years ago, but in 2023 there is another heinous prejudice on the buses—this time on the London buses. *The Independent* newspaper today is among many reporting that Jewish children in north London are experiencing buses deliberately failing to stop to pick them up at bus stops. Several incidents are being investigated by the police, and the Metropolitan police have tweeted about this or spoken about it today.

In one incident, several Jewish schoolboys were waiting at Egerton Road bus stop in Stamford Hill and signalled for a bus to stop. The driver slowed down, but then continued without stopping. It is claimed that several passengers were encouraging the driver's actions, making antisemitic remarks and thanking the driver for not stopping. Three days later, a similar incident occurred. A 13-year-old Jewish girl was on the bus, and she reported that the driver slowed down, but did not stop for Jewish schoolboys who were waiting to be picked up. This was early in the morning on their way to school. At the next stop, the driver did stop, proving therefore that it had been done for prejudiced reasons. That is a live example, 60 years on from the horrific boycott in Bristol—the boycott was a good thing, of course, but the reason for it was prejudice.

The Community Security Trust is a charity that I know is strongly supported by both the Conservative and Labour parties. I have been to its events, I am proud to say, and I have seen Labour leaders there for years, as well as Conservative leaders. It is an excellent charity and is strongly supported by all. It has reported the following incidents in the past few days: a young girl shouted out of a passing car, "dirty effing Jews" at a Jewish person walking past; a Jewish boy was at a bus stop and a group of youths shouted,

"let's see you run Jew boy",

and then chased him; at a London train station, a man approached a Jewish girl and said,

"I hope you and all your people die in the war."

A Jewish organisation that works in holocaust education received a message via its website saying:

"Nazi Israel, which has nuclear weapons, must all surrender and be arrested to stand trial. White-hat hackers blast these Nazis."

In Manchester, two men were walking towards a woman wearing a star of David, shouting, "Gas, gas." In Essex a woman was woken up by banging on her front door, and a group of men shouting "get out bloody Jews." In London, a woman said to a visibly Jewish man:

"Oh you are everywhere, just like the rest."

On a bus in Brighton, a man repeatedly called a woman an "evil Jew". A woman at a pro-Palestinian protest in Glasgow was holding a sign saying, "one holocaust does not justify another."

A rabbi in the west midlands received a phone call saying—I will not use offensive words—"I wiped myself on your Torah." A woman shouted:

"You effing Jews think you own the world"

at a passer-by in London. A Jewish boy was getting changed at school when two other students shouted, "you're bombing Gaza." Those are just a few examples from the past few weeks.

In the 54 days between the Hamas attacks and last Wednesday, CST recorded at least 1,747 antisemitic incidents across the United Kingdom, which is the highest ever total reported to CST across a 54-day period since it was established 40 years ago in 1984. Right now, in the last few minutes, in the Regent's Park area of London an incident has been occurring. I have been told of large numbers of police attending Regent's Park because of an incident to do with a banner that has been placed on a building which says, "globalise the intifada."

When it comes to safety in town centres, it is crucial that safety applies to all. I would want to stand and defend any ethnic group or any person of any faith if they were subject to those sorts of attacks. I know people on the left and on the right who have spent their careers doing that. They are proud of doing so, and have done so for generations. We now see members of a very small community—a Jewish community which amounts to less than 0.5% of the total population of this country; only about 250,000 people in a population of 70 million—who are subject to the sort of abuse that frankly would not have been seen since the days of the Ku Klux Klan in America, and probably would have been the subject of disgust 70 or 80 years ago in this country. It certainly would have been at the time of the battle of Cable Street.

When it comes to safety for all, now is an opportunity for those who are not of the Jewish faith to support those who are. I commend Labour for holding this debate. I know that this issue goes across party political divides; this is not a party political point at all. That gives me comfort, because I know that all those of good faith in this country of any religion, and of none, and people of all ages, ethnicities, colours and social backgrounds, would know that the sort of examples I have been giving to the House today are abhorrent and a disgrace to this country. I must demand that the police, the Mayor of London, and everyone else in authority, including those responsible for Transport for London, immediately take action to deal with the examples I have given. This is becoming an emergency situation and the offenders must be caught. People who are driving buses and behaving in such a fashion should not only be dismissed for gross misconduct, but should attract serious criminal charges.

2.35 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am sorry, in many respects, to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) and to hear the horrifying examples of antisemitism and racism that have surfaced on our streets. I absolutely agree that this is not a party political

matter; it is one on which we in this House stand united, and we agree with the action he calls for. There is very much solidarity with all those in our country who face such abhorrent and unacceptable abuse.

What is a party political matter, however, is the current Government's record on crime and policing, which is something we want to address as part of this debate. We know the challenges faced in our communities and on our streets, and businesses and individuals who work in those businesses are paying the price for a decline in the effectiveness of our policing, and collapsing confidence in it. That is the message that Government will hopefully get during this debate.

This weekend was Small Business Saturday—other colleagues have mentioned that—and like many, I spent Saturday morning visiting and speaking to businesses in my local area on Gosforth High Street. Those businesses are the beating heart of our communities. We treasure them more than ever, particularly after covid and the inability to go to the shops and the challenges around that. It is heart-warming to visit local independent businesses and, happily for those where I was on Saturday, to see them thriving, despite rising cost pressures, rising bills, and ever increasing competition from online sources. There was a lovely, thriving atmosphere in Gosforth at the weekend.

However, that does not change the reality for so many businesses which are facing a shocking increase in shoplifting. Across Northumbria last year there was a staggering 44% increase in shoplifting. That is horrendous, and with the £200 limit on Crown court prosecutions for shoplifting and antisocial behaviour, it is a real hammer blow for businesses that seem to be being told that they have to accept such behaviour as part of running their business. Many are paying for additional security just to run their businesses, and that is damaging not only to the businesses themselves, but to shop workers and those in the community who do not always have the confidence to go shopping in their local area. Retail crime is a real blight, and it is having profound financial and societal costs. That is why I support USDAW's Freedom from Fear campaign. It is important to raise awareness of this issue and ensure that, in the hustle and bustle of Christmas shopping, we always treat shop workers with the respect that they deserve.

Some of the figures are horrifying. Seven out of 10 retail workers have been abused in the past 12 months, 49% have been threatened with physical violence, and 8% have been physically assaulted. The situation is real and a concern. Indeed, 88 major retail bosses felt compelled to contact the Government to demand action, because the reality of rising concern in our shops is happening on this Government's watch. I hope the Minister is taking note of those concerns today.

I know that Northumbria's police and crime commissioner Kim McGuinness is very focused on supporting Northumbria's limited resources to identify repeat offenders and tackle this issue, but alongside that we have disproportionate cuts in funding to Northumbria's police budgets, and current legislation is holding back action that could and should be taken against people who are shoplifting and causing disturbances in shops.

The Government's approach to police funding has left the country with 10,000 fewer neighbourhood police and PCSOs since 2010. The Government congratulate themselves on putting an uplift back in place, but

Northumbria police remains 427 officers short compared with pre-2010 levels. Those officers could be combating these issues and making communities feel safe and be safer, which is what we need to see. The hollowing out of neighbourhood policing has allowed antisocial behaviour to blight certain parts and communities, preventing people from shopping locally and driving people back into their homes or back to shopping online, when we know that we need to support these shops and make sure that people feel confident to go out shopping.

Newcastle has a world-renowned vibrant nightlife, which we want to see not just in the city centre, but in places such as Gosforth High Street and Osborne Road. People love to go out and eat in the bars and restaurants and socialise. We know that times are tough and people in my region are increasingly challenged financially, but the last thing we need is for people to feel a safety challenge in addition. We need our policing to be adequately resourced not just to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, but to make sure that people feel safe to go out and be part of our community and of the vibrant nightlife and shopping experience that we should have in Newcastle. Sadly, though, we have seen a decline and a collapse in confidence.

We have shoplifting at record levels, with a thousand offences a day, 90% of crimes going unsolved, victims feeling completely let down and less neighbourhood policing compared with 2015. Although this Government have failed to tackle that, we know that there is another way. Personally, I think we just need a change of Government to rebuild that confidence and focus, to be tough on those who blight our towns and to put confidence back into the economy and our communities so that people can get out there and be part of the vibrant communities that we are all here to represent. That needs a Labour Government. We need one as soon as this Government will allow Parliament to call a general election.

2.42 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am grateful to the Opposition for calling this debate, because it spans the interests of every party, although apparently not the Liberal Democrats or the Scottish National party. For those who are taking part in this debate, keeping our town centres safe is enormously important. That includes all sorts of concerns, stretching from public disorder not only to more serious violence on the streets and low-grade antisocial behaviour, which can be an absolute scourge in our communities, but—this is particularly important for this debate—to shoplifting and violence associated with it.

That takes me to the meat of the motion that Labour has put forward for our consideration today. Its primary suggestion is that we need a new offence to deal specifically with violence against shopworkers. Presumably the argument behind that is that the offence against shopworkers is so different from other workers or other people on the high street that the tariff associated with that offence will be in some way different.

I listened carefully to what the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said in his opening remarks, but it left me confused, because as he is well aware, we already have section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which deals specifically with assaults on those providing a

[Jerome Mayhew]

public service. I think it is common ground among us all that that includes shopworkers. Under the terms of section 156, which I will not read out—I will spare the House that—an assault against a shopworker is considered an aggravating factor. That leads us to the tariff.

Labour's position appears to be—I would welcome further clarification on this, perhaps in the wind-ups—that there is something so peculiar about a shopworker receiving violence that the aggravating factors cannot be taken into account adequately under section 156. I do not understand what aggravating factors cannot be associated with the section 156 consideration. Surely the best person to decide the correct tariff is always the judiciary. That is the judge, who has all the evidence in front of them, assisted by legislation that clarifies in their mind what is and is not an aggravating factor according to the views of Parliament, and assisted by the sentencing guidelines. That is the right forum to decide the tariff for this kind of offence.

If we start going down to individual offences, so that we have a specific offence for shop workers, what about bus drivers? They are public servants who are exposed to the public. It is clearly outrageous when bus drivers are assaulted by the public in the course of their duties, which they are. What about that offence is less serious and requires a different tariff from those of shop workers? That is the logic of this motion from Labour. My concern is that by going for an eye-catching initiative—my suspicion is that this motion has been tabled to get a headline—Labour is doing an enormous disservice to the criminal justice system, when we need to empower our courts to assess the gravity of offences and let the judiciary, assisted by the sentencing guidelines, come to the right tariff.

I note in passing that Labour voted against Third Reading of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. In my submission, we already have sensible legislation that deals with aggravating features for people serving the public, which those on the Government Benches voted for and Labour voted against. It begs the question: why was the measure so bad then and why is it so good now?

The second part of Labour's plan is the roll-out of something called a town centre policing plan. Perhaps Opposition Members failed to notice that on 23 October, the Government launched their own retail crime action plan. There are striking similarities, because our plan changes the priorities of the police and requires them to prioritise attendance at shoplifting, particularly shoplifting with violence, shoplifting where a suspect has been detained and shoplifting where it is necessary for the police to attend to secure evidence. Those are exactly the kind of things that we want the police to attend, to reinforce the public's faith in the argument that every crime needs to be investigated and brought to justice. As my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned from the Front Bench in her opening remarks, no crime is too small to be investigated. The plan also prioritises hotspot patrols by the police, and it sets up Pegasus, which is the specialist policing team to deal with organised crime using shoplifting gangs as a mechanism to drive revenue. It is important that that is dealt with, too, and I am glad that the retail crime action plan tackles that.

Labour appears to be announcing or, rather, re-announcing what is already Government policy. That leads me to the third part of its plan, which is to announce 13,000 extra police and PCSOs to be used in town centres. I mention in passing that the comfortable majority of that number is PCSOs, not police officers. That appears to be dressing up a £360 million investment and ignoring the £3.6 billion investment that the Government have already put into the police, generating 20,000 extra police officers in the past three years. [Interruption.] From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) says that we cut them. I can tell her that we have 1,897 police officers serving in Norfolk right now—more than ever before. That is an increase of 269 officers, which is driving down crime and increasing the capture of criminals in Norfolk, particularly in Broadland.

I wonder whether we should have confidence in Labour's plans. It is either re-announcing Government plans or going for an eye-catching initiative, rather than looking for serious changes to the legislation. Let us look at Labour's action in practice. Recorded crime is 34% higher in areas with Labour police and crime commissioners than in Conservative areas. The lived experience of all our constituents is that when Labour is in charge, crime is much higher, yet the Conservative record is that non-fraud crime has fallen since 2010. There has been a 50% fall in reported crimes, but let us look at the gold standard, which is the crime survey of England and Wales. By March 2023, our constituents' experience of crime had dropped by 15% since before covid, and by a whopping 54% since 2010. That is even higher than the reported crime reduction.

Finally, I had a conversation with a seasoned senior officer in Norfolk, who said, "When I started out, if we had had the crime numbers that we have now, I'd have bitten your arm off." Crime has fallen under the Conservative Government, and we should recognise that in this debate.

2.51 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) have support across the House, particularly those about safety and security for everybody, and about tackling all forms of racism and hate crimes. However, the Conservative Government have overseen the demise of town centres across the country, which is a key part of the failure to tackle town centre crime such as street drinking, harassment and littering. After 13 years, their legacy is one of damaging decline and collapsing confidence, and victims and communities have paid the price.

Antisocial behaviour has a devastating impact on communities and individuals. Over 90% of crimes are going unsolved, meaning that criminals are now less than half as likely to be caught than under the last Labour Government. Shoplifting has reached record levels and is driven by organised criminal gangs, with a 25% surge nationally over the past 12 months alone and 1,000 offences a day. Shoplifting is not a victimless crime. Theft from shops has long been a major flashpoint for violence and abuse against shop workers, and far too many shop workers face abuse and violence in our town centres.

The trade union USDAW's latest survey results show that two thirds of its members working in retail suffer abuse from customers, with far too many experiencing threats and violence. Six in 10 of these incidents were triggered by theft from shops, which is clearly the result of a 25% increase in incidents of shoplifting, as shown by the latest ONS statistics, so I want to put on record my support for USDAW's important Freedom From Fear campaign to prevent violence, threats and abuse against workers. Labour supports increasing protections for shop workers and will table amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill to ensure that there are tougher sentences for attacks on our shop workers. Everyone should have the right to work in safety and to live free from fear.

In Luton, we are proud of our community and the way Labour-run Luton Borough Council and local businesses continue to work together to improve safety in our town centre for everyone. It is good to see the Luton business improvement district team working with Luton Borough Council to support the night-time economy and improve night-time security by funding additional neighbourhood enforcement and security officers in the town centre to help prevent crime and improve safety for residents and businesses. That commitment to creating a safe, vibrant and inclusive nightlife for all has seen Luton town centre awarded purple flag status again, which I am pleased to see, and Luton Borough Council's 2040 town centre masterplan will create a safer, cleaner and greener town centre. However, the need for Luton's community to step up and support itself is a consequence of the Conservative Government's 13 years of failure—13 years of cuts to our local services, cuts to youth services and cuts to bus services, and 13 years of rising poverty, pushing people away from our town centres and high streets and, sadly, sometimes into more desperate measures.

The issues facing our town centres would be addressed by Labour's community policing guarantee. It includes scrapping the threshold brought in by the Tories in 2014 that prevents the prosecution of shoplifting under the value of £200, making it easier to take action against repeat offenders and ending the farce of offending going unpunished. It would create a new, specific standalone offence of violence against a shop worker, roll out town centre policing plans with guaranteed patrols of town centres, and put 13,000 extra police and community support officers back in town centres to crack down on antisocial behaviour. Like others have said, however, for this to happen—for action to make our town centres safer—we need a Labour Government.

2.56 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), and I recognise what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) said about communities. Without speaking out of turn, I hope that we might have a debate on that very issue—whether it be in Government or, indeed, Opposition time—because it is so important and so current. I very much welcome today's debate, even if I do not necessarily welcome the motion that goes with it.

Keeping our town centres safe is absolutely critical, but let us remember that they look different from a decade, two decades or three decades ago. Our fast-changing, ever digital world is impacting on every aspect

of life: how we live, how we work, how we do business, how we communicate, how we socialise, how we entertain and, of course, how we shop. That has inevitably had a knock-on impact on our town centres, and we also have the global shocks to our economies of covid and the war in Ukraine, fuelling the cost of living crisis and the jump in employees no longer going to work but working from home. It has all been tough for our town centres. All these factors require local communities, councils and private sector stakeholders to reinvigorate a sense of purpose about what our town centres are for in the modern age, because if they do not, any reduction in activity, attraction, footfall or busyness in our town centres can and does lead to a vacuum that is then filled with antisocial behaviour, which further deters people from coming into our town centres.

Bournemouth has not only a vibrant town centre, but some attractive commercial, retail and hospitality hubs—for example, Tuckton, Boscombe High Street, Charminster, the huge Castlepoint shopping centre, our seafront and Southbourne, where I was delighted to spend Small Business Saturday. If Members are ever in that neck of the woods, I strongly recommend Syd's Slaps coffee shop, where the staff are very hospitable and certainly look after their customers. I thank them very much for their hospitality.

I welcome the Government's initiatives to support our town centres, which is what the almost £5 billion levelling-up fund is all about. For Bournemouth, this equated to over £18 million to support our seafront offering, and £21 million from the towns fund for Boscombe. However, when it comes to safety, I am concerned that ever more young people across the UK are choosing to carry knives. That is what I want to focus on as the main part of my speech, because it is leading to ever more people being harmed or killed by the use of knives. In the last decade, knife crime has jumped by 75%, which is already impacting on the night-time economies of too many town centres across Britain.

As a popular seaside town, Bournemouth has a vibrant nightlife, with thousands of visitors enjoying the night-time hospitality on any Friday or Saturday night. If we are to prevent Bournemouth from experiencing a similar rise in knife crime to that we have sadly seen in other parts of the country, we need action in Bournemouth now. As I have learned from joining Bournemouth's police on a number of night-time patrols, the cause of the increase both is understood and can be tackled. The increase in the prevalence of young people carrying knives stems from peer pressure and a false belief that it is the best way they can defend themselves if they get into a serious confrontation. Of course, they are cheap and easy to get hold of.

I am pleased that the Government have banned the carrying of zombie knives, but we need to do more. I propose two initiatives—I am pleased to see the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire in his place, because he will be familiar with what I am about to say. The first, relating to police resources, is a violence reduction unit. Such police units in other parts of the country have a proven track record in reducing knife crime in town centres. They do so not just by increasing policing but through working within the communities, including schools, to educate youngsters on the dangers of carrying knives. I have written to the Home Secretary and the Minister to request that.

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

Secondly, let us obligate all entertainment premises such as nightclubs licensed to operate after 11 pm to have metal-detector systems—either archways or handheld devices called wands—to guarantee that no one entering the premises is carrying a knife. I stress that that is not to point any fingers at the sector—there is rarely trouble inside those premises—but that would really deter the small but growing minority who choose to carry lethal weapons. It would also offer reassurance to the majority of the public who simply want to experience an enjoyable Saturday night out. Such measures are already in place in venues across the country, including for sports functions and in public buildings such as where we are today. I have written not only to the Home Secretary but to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council asking the licensing committee to make that part of any licence to run premises. A statutory instrument will be required here to empower licensing committees to operate in that way.

Bournemouth has developed an enviable reputation over the decades as an attractive, safe seaside town for all the family. Today, there is a vibrant night-time economy trying to avoid knife crime, but we need robust action now to stamp out the worrying trend of carrying knives.

I am pleased to see police numbers now at record levels, even compared with 2010. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), was keen to repeat that police numbers had indeed fallen over the period. He was less eager to clarify why tough choices were taken by the Government at the time that impacted on every Government budget across Whitehall. He really does need to recognise that and put the figures into context. I did not want to see police numbers go down, and I certainly did not want to see any reduction in any Government Departments. Unfortunately, we inherited a financial crisis that we had to endure and recover from.

I am pleased—and I hope the hon. Member for Nottingham North concurs—that numbers have returned to what they should have been over the last decade and are at record levels, as we heard from the Minister in her opening remarks. I end by repeating my earlier intervention. There are other factors as well, but our town centres are largely safe because of what our police do, and it is worth giving them gratitude for what they do and the service they provide. They do so with less thanks than they should be given. As I have stressed, they start the day not knowing how things will unfold. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. I am pleased by what they do in Dorset and in Bournemouth. I give them thanks for the service they provide.

3.4 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) for his contribution on knife crime and its effects on the community. Only last week, in my maiden speech, I paid tribute to my predecessor, Sir Robert Peel, who pioneered the leading principles of policing, which ring as true today as they did in 1829. Central to his philosophy was the integral role of rooting the police force within the community. Tamworth no longer has a police station with a front desk to report crimes, and many have raised

with me their dismay at the town centre suffering from increased antisocial behaviour, but it is high-street shoplifting that I wish to raise specifically in the debate.

High-street retailers are struggling with the increased costs of their bills and their business rates, reduced profit margins and worries that footfall will reduce due to concerns about safety in town centres. To add to that difficulty, under this Government they are having to absorb up to £200 every time someone steals from their shop. That is simply not good enough. My constituent Onkar, who runs a convenience store, raised his concerns with me about how damaging shoplifting is to his business. He has reported shoplifting on many occasions but has not seen a single conviction in 13 years. That also means that he cannot recoup the costs of those lost goods.

Coupled with that, retail workers face unprecedented rates of violence, abuse and aggression while doing their jobs. Last year, survey data from USDAW of more than 7,000 shop workers—it has been cited many times by colleagues during the debate, but I will repeat it because it is so stark—reported that 70% suffered from verbal abuse, 49% received threats of violence, and nearly 8% were actually physically assaulted during the year. The report called for:

“Investment in community-led policing initiatives, which recognise the invaluable role that retail workers play in our communities and deliver locally-led programmes to guarantee worker safety.” That is exactly what Labour’s community policing guarantee will do.

Labour will put police on the beat again, with a major expansion in neighbourhood policing, including putting 13,000 more PCSOs on the streets. Just as Peel professionalised the police force in 1829, Labour will professionalise neighbourhood policing, working with national bodies such as the College of Policing to create bespoke problem-solving skills that support communities. Labour will also introduce a new, specific offence against the assault of shop workers, which will protect people like Onkar and the shop workers of USDAW to ensure that everyone who works in retail can feel safe.

Finally, I pay tribute to the serving members of the police force, who still do the best they can despite consistent underfunding and under-resourcing over the last 13 years. I join colleagues in calling on the Government to take action and back Labour’s community policing guarantee.

3.7 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I welcome the debate, because it is so important to talk about the safety of our town centres and our high streets. In the Cities of London and Westminster, I am proud that we have what is perhaps considered the nation’s high street: Oxford Street. We also have Regent Street and Bond Street. Equally importantly, we have amazing local neighbourhood high streets, such as Marylebone high street and St John’s Wood high street—it is not in my constituency at the moment—which I visited last week for Small Business Saturday. On my visit, I was shocked to hear from shopkeepers about the rise in shoplifting. I also recently met the Marylebone Association in Marylebone high street, where local people are really concerned about the huge increase in shoplifting. I have spoken to shopkeepers and heard about the work that local councillors in Marylebone are

doing with local retail staff. Some are now locking their doors and not allowing people in until they know who is coming in. Waitrose on Marylebone high street has taken away so many products—alcohol in particular—because it has had organised gangs going in, particularly at certain times, in an organised operation. I would like to see the local police do a lot more to tackle shoplifting, particularly in places such as that.

I also welcome the debate today because it is really important that we talk about the local policing of town centres. I know that the Government have put dealing with town centre safety very much at the heart of policing. My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) mentioned the Government's retail crime action plan, which is important. Things such as the antisocial behaviour action plan and the safer streets programme devolve money, funding and action to local communities, councils and police. I want to highlight the importance of police and crime commissioners and police chiefs in ensuring that our town centres and high streets are safe.

In London, we have a rather interesting situation with the Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. Crime has gone up in the seven years that he has been Mayor, and 11% in the last year alone—that is 1,100 extra crimes. Research has been done recently on crime on the tube, which has risen more than 50%, fuelled by thefts and robberies. People come to the centre to shop or have a good night out in the night-time economy that we offer in the west end, but Oxford Circus and Leicester Square are among the worst tube stations for theft. That has happened under Sadiq Khan as the police and crime commissioner for London. My hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) raised that issue when he intervened on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and said that Sadiq Khan has failed to recruit more than 1,000 extra officers on top of the 3,666 police officers that the Government have funded with the Met and the City of London police.

It is important to understand that it is up to local police teams. In London we have an excellent borough commander, Louise Puddefoot, ably supported by Chief Superintendent Beth Pirie, but their hands have been tied in Westminster. We have amazing neighbourhood police teams but they are often taken away from their neighbourhood duties to undertake ceremonial and protest duties, because Westminster is home to more than 500 demonstrations, marches and protests each year, in addition to the ceremonial activities such as the changing of the guard. I recently wrote to Assistant Commissioner Rolfe to ask whether the Met will establish a central police team that will undertake those ceremonial duties, so that we do not lose our neighbourhood police teams on a weekly basis. It is important to acknowledge the excellent work of our neighbourhood police officers, who are equally frustrated to be taken off neighbourhood duties for ceremonial duties.

When our neighbourhood police officers are taken away for ceremonial duties or protests, a huge vacuum is left. There has been a huge increase in antisocial behaviour around the cathedral on Victoria Street, Great Peter Street and around St Matthew's Primary School. I have been heartbroken to read letters from year 6 children in that school, outlining what they see as they walk to and from school: men urinating and defecating

in the street outside their school; men and women taking drugs and acting antisocially. I want more police action on that.

I recently held a local public meeting just off Victoria Street with the cathedral area residents group. More than 100 people turned up, and they were sick to the back teeth of dealing with all the antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhood. It is imperative that the police and Westminster City Council take a zero-tolerance approach to it. I am disappointed to report that in the last 18 months there has been a real increase in antisocial behaviour across Westminster, particularly people who are street drinking and begging. I would like the council to do an awful lot more. I produced a crime plan last year, having conducted a survey across Westminster to which nearly 5,000 people responded. Their top priority was more police officers on our street. If we see them in our neighbourhoods and high streets, that will prevent crime and stop the shoplifting. We need to get a grip of this.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): If the hon. Lady thinks that we need more police officers, should she not support Labour's motion?

Nickie Aiken: I go back to my earlier comment: the Government gave funding to the Labour Mayor of London, but he failed to use that money to recruit up to 1,000 extra police officers on top of the 3,600 that the police have funded. That money went back into the pot, and other police forces have taken advantage of it. Over the last seven years under Sadiq Khan we have seen failure, failure, failure in many areas, but the biggest one has been crime. Any community across London will say that their biggest concern is crime and antisocial behaviour. Sadiq Khan has failed to answer that concern.

Local people want a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour and crime, particularly in our beloved shops including major brands across Westminster. Last summer I visited Boots in Piccadilly, and was shocked to hear about the number of incidents it is dealing with day in, day out. It is the only pharmacy open at midnight, so people who desperately need medication will go there. With the night-time economy as it is, Boots staff are often victims of assaults and shoplifting. They call the police, but they do not turn up.

In all my meetings with local people over the last year or two on this issue, that is the biggest concern that they raise: that when they call the police, they do not turn up. It might not be a life-threatening issue—someone might not be about to die—but they want the police to come and deal with someone comatose on the street or a shoplifter. The public must not give up on the police. They do an amazing job, and officers are there for us day in, day out, but they are being let down by the lack of serious leadership in the police in making sure that our bobbies are on the beat and doing what they should be doing. The public need to be encouraged to continue to report crime. I have only just learned that it is possible to report crime on Twitter or Facebook. It is really easy. The person reporting it will get a crime report and can follow it up. The police need information so that they can put the resources where they are needed.

To conclude, I welcome the opportunity to debate the importance of town centre and high street safety. We need more police officers on our streets. In London we

[*Nickie Aiken*]

have a Labour Mayor who has let us down time and again. It is not about funding police officers but about recruiting them and putting them on our streets.

3.18 pm

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Let me start by sharing colleagues' sentiments on the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris). It is important to continue to have cross-party consensus on the importance of stamping out antisemitism and racism across our streets. I share his horror at some of the examples he brought to the House's attention.

Members on both sides of the Chamber who had the opportunity to come and visit us in Mid Bedfordshire recently may wonder what I am doing in a debate about town centres. Having spent one or two hours along Long Drive and trying to find that last house at the end of a road group, they may wonder whether they somehow missed the latest Westfield shopping centre at the end of a country lane. In Mid Bedfordshire we may not have anything quite on the scale of Oxford Street, but the town centres and hubs in my 48 towns and villages are no less important. From the fantastic Roger's Bakery in Meppershall to the Cross Keys pub in Cranfield, those businesses showcase the very best of what a high street should be about: the beating heart of the community where we can all come together. But the heartbreaking reality of much of my campaign was speaking to people who simply do not feel safe on those streets anymore.

The Government keep telling us today that we have never had it so good when it comes to policing in Mid Bedfordshire, but the sad reality for people in my constituency could not feel more different. From Shefford to Wixams and from Wootton to Flitwick, many people just are not feeling safe on their streets. It is easy to see why: shoplifting up 7% and neighbourhood offences up across the county of Bedfordshire, but charging of offences across Bedfordshire down. The result: businesses, customers and communities left feeling vulnerable and exposed. Our high streets might not be on the same scale as those of other Members, but these issues have even greater resonance in my community. Without the networks of support and the visibility that larger high streets can provide, my shop owners, communities and shoppers can feel even more vulnerable when Governments fail to act. That cannot be right and cannot be left unaddressed.

During the campaign, I was incredibly heartened to see some cross-party consensus on this issue, with my rival Conservative party candidate, the local police and crime commissioner no less, conceding that policing in Bedfordshire was underfunded, that more needed to be invested in neighbourhood policing and that new approaches were necessary—with, I hasten to add, very little pressure from me to do so. But since arriving in this place, I am sad to say that I have felt that Labour is the only party with serious answers to these challenges. It should not be rocket science: it is about creating the thousands of extra neighbourhood officers we need to create a visible policing presence on our streets, rooted right across my towns, villages and communities; making sure we are taking retail crime seriously by creating a new offence to give extra protection to shopworkers; ending the floor on offences leading to follow-up for shoplifting; and having a focus on youth centres and

provision to ensure our young people have better options available to them than bad choices. Those are the solutions my communities are crying out for, and they should not have to wait for a general election to see them.

This is a Government who, for all their faults—I hasten to add that I might think there are one or two—have not been afraid at times, in their best moments, to take some of the Labour party's ideas and bring them forward, from aspects of Labour's NHS workforce plan to getting more investment to our businesses. We welcome that. I urge those on the Government Benches to take this opportunity to add another example to that list. Do not let my communities wait any longer. Do not fall into the temptation of self-indulgence and pre-emptive leadership bids in the last few months of this Parliament. Let us get something done together for our communities and support Labour's common-sense plan to take our high streets back, keep them safe, and invest to enable the neighbourhood policing my towns and villages are crying out for.

3.22 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern), who did a sterling job of representing his constituency with the pride and passion that I like to think I always give to my own speeches about the fine constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke.

I am delighted that the Government have reached and exceeded their target to recruit 20,000 police officers, and that 333 are coming to the great county of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. They will help to ensure that we can have neighbourhood policing in our communities, as modelled by the fantastic new chief constable Chris Noble. He is doing sterling work to ensure that officers are on the beat, out and about in their community, and standing up for the interests of the people day in, day out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), sadly no longer in his place, did a sterling job of explaining why the motion is more election gimmick than reality. However, I accept and understand the passion that the shadow police Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), has in this area. He takes it very seriously indeed. I am always happy to sit down and discuss any forthcoming amendments, seeing as how in recent times I have ended up in the Lobby on the wrong side of the Chamber more than I should.

In Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, we have had antisocial behaviour hotspot funding from the Government, which the police, fire and crime commissioner Ben Adams, who is doing a fantastic job for our community, has implemented so successfully that we have seen a 20% reduction in antisocial behaviour in those hotspot areas so far. The investment by the Conservative Government under a Conservative police, fire and crime commissioner, with a Conservative county council and nearly all 12 Staffordshire Members of Parliament—albeit that we have recently had one new addition in red—has made sure that we are delivering on the priorities of the people in our local area.

Stoke-on-Trent has benefited greatly from around £3 million in safer streets funding, with around £2 million having already been secured under the former

Conservative-led council. That has seen investment in places such as Longton, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) serves. We are now seeing a £250,000 investment in one of the great towns of our city, Tunstall. I passionately campaigned for that investment to improve our street lighting to make sure women and girls in particular feel safe in our community, as well as to make sure we have digital CCTV to help the police on the beat. I was backed by over 700 local residents who signed my petition and by the police, fire and crime commissioner.

Sadly, I was not backed by the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, the Labour council member for Burslem ward. She told me to my face that no money was going to come to Tunstall, and that my petition was meaningless because it was on my own website and that the constituents I serve therefore did not matter. I lodged a complaint with the electoral officer at the council. Sadly, he whitewashed that particular complaint. It was very sad to see the passive-aggressive nature with which she approached that meeting, making a member of my staff feel incredibly uncomfortable, as well as denigrating the very people I am proud to stand up for and serve—the people of my constituency, some of whom are also her constituents. That goes to show that Labour may talk the talk, but it does not walk the walk when it comes to delivering for the people of Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke.

I am delighted that we got backing and funding, but there is of course more to be done. Now I want funding for Cobridge, which, between January and December 2022, saw a 75% increase in neighbourhood crime. It is important that we get the CCTV, street lighting and alley gates that we need to help that community feel safe. I will be looking for future rounds of safer streets funding, and I will be getting the signatures of local people.

I hope that this time the Labour-run council will get behind that, rather than playing petty party politics. It denigrated me for calling out the tiny minority of scrotes who deal drugs, the scumbags who fly-tip and the savages who create antisocial behaviour issues in our community. I was proud to say it in that video at the time and I am proud to say it again now, because I will not let a tiny minority of people ruin my town centre, despite all the investment that has gone in, from the £7 million to refurbish Tunstall town hall to the £3.5 million to open a brand-new living quarters for the over-50s in the former Tunstall Library and Baths. We have seen record funding in Kidsgrove, with the town centre hub on its way, a new pump track for young people to use, and the sports centre refurbished and reopened. All those things provide activities for our young people and our elderly to enjoy in our communities, helping to give the police an opportunity to engage with the local community to make sure that the overwhelming majority of law-abiding residents who do the right thing day in, day out are rightly rewarded and treated with the respect that they deserve.

Until recently, I had a Labour-run Kidsgrove Town Council. I was delighted when a campaign I successfully led meant that it was allowed to use some of its funding to finally put in new and improved CCTV. The Conservatives took that council in May 2022 for the first time ever. We have had investment in Bathpool Park, Clough Hall Park, Whitehall Avenue, Birchenwood,

King Street and Heathcote Street, which means that CCTV can help to tackle the scourge of antisocial behaviour that happens at times in those particular areas.

I am grateful to the residents of Kidsgrove, Talke, Newchapel, HARRISEAHEAD, Mow Cop and Butt Lane for backing the campaign to give them that protection and aid our police, who no longer have to use the outdated CCTV system that required them to wait for a shop to open to go and use a VCR—I did not realise that those still existed—to download the videotape. Now that the cameras are monitored 24 hours a day from the Stoke-on-Trent control room, people can feel safe, because a Conservative Member of Parliament—the first ever Conservative Member of Parliament in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke—has made sure, along with Conservative councillors, that we are delivering for our local area. *[Interruption.]*

I hear a bit of sedentary chuntering. Perhaps the hon. Member for Nottingham North is hoping for my demise, but whenever the election comes, I will be knocking on doors and telling people what is happening—I look forward to it. We had 70 years of Labour rotting our community away, taking it for granted and assuming that people were just cannon fodder for their votes, but now a Conservative has come and delivered for their area.

As I have said, a new Staffordshire community policing model was introduced in February 2022 under the excellent new chief constable, Chris Noble. Officers in 10 areas, alongside the neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers, are now helping to ensure that communities and businesses feel they have the safety and security that they need. I want to give a shout-out to a very special individual, Sergeant Chris Gifford, or “Giff”, as he is known by the bobbies on the beat. I was proud to do a night shift with him, and although he did not take the opportunity to put me in a cell and take a photograph, which would doubtless have earned him a lot of money, we did have a great opportunity to look around our neighbourhood and see the police on the beat.

I witnessed the power of the neighbourhood policing that Members on both sides of the House have espoused today. The knowledge that those officers gather on a daily basis, the individuals they are able to spot from a distance—I would never be able to identify someone that far away—and their ability to deal with offenders are invaluable to the local community, and they have my absolute support. I want to thank Sergeant Gifford and his team for allowing me to join them on the beat, and I look forward to doing so again soon.

We are trying not to let the woke arrive in Stoke-on-Trent, although the Labour party is desperately trying to import it up there. We do not want the chai latte and avocado brigade arriving in our area any time soon. I must say that I was very disappointed to see in the papers that Staffordshire police had introduced woke guidance: you cannot say “spokesman” or “policeman”, for example. I can only assume that that must emanate from the abysmal former chief constable, Gareth Morgan, who was a disgrace to the uniform, regularly sitting in his office without emerging to walk the streets with the local Members of Parliament in Stoke-on-Trent, unwilling to go out and tackle the issues of the day. In fact, morale was so low in the Staffordshire police force as a

[Jonathan Gullis]

result of his appalling leadership—he was busy crying on camera, rather than actually delivering with the bobbies on the beat—that we had a recruitment and retention crisis. Thankfully he decided to finally disappear and be forgotten about. Now we have a great chief constable with great officers on the ground who are doing great things for our local community, and I assure the House that I am glad to see the back of Gareth Morgan.

I want to express my gratitude to those brave men and women in uniform who, day in, day out, serve our country and our communities, risking their lives and their safety for the freedoms that we are able to enjoy. I hope that if one day—it may come sooner than I wish—I am no longer in the House, I will be able to join the special constables, although I am sure that will prompt dread in the chief constable of Staffordshire.

I want to record my thanks to the great officers of that county. I want to thank Chief Inspector John Owen, who oversees the Newcastle-under-Lyme neighbourhood policing team and who I recently joined for a walkabout in Kidsgrove. I want to thank Chief Inspector Scott McGrath, who is in charge of the Stoke-on-Trent North neighbourhood policing team, and Inspector Hayley Eaton, his deputy; PC Jonathan Tench, who covers Burslem, Smallthorne, Baddeley Green, Milton and Norton; and PC Rachel Ford, who covers Tunstall with PCSO Sue Wall. Two of our finest officers, PC Edward Clarke and PCSO Anderson Cadman, will join me later today at 10 Downing Street to attend a reception to thank them for their service. They represent the very best of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, and I am immensely proud to be their Member of Parliament—as I hope to be for many years to come.

Holly Lynch: I am sorry to interrupt, because the hon. Gentleman is making such a powerful speech. I join him in paying tribute to all those officers. Does he not think it a shame that they have endured a 17% real-terms pay cut in recent years, and does he not think they should be rewarded for their hard work and effort?

Jonathan Gullis: I think the hon. Lady has forgotten the 7% rise in police officer pay that we saw this year. I have spoken to those officers about their living and how they work on the job, and they have of course raised with me the fact that money can be tight, but they understand that the Government have to be sensible with the public purse and cannot be seen to run amok with it, and they understand that any more money going into salaries may lead to less investment in new equipment and the technology that we need to track more crime. It may deprive them of the additional training for which they are desperate, because that is what enables them to patrol our streets. I am proud that our police are doing such a great job in recruiting 333 brand-new officers for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, in addition to the record numbers we are seeing across the United Kingdom. It is great news for our communities.

I like the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) a lot; she is a fine Member of Parliament—I know that will not help her on Twitter and I apologise for the grief she will now get—but she talks about Labour running police and crime, and I cannot think of anything worse,

personally. The wokery that we saw the former chief constable bring in will trickle into our police force and we will see the police arresting people for thought crimes and nonsense like that, rather than having bobbies on the beat where they need to be, locking up the scumbags, scrotes and savages—that tiny minority who ruin it for the overwhelming law-abiding majority of our great community of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Follow that, Jess Phillips.

3.34 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): As a member of the wokerati, I absolutely will. I gently point out that the wokerati were coming alive in Woke-on-Trent under the current Government. I urge the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) not to be so fearful. I will take my lead from him in praising some of the officers. I want to praise our local copper, a police officer called Orla Jenkins. Such a rock star is she to my staff that when she came to visit my office recently, they put a countdown on the board to show how excited they were to see her. Local police officers who do the beating heart of the work in our communities deserve all of our praise.

On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) about the findings of lots of different people, the Social Market Foundation last year revealed that police officers' pay had declined by 17% in real terms. Not last week but the week before, 24 coppers came knocking at my door—[Laughter.] Not last week but the week before, I got in a cab from Euston to an appointment that I had in London and the person driving my taxi was a sergeant in the Metropolitan police. He told me that on his off days he drives cabs. He also told me that his inspector, also in the Metropolitan police, did Deliveroo. That is the reality, and what I have heard today, certainly from the Minister and from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North in his rousing speech, is fantasy. I respect the hon. Gentleman's electioneering—it was absolutely top class—but does he know what the British public absolutely hate? They hate it when we stand in front of them and say, "Everything's fine, isn't it great, we are world leading," but then when they call for a copper, nobody comes.

I had a security guard from the local B&Q in my constituency come to see me. He had previously worked in the Prison Service and he wanted to talk to me about strategies for preventing people who end up in prison from ending up there, and I was grateful to him for that. He also came in to tell me that he gets up at 3 o'clock in the morning to call 101 to report the crimes that have happened in B&Q that day because he cannot get through in the daytime. He told me that the impunity that he sees in his store is such that, on the day he came to see me, somebody had stolen a hot tub from B&Q. If people think they can get away with that level of crime, it is because criminals have never had it so good. There has never been a better time to break the law, with charging rates on the floor and hardly any crimes being detected. To bring people back to reality—in this amazing world we are pretending we live in—this applies even to the most serious cases. I recently dealt with a case where a woman whose husband was on bail for trying to kill

her turned up at her house with a machete—the evidence was on a Ring doorbell camera—and five days later the police officers came.

I could stand here and say that all sorts of things need to change in police forces. I am here all day for better standards and better training, and for much more prioritisation of the kind of crimes I am talking about, but the reality is that that is like hoping for something that cannot exist while police officers across our country are expected to pick up the pieces of a crumbling society in every other regard.

Mr Ellwood: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Lady, and we have done a few gigs together, including “Question Time”. I hesitate to pose this question, because I do not want to take away from where she is going, but she mentions society, which is quite personal to me. I am concerned that there is too much of a “walk on by” society. She mentions the theft of a hot tub, for example. Would she concur that there is a role for the general public? I do not want to encourage them to put themselves in danger but, collectively, the people who are around, not the police, are the first responders. They should perhaps react a bit more positively and proactively in calling out bad behaviour.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, in that I am a proper intervener. I will cross the road to have a fight. I have intervened in many domestic abuse situations while out door knocking. In fact, when I was door knocking for my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), I walked into somebody’s house to break up a domestic abuse incident. After years of working with offenders and victims, I am more than capable of accurately risk assessing a situation and intervening. I do not suggest for one second that anybody else who was door knocking with me could have done the same thing. We have to be very careful in how we manage that.

The trouble is that people in my constituency will tell the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), as they tell me, that they try to intervene. They see drug deals on their street every single day and they try to do something about it—they organise neighbourhood meetings, the local neighbourhood police come along and we all agree that it is a terrible problem—but when they ring about these hotspots, nobody comes and nothing changes. It is the same drug dealers, with the same dispossessed people walking up the street like zombies, every single day. They do not bother to report it any more, because there is no point.

On burglary, the police have become a third arm of the insurance companies. For a lot of people, the police are just there so that they can get a crime reference number. Orla Jenkins is a cracking copper and, more than anything, she just rings up people to give them a crime reference number. That is not why she went into policing. Officers are pulled away, and I have given the example of officers sitting and waiting in A&E for hours and hours.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) mentioned, the proliferation of unregulated exempt accommodation is one of the single biggest reasons for call-outs in the city where I live. Hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money is spent on putting vulnerable people in inappropriate

accommodation in our neighbourhoods, and the police are repeatedly called out. When I went on response with the police, every call we went to was to vulnerable people’s exempt accommodation in the city, and I was much better suited to that work than the police officers, because I ran vulnerable people’s accommodation for years.

For years, we have been asking the Government to regulate. Every single time I have asked a Minister for regulation to address this terrible, dangerous, exploitative accommodation, which causes antisocial behaviour on every street in Birmingham, on every street in Manchester and all across Oldham, as has been said—it might not be happening in rural communities, but it is happening in our urban communities, and it will be happening in Stoke-on-Trent—the Government have said to me, “We just don’t have parliamentary time to legislate on that yet. There isn’t parliamentary time.” I have been told that twice. So hundreds of thousands of pounds—hundreds of millions of pounds—of taxpayers’ money is going to bad landlords, housing crack addicts alongside rape victims. This is the country that has been created. It is causing harm, and the Government have the power to stop it, to regulate that accommodation and to end what would be at least half of all antisocial behaviour in the city where I live. They have the power to do it, but they do not, so the police get called out, and called out, and called out forever. That is a waste of their time, and it is something that the Government are directly responsible for, and could end.

I could make the same speech about the degradation of mental health services across our country, for every police officer who sits for 24 hours in a house because there is no emergency response any more. There is no protection for people when they are suffering suicide ideations, so a copper sits with them for hours. By the way, in my area there are 800 fewer police officers than there were in 2010. So much for “the best since records ever began!” If population is taken into account, the situation is even worse. [*Interruption.*] Would the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) like to intervene? No? Okay. I would welcome it; as I said, I am big on intervention.

Jonathan Gullis *rose*—

Jess Phillips: Go for it. Cracking!

Jonathan Gullis: I reassure the hon. Lady that I completely concur with her views that our brave police officers should not have to sit with people with severe mental health disorders to keep them safe, when that is the job of the other emergency services. I will happily stand shoulder to shoulder with her and badger Government in any way necessary if there is time for legislation, because supporting our police officers should be an absolute priority of this Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am hoping to get on to the wind-ups by about 4.10 pm, for 10 minutes each, and we can then start the next debate shortly after that.

Jess Phillips: I welcome that intervention. Very noisy people from the midlands are my favourite. I actually think Stoke-on-Trent is in the north, but we are splitting hairs now.

[Jess Phillips]

I just think the gall to suggest that everything is all right looks really crass to the public. If hon. Members want to electioneer, as many of them seemed to want to do today, I suggest that they change that patten and do the things that they can do centrally, rather than blaming everybody else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If the remaining three speakers would speak for about seven minutes, we could keep to time—and Mr Brereton is going to show us how to do it.

3.47 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Although I do not agree with everything that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, I agree with some points that she made. In Stoke-on-Trent we certainly see some of the issues that she mentioned.

I am pleased to speak in this Opposition day debate on keeping our town centres safe. I know that Members across the House care about that, but it is important to reflect that crime has halved in the period since 2010. That has made a massive difference, thanks to the work of this Government. We have started to see great new uses coming into our high streets to fill some of the empty spaces, and more community-led events. I know, however, that people locally in Stoke-on-Trent and across north Staffordshire want to feel safer when visiting our town centres and high streets. That is why this Government have been delivering the additional 20,000 police officers nationally, with an additional 333 specifically for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

Although having more police on the beat is always welcome and very much needed, it is not the only action needed to address the issues that we face and to ensure that our town centres are safer. The Opposition motion is far too focused on narrow issues, assuming that further increasing the number of police officers is the magic solution, when actually we need to do a number of things.

There have certainly been issues when it comes to safety in our towns and on our high streets in Longton, Fenton and Meir, which are the main high streets in my constituency, and those issues are regularly raised with me. We have seen instances of antisocial behaviour, with shop owners having windows smashed, and more serious criminal damage with theft from businesses. It is terrible to see shop owners, who have put everything they have into running their small businesses, targeted by mindless vandals. We condemn those who attack and target shop workers—they must face the full force of the law. I welcome the actions the Government have taken through the retail crime action plan, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, and now the Sentencing Bill.

Most shockingly, in Longton town centre, the Dougie Mac hospice charity shop was targeted, with its windows smashed. I say to those who have behaved in this absolutely despicable way, “Think about the impact on local small businesses that cannot afford to repair the damage. You do not know when you or a family member may need the help of organisations like the Dougie Mac hospice.”

I welcome antisocial behaviour action plans to help people locally to take back control of our high streets. Only last Friday, I was out and about in Longton for one of our regular week-of-action walkabouts, with representatives from Staffordshire police, the city council and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service. I thank all the officers who were out with me. We reported a number of issues, and those fantastic officers are doing an excellent job trying to tackle and get on top of some of them. It was positive to hear that some of those who have targeted the town centre recently are now behind bars, thanks to the work of Staffordshire police.

In Longton, too many people have been getting away with horrific, mindless acts of criminality, particularly because of the lack of CCTV. Longton has the lowest coverage of any town centre in the Stoke-on-Trent area and that is why I have been working closely with our Staffordshire police, fire and crime commissioner, Ben Adams, and I am delighted that Longton town centre is set to benefit from the latest round of safer streets funding.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who is no longer in his place, said, we are receiving around half a million pounds for Longton and Tunstall from the safer streets fund. That will make a massive difference in delivering significantly enhanced CCTV coverage for the town centres, which they desperately need, so that nobody can escape the focus of the law. It will ensure that those who target our town centres face the action they deserve. Funding will be used to improve the area, including gating off some of the alleyways that have been a major attraction for antisocial behaviour.

One of the most significant issues facing local towns has been the impact of drug misuse, particularly the horrific drug monkey dust. As hon. Members know, I have been campaigning vociferously to get that horrific drug reclassified from the current class B to class A. The reason monkey dust is so damaging is that it does not just have a corrosive effect on the health of those who consume it; it also causes serious violence and antisocial behaviour in our communities, particularly our town centres.

Given its psychoactive properties, those under its influence have been seen to exhibit zombie-like and often superhuman behaviour, with police officers reporting that someone under its influence requires eight or more officers to restrain them. This horrific drug is highly addictive and far too cheaply and widely available in our towns, despite the best efforts of Staffordshire police and others. It is essential for this drug and other synthetic cathinones to be reclassified, as I have been calling for, to drive up the costs and consequences for the horrific dealers.

The provision of temporary accommodation in our town centres has also been a major concern and contributed significantly to antisocial behaviour. The Crown Hotel in Longton, right in the middle of our town centre, was used during the pandemic by local authorities to provide homeless accommodation. I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a trustee of a local homeless charity in Stoke-on-Trent. Given the urgent need during the pandemic, it was absolutely right immediately to get people into that accommodation, but we are now more than three years on and more permanent accommodation is yet to be delivered.

The police have said that between January and May 2022 that one location generated 108 incidents. Between January and May this year it had dropped slightly to 76 incidents, but that is still an incident every two days. Of the individuals housed, it has been said that

“many... were homeless and included many individuals with chaotic lifestyles/complex needs with insufficient structure or support in place.”

It is quite clear that these individuals, many of whom have serious addiction and mental health problems, need far more intensive treatment and support than can ever be provided at the Crown.

As I have said on several occasions, I call on the Labour-led council to cease use of the Crown Hotel. I am extremely concerned about the shocking safeguarding risks being taken by Stoke-on-Trent City Council when it comes to housing families with children at the Crown, thereby exposing children to totally unregulated settings alongside often highly dysfunctional individuals. The current situation is not in the best interests of anyone—not of those housed there and certainly not of Longton.

As I have said, the challenges faced in our town centres are not as simple as just creating a few more police officers; we also need more proactive action from local authorities, particularly given the need for greater enforcement in town centres. It is about not just criminal enforcement but the use of civil powers. I have been pleased to support the use of the shared prosperity fund for such purposes, creating some much-needed town centre wardens and heritage enforcement officers.

The move to online has resulted in our town centre being in a serious state of decline and our high street suffering significantly. We have some proactive owners, but we have also seen owners who are not taking responsibility. We need further action to ensure the enforcement that is needed. We must use a carrot-and-stick approach, and I very much hope that we will see further action.

I bring to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends my private Member's Bill, which I will soon lay before the House. It is very much focused on ensuring that local authorities have a duty to review the condition of our high streets and put together action plans to deal with some of the issues. I very much hope that Members from all parties will support my Bill and the work I am doing to call for further action to address the decline of our high streets and some of the related issues. It is not just about more police on the beat. We need to take a number of actions to address the issues and I hope we see further Government action moving forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. That was a very long seven minutes, but I am sure that Kim Leadbeater will do better.

3.57 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I will do my very best, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am going to follow the lead of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and focus on the reality of the situation on the ground for my constituents in Batley and Spen. I also thank her for her one-woman crime-fighting endeavour when she was in my constituency.

Our town centres are the lifeblood of our communities. In my constituency, people are incredibly proud of where they are from and often identify, first and foremost, with their immediate locality, whether that is Batley or Spen. The Spen valley is made up of a fantastic collection of towns and villages, all with their own strong local identity. I know how important that is because I was born and brought up there and have never lived anywhere else. There is Heckmondwike, where I went to school; Mirfield just down the road, where I had my first full-time job; Gomersal and Liversedge, where I have both lived and worked; and Birstall, Birkenshaw, Oakenshaw, Cleckheaton, Scholes, Roberttown and many more. All of them are special, but sadly all of them are also too often ignored by a Government who over 13 years have shown themselves to be totally out of touch with the day-to-day reality of the lives of so many people I represent.

I have worked closely with West Yorkshire police to tackle the scourges of dangerous driving, crime and antisocial behaviour in Batley and Spen, and they tell me how the cuts to police numbers and resources over the years have left them unable to serve the community as they would wish. They all want to do a great job, but it is increasingly difficult to do it as they would wish. Members should not take my word for it: the chief constable of West Yorkshire police, John Robins, made the point very clearly on BBC Radio Leeds in June. He is not political; he just wants to do the best for his officers and for the community. As John Robins said:

“We are able to deal with the most serious incidents in policing, from terrorism to serious organised crime, homicide and serious violence, but as you go down the list of issues, when you get towards visibility, engagement, patrols and neighbourhood policing, that's the one that comes under the most pressure.”

He added:

“The saddest thing for the people of West Yorkshire and the UK is that's the one the public see most and want the most of.”

Before the Conservatives try to claim credit for the most recent recruitment of officers, which of course I welcome, they need to recognise the serious damage already done by all those years of neglect, and acknowledge that they are simply giving back a few of the officers they have taken away. The chief constable compared the situation to people's household budgets, and he is right. He said that

“through cost of living and mortgage increases people haven't got the money that they want to live their life with... Since 2010 that's what it has been like for policing. We're 2,000 less officers and staff, £140m less—I can't deliver what I want to deliver as a professional police officer.”

I met the Police Federation in Parliament last week, who also spoke candidly about the challenges faced by officers on the ground as a result of reduced numbers, retention and recruitment issues, and the impact on the mental health of their officers and their ability to do their job as they would wish to do it—adding again to the mental health crisis that has already been spoken about in this debate. I thank the fantastic neighbourhood police team in Batley and Spen for everything they do to keep our communities safe, but I know from the many conversations I have had with them that it is an uphill battle.

Our towns and villages deserve better than they have received under the Tories in many ways. The cost of living crisis has hit individuals and businesses alike,

[Kim Leadbeater]

with inflation, rising interest rates and spiralling energy costs making life incredibly difficult. Labour's plans for economic stability, growth, green investment, a warm homes fund, the abolition of business rates and reform of the NHS and social care sectors, all on the basis of strict fiscal responsibility, will make a huge difference.

First and foremost, though, people have a right to feel safe and to know that the police will be there when they are needed. I have received countless messages from constituents about speeding and reckless driving, selfish and dangerous parking, when pavements should be for people, criminal activity, including drug dealing, going on openly on the streets, and antisocial behaviour of all kinds, including the use of off-road bikes. It is not right that people should be expected to put up with such a state of affairs. It does not have to be like this.

That is why I am incredibly proud of the Labour party's plans for a new community policing guarantee, announced by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition at conference, which means guaranteed town centre patrols with 13,000 more neighbourhood police and PCSOs on the streets. Local people will be involved in setting local policing priorities and we will have tough new sentencing guidelines for assaults on retail workers, as already discussed—something that USDAW and many others have campaigned for brilliantly—and stronger police action on shoplifting.

Local councils, the police and the courts will be empowered to introduce zero-tolerance zones in town centres to help to crack down on antisocial behaviour. I was horrified to hear the stories from staff at Tesco in Cleckheaton recently about the dreadful abuse and attacks they face on a day-to-day basis. We cannot have small business owners and shopworkers feeling unsafe at work, and we cannot have local people feeling scared to go into their local town centre or village to do their shopping or to socialise.

As well as the many fantastic shops in my constituency's towns and villages, they also have brilliant community centres, pubs, restaurants and cafés. They are places not only where people come together with family and friends, but where many fantastic community events take place and people have a chance to meet others from different backgrounds. That is really important for community cohesion and for addressing loneliness and social isolation.

However, many of those venues are struggling. I pay tribute to the chambers of trade up and down the country for the fantastic work they do in building strong towns and villages, including in my constituency, where we have the Birstall chamber of trade, Batley Business Association and the Spenborough chamber of trade and commerce. They are often run by volunteers and amazing local businesspeople who are at the heart of our communities.

A future Labour Government will offer individuals, businesses and communities not only a promise of financial security, but the physical security that we all need to be able to rely on as we go about our daily lives. The people of Batley and Spen deserve more, and the sooner the Conservatives admit that they have sadly failed our towns and villages, and make way for a Labour Government who understand the needs of our communities, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Could those who took part in the debate make their way to the Chamber now for the wind-ups, which will start seven minutes after Mr Hunt starts speaking?

4.4 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): The town centre has become one of the dominant issues in Ipswich. When I talk to constituents, it comes up perhaps more than any other issue, particularly over the past year or two. In the time that I have been the MP, there have been a few tragic cases. A few months after I was elected, my constituent Richard Day was killed on St Matthew's Street. Early this year, a teenager was killed in a knife attack in broad daylight on Westgate Street. That had a chilling effect throughout the town. Just a few days ago, at the Clapgate Lane Conservative Club, an attacker held a knife to the throat of one of my constituents. I have written to those at the club and will be visiting it soon to discuss how they are recovering from that incident, which was very chilling.

The thing about the town centre is that some of the most inspiring people I have met in Ipswich have been in town centre businesses. Just this Monday, before travelling to Parliament, I visited Miss Quirky Kicks, which has relocated in Ipswich and has a new café-bar—if anybody in Ipswich is listening and wants to go, I suggest that they do. There is also Geek Retreat Ipswich, which of course is part of a national franchise but is actually pretty decentralised. Geek Retreat Ipswich does fantastic work. It had its two-year anniversary recently. Its work to support neurodiverse individuals in particular should be commended.

As the Member of Parliament for an area that has a great history and a town centre with inspirational businesses, but which faces challenges, it is sometimes difficult to get the balance right between representing the concerns of my constituents and not talking the town down. That is a difficult balancing act, and although I do my best to get it right, some people might think that I do not always get it right. I cannot pretend that things are a bed of roses, because I think my constituents would look at me and wonder if I was on something, so I have to speak frankly and directly about the challenges as I see them.

When I knock on doors at the moment, I hear the reality that a lot of Ipswich residents who have lived in the town their whole lives are shunning their own town centre; they are going to Bury St Edmunds, Woodbridge and other areas. That is a problem, and there are many reasons for it. Some of the things that affect our town centre affect town and city centres up and down the country, and they are not easy to tackle: the growth of online retail; empty units; business rates, which need further reform; and, of course, the Labour council's car-parking charge, which, according to my recent survey, 76% of people think are too high—I am just dropping that one in there.

Safety and crime is probably the No. 1 issue. The reality is that large numbers of my constituents do not go into the town centre because they do not feel safe and secure doing so. On that point, we have had shared prosperity funding to increase the number of PCSOs in the town centre during daylight hours, we have had safer streets funding and, of course, we have had our

share of the 20,000 police officer uplift, so we have more bobbies on the beat in the town centre. In the Suffolk constabulary, I deal perhaps the most with Superintendent Martin. I have a huge amount of time and respect for what the constabulary does—it will always have my backing.

What people are saying in their responses to my survey is clear. I personally enter all the survey responses myself. So far, I have entered almost 1,000 responses. It is a bit of a weird thing, but I like to feel the responses, and I can only do so if I enter them myself—it is very strange and is making my flat look a bit of a bomb site at the moment, with envelopes and surveys everywhere. But anyway, the nuts and bolts of the issue are that, when asked, “Do you support a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour?”, 91% of responding constituents agreed. When it comes to the groups of large men we see—the groups of large men congregating and acting in a very antisocial way in the town centre, who are not dispersed by or engaged with by the police as directly as I would like—some 88% of those who responded to my survey said that they think those groups should be dispersed. Shoplifting is also a problem in the town, and 91% of respondents agreed that there should be tougher punishments for shoplifting, while only 3% disagreed.

The survey asked people which two of seven things would make the biggest difference towards getting them back into the town centre, and No. 1 of the seven was the police adopting a tougher, zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour, so although I have a huge amount of respect for our police, we need more of them in the town centre. In addition, we need them to adopt a more robust attitude to dealing with the individuals in the town centre who are blighting the experience for the majority of my constituents and undermining a beautiful town and its historic centre. If people are not going into the town centre because of the behaviour of a small minority, that is a real problem.

On the shoplifting point, we do need to have the deterrent there. There is a challenge here, however, because some of those engaging in shoplifting are younger. One of the businesses I spoke to earlier this week said that those engaged in shoplifting are 16 and 17-year-olds, so it can be more challenging to deal with them.

In conclusion, based on my survey responses, when it comes to town centre safety, we need to boost the police presence in the town centre, adopt a zero-tolerance attitude and crack down incredibly hard on the rogue minority who are blighting the experience of the majority. We need to disperse the groups of large men who are hanging around and put in place much tougher punishments for those who engage in shoplifting. We have a great town in Ipswich—I am very proud to represent it—but the reality of the situation is that thousands of my constituents are shunning their own town centre because they do not feel safe. That is not me talking down the town; it is me seeking to represent my constituents. I am not going to stand here and pretend that everything is wonderful. Yes, I welcome the uplift and the shared prosperity funding, but we need action. We need to turn the situation around, and I will continue to work with the Minister—for whom I have quite a lot of time—to try to get robust action for my constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Minister to start the wind-ups.

4.10 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to close this important and timely debate on behalf of the Opposition, and to follow the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), who gave us a fresh dose of reality. I welcome his candour in outlining the actual situation that is faced by so many of our town centres up and down the country.

Many hon. Members from across the House referenced issues with their own town centres, particularly knife crime. The hon. Member for Ipswich, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) all talked about the rise in serious violent crimes in our town centres. Sadly, our police are having to deal with those crimes more and more. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all her work on the Protect the Protectors campaign: she has been a vocal champion for looking after those who run towards danger when we all run away from it. It is absolutely imperative that we do more to protect not only our protectors—our first responders—but our shop workers and all those who are in our town centres, working hard to improve those town centres, boost our local economy, and make our towns better places to live and to enjoy retail and leisure activities. Sadly, because of the situation that has been described today, those people face significant challenges.

From the contributions of colleagues from across the House, it is clear that safety in our town centres is a growing concern for all of us and for our constituents. My hon. Friends the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahan), for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) all referenced the challenges faced by the businesses on our local high streets. They are not only having to deal with bank closures up and down those high streets, as well as pub closures, rising business rates and a cost of living crisis, but with a spate of retail crime that is yet another hammer blow.

My hon. Friends for Luton South and for Tamworth also mentioned assaults on shop workers, which has been a key focus of this afternoon’s debate. Our retail workers go out to work not to be assaulted, to be verbally abused, or to have to protect their stock from shoplifting; they just want to earn a decent wage to take home to their family. Sadly, far too many of them are being put in harm’s way and are not receiving the adequate protections that they deserve.

My hon. Friends the Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) and for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), as well as the hon. Member for Ipswich, also outlined the harsh reality that so many of us in the UK face. Our town centres are the lifeblood of our communities; they are a valuable resource that nobody should take for granted, but far too often, they have been. People do not feel safe—that is the reality for many people in our country. They do not feel safe walking up and down their high streets or their residential streets, and the reality of exactly why that is has been laid bare before us all. Labour has a plan, but the Conservatives have failed to deliver any meaningful change for the past 13 years.

Later in my speech, I will outline exactly what the situation is, but I will first comment on the contributions made by my good and hon. Friend the Member for

[Alex Davies-Jones]

Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). As always, she is a very vocal champion; she reminded us all not to be bystanders. Just last week I attended really important bystander training organised by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. I implore all right hon. and hon. Members across the House to take part in that training. There was an interesting exchange between my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East about exactly what society should do—how can we intervene? How can people feel empowered to do more?

Sadly, I think we have been far too desensitised, and this has become the norm. It is a sad indictment of the situation that people feel like this is just part and parcel of everyday life, but it should not be and it does not have to be. People can all do more, and they can all be active bystanders if they have had the appropriate training. If they feel it is safe, they can do more and can feel empowered to do more.

Mr Ellwood: I want to link this point to what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) said. We all need to do intervene more when we see some of the terrible behaviour prompted by what is happening in the middle east, and to call it out. I hope the hon. Member would agree with that.

Alex Davies-Jones: I wholeheartedly agree, and I was going to come on to the very powerful speech by the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis), outlining exactly the situation that faces us all. Everyone in our country should feel safe in their high streets, their communities and their homes, regardless of their colour, their religion or their background. I join him in paying tribute to the CST and Tell MAMA for raising awareness of the situation. Sadly, it has worsened as a result of the horrendous attacks in Israel on 7 October, but everyone should feel safe. I hope that this House has a greater opportunity to debate that as time goes on.

As we have heard, the Government have ignored challenges ranging from antisocial behaviour on our streets to retail crime and violence against shop workers for far too long, and ordinary people are paying the price. By contrast, as I have said, Labour has made bold commitments because we recognise that people deserve to be safe in their communities. In government, we will halve serious and violent crime and raise confidence in the police and the criminal justice system within a decade.

Let us be clear: the challenge ahead of us, as we have heard, is significant. Thanks to this Tory Government's shameful record, we are now seeing record instances—up by more than 30%—of criminal damage to shops, schools, leisure centres and businesses in our town centres. In the year ending September 2021, 41,500 offences of criminal damage to a building other than a dwelling were recorded by the police, yet the latest figures show that this has risen to almost 55,000, which is about 150 incidents every single day. How can this be allowed to continue?

The reality of the situation is that the Conservatives have failed to tackle the root causes of crime and violence. Over the last 13 years, the role of crime prevention work has been heavily downgraded by the Home Office, and leadership has been practically abandoned overnight. Rather than keeping people safe here in the UK, we

have a Government who are more focused on wasting taxpayers' money and chasing headlines for their failing asylum scheme. The Tories are simply out of touch.

Mr French: On crime prevention, one of the best tools used in London is stop and search, which removes about 400 knives and weapons from London's streets each month on average. Can the hon. Lady outline what the Labour party's official position is on stop and search?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome the intervention, and I know that stop and search has an appropriate place, particularly in targeting knife crime and offensive weapons. It can be an appropriate tool if used appropriately, with the police obviously having the appropriate training and support to do so. It cannot be a blanket policy to target everybody in our town centres; it has to be used appropriately, proportionately and effectively if it is to be used at all. It can be used as an appropriate tool and I recognise that it has a place, but there are other schemes and, as I have said, crime prevention has been overlooked far too much by this Government. There are many schemes to deal with that, and I will be outlining our plan.

I will welcome an intervention by the Minister if he wants to reach out to me, but I offer him an olive branch. I invite him to come and spend the day with me in Pontypridd, because I am confident that it will take him all of 10 minutes to understand the real issues that we are discussing.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): And in Croydon South?

Alex Davies-Jones: Yes, happily.

In fact, my community, along with many others across the country, recently came together to commemorate White Ribbon Day, which is always a poignant moment to reflect on the huge battle we continue to face as we seek to end male violence against women and girls for good. One of the most shameful consequences of the last 13 years is the systemic failure to tackle violence against women and girls, which is having serious consequences. I rarely have to state the obvious, but sometimes clarity is overlooked in this place. I genuinely do not know whether men can truly understand the fear and the constant, often underlying concern that women feel when out on our streets and in our town centres. Our safety is not always at the forefront of our minds, but let it be known that it is always present in them. I know that women, across ages and across the political divide, know that feeling of asking a friend to take a longer and safer route home or to message when they are back. We have all become used to exhibiting such behaviour as second nature, but how on earth have we got to a point where women and girls cannot reliably feel safe when simply walking through our town centres?

Something commonly overlooked is the huge impact that the situation is having on older people, who may be equally vulnerable and the targets of crime. I have heard from a number of older residents—male and female—in my own area, who no longer feel safe visiting Pontypridd on market day. What used to be a bustling day for local businesses on the high street is now often a busy day for my local police force, who are having to do more and more with less and less. That is the simple reality of the situation: this Tory Government have sat by and made

cuts to policing that are having a huge impact. Visible policing on our streets remains at record lows, and often police officers have to travel across county lines, which means the connections and knowledge of a local area are sadly lost.

I am lucky in south Wales to have the support of a fantastic, hardworking and award-winning set of police community support officers covering our town centre, including Constable Liam Noyce, Hannah Lowe, Christopher Jones, Lisa Banfield, and Shanie Ross. Sadly, I know that many other areas are not as fortunate. The Government's lack of leadership means that they have failed to ensure that professional standards in policing are high enough. Recent events and appalling evidence of misconduct have also shown us the extent to which trust in policing can be shattered, and without that trust, policing by consent sadly becomes impossible.

Patterns of crime and vulnerability are changing, but neither the police nor the criminal justice system has kept up. Labour can, and will, do better. As a priority, a Labour Government will crack down on serious violent crime by preventing young people from getting drawn into crime and criminal gangs in the first place. We recognise that there are serious issues with knife crime, which is destroying young lives, devastating families and undermining our communities.

To tackle that we need a serious programme of police reform and crime prevention. Government Departments must work together, and work with the Home Office, to intervene where young people are at risk and act quickly when knife crime incidents are recorded. At the moment police forces and local authorities are lacking in direction, but a Labour Government will take action at the root.

Whether that is by tackling websites that promote and sell machetes and dangerous knives, or taking action to stop vulnerable young people being drawn into crime and gangs by putting access to mental health support workers into every school, it is the Labour party that takes safety seriously.

It is utterly wrong that this Government have abandoned their basic duty to keep people safe on our streets and online. The numbers speak for themselves. Most of all, after 13 years of Tory Government, more than 90% of crimes are going unsolved. That means that criminals are less than half as likely to be caught now than when Labour was last in government. The Conservatives' legacy on crime and justice is one of damaging decline and collapsing confidence, and victims and communities are paying the price. I echo the pleas of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who asked the Minister to do better. If he cannot commit to getting the basics right on personal safety, people across the country will sadly continue to suffer. Only Labour has a solid plan for change, and never, ever, has the need been stronger.

4.22 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I thank both shadow Ministers for the opportunity to debate this important topic, and it is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). We worked together when we were both on the Culture, Media and Sport Front Benches. I am not sure whether she is following me or vice-versa, but it is a pleasure to continue to work with her.

I agree that the retail community, which serves this country so well, is the lifeblood of our town centres, and it breathes life into the heart of our communities. My very first job was working in a shop, in Sainsbury's in south London, not far from my current constituency. I was stacking shelves among other things, so I have had direct experience of working on the frontline of retail, as I am sure other hon. Members have had as well.

Before I talk a little about shoplifting and antisocial behaviour—as a number of Members from across the House have said, more needs to be done there—I want to talk about the facts on crime and policing as a whole. We have heard many Opposition Members trying to paint a sort of dystopian, almost Dickensian picture as part of their pre-election campaigning—they have referred repeatedly to an election, and make no bones about it: this is a piece of electioneering. Their dystopian anecdotes do not bear scrutiny when measured against the facts. We owe it to this House and the public to be clear about the facts.

Let me start with the crime statistics. The Office for National Statistics says that the only reliable source of crime data is the crime survey of England and Wales. In the past year, all crime as measured by the crime survey has fallen by 10%. Since 2010, when this Government came into office, crime has fallen by 56% on a like-for-like basis, meaning that crime under the last Labour Government was around double the level it is today.

Looking at some of the more serious crime types individually, here are the falls we have seen since 2010: criminal damage is down by 73%, domestic burglary is down by 47%, theft from the person is down by 44%, vehicle theft is down by 39%, violence is down by 52% and total theft is down by 47%. Those are the facts, those are the figures and they are published by the independent Office for National Statistics. *[Interruption.]* The figures for the last year include fraud and are down by 10%.

Let me talk for a moment about police numbers. Some Opposition Members referred to the reduction in police numbers that occurred in the years following 2010, before I was even a Member of Parliament. Let us remember why there was financial pressure in those years. That was because, as the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, helpfully said, there was no money left. The economic devastation left by the last Labour Government led to difficult choices. In the past three years, we have hired 21,000 more police officers.

Jess Phillips *rose—*

Chris Philp: I will give way in a moment. We now have 149,556 police officers employed in England and Wales. That is more than we have ever had at any time in this country's history, including 2010. Labour has chosen to look today at neighbourhood policing, which is a subset of local policing. When we look at all local policing, which includes several different subcategories, the number has gone up from 61,000 to 67,000. That includes a number of categories, not just neighbourhood and response.

Tom Randall *rose—*

Chris Philp: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and then to my hon. Friend.

Jess Phillips: I just wonder, as the Minister is doing such enthusiastic cheerleading for his Government, whether he could remind me who the biggest cheerleader was for the mini-Budget.

Chris Philp: I am not sure what that has to do with the devastation that the last Labour Government wreaked on the economy, with the biggest recession for a generation and unemployment at twice the level it is today. I am surprised that the hon. Member wants to talk about the last Labour Government's appalling economic record.

Let me return to crime and policing, or you will tick me off for being out of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I acknowledged a moment ago that there are some areas where we need to do better, and shoplifting and antisocial behaviour are two of those, as Members on both sides of the House have said.

Let me start with shoplifting. Across the western world, including in the US, Germany and France, in the past year or two we have seen a considerable increase in shoplifting, and the same has happened in the United Kingdom. While the 29% increase in prosecutions for shoplifting in the past year is welcome, we clearly need to do more. That is why the Government set out a retail crime action plan to do more in this area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) said in his excellent speech. That was published just a few weeks ago. It includes a commitment by the police to attend shoplifting incidents where that is necessary to secure evidence, where there has been an assault, or where a suspect has been detained, for example, by store security staff.

It is not acceptable, frankly, that the Co-op has discovered that in about three quarters of cases where its staff have detained an offender, the police did not attend. I have said directly to the police that that is not acceptable, and they have responded with the commitment they have made in the recent action plan. I expect better, and the police have committed to delivering better.

Jim McMahon *rose*—

Chris Philp: I promised to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, but I will then give way to the hon. Member.

Tom Randall: I am old enough to remember the last Labour Government. They went into the 2010 election promising a £1 billion cut to the Home Office budget, which I am sure would have had an effect on police numbers. Whether it was the coalition Government cleaning up Labour's mess or the Labour Government cleaning up their own mess, someone would have had to make the difficult financial decisions in 2010 that my right hon. Friend the Minister outlined.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend has a much better memory than some Opposition Members.

Jim McMahon: If we accept that there was nothing the Government could do about the near quarter of a million cases—the Minister has used the Co-operative

Group's figure himself—where a police officer did not turn up when somebody had been apprehended, is he now saying that, from today, a police officer will turn up to every single call from a Co-op store?

Chris Philp: Chief Constable Amanda Blakeman, who is the National Police Chiefs' Council lead on this issue, has committed in the retail crime action plan, which I urge the hon. Member to read, that where an offender has been detained, the police will prioritise attendance. I expect all of us in Parliament, and police and crime commissioners, to hold the police to account in delivering that commitment. The police have also committed to identify and target prolific offenders, and to always follow reasonable lines of inquiry in relation to all crimes, not just shoplifting. That includes, for example, always retrieving CCTV or mobile phone footage and running it through the police national database to seek a facial recognition match to identify offenders.

The technology has improved enormously, even in the last six to 12 months. The artificial intelligence that drives it means that images that appear to be blurred or partially obscured, which a year or two ago could not be matched, now can be matched. Always running images from Ring doorbells, mobile phone pictures, dashcam footage and CCTV footage through the police national database will lead to very many more offenders—shoplifters, but also others—being caught. I have asked all 43 police forces across England and Wales to double the use of retrospective facial recognition in the coming year, to make sure that more offenders are caught.

Time is pressing, so let me move on to antisocial behaviour, which a number of Members on both sides of the House rightly identified as a challenge in town centres. My hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) both made, in their very different ways, powerful speeches on this topic, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and others on both sides. Antisocial behaviour is a scourge. It leaves people feeling uneasy when they visit their town centres, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich that we need a zero-tolerance approach.

In the last five or six months, we have trialled antisocial behaviour hotspot patrols in a number of police force areas, and they have been extremely successful. In the areas where they have been run—they have been fully funded with extra money, by the way—they have reduced antisocial behaviour by something like 20% to 30%. Staffordshire is one of the counties that has been trialling the patrols, along with Lancashire and Essex. Because the approach has been so successful, we will roll it out across the whole country from April next year. It will be fully funded and that will pay for something like 30,000 hours a year of hotspot patrolling in each police force area, to address the issue of people feeling unsafe or uneasy in town centres. My hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich, for Stoke-on-Trent North and for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned that in their excellent speeches. It is coming soon; in fact, it is coming as soon as April.

I have set out the actions being taken on retail crime and on ASB, and I have set out the fact that crime is falling and that we have record police numbers, so let me come to the electioneering we heard from the Opposition. The hon. Members for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins)

and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) called for an election in what was an extraordinary display of overconfidence, so let us have a look at what Labour delivers in government.

The last Labour Government delivered fewer police officers than we now have. They delivered double the levels of crime that we now have. In London, where there is a Labour police and crime commissioner, Sadiq Khan failed to recruit 1,089 officers, despite being given money by the Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) pointed out. He could have recruited them—the money was there—but he failed to do so. Knife crime under Sadiq Khan has gone up, and he was told off by the Office for National Statistics for misleading the public—let us be generous and say that it was unintentional—by claiming that knife crime had fallen on his watch. In the west midlands, where there is a Labour police and crime commissioner, they are looking at closing police stations.

Finally, let us look at the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Just a year ago, the Labour party voted against that Bill. Labour Members voted against increasing the sentences for people assaulting emergency workers. They voted against making assaulting a shop worker a statutory aggravating factor. They voted against measures to clamp down on disruptive protests. They voted against making whole-life orders for premeditated child murder mandatory. In fact, in the Bill Committee Labour even voted against keeping rapists in prison for longer, having introduced release at the halfway point in 2003.

We have seen Labour's record in government and its record in London and the west midlands, and we have seen Labour Members voting against strong legislative measures. The Government have delivered record police numbers and falling crime. We have got a plan on antisocial behaviour and on shoplifting. I commend that to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House condemns the Government's failure to tackle town centre crime; is concerned that shoplifting has reached record levels, with a 25% rise over the past year and 1,000 offences per day, while the detection rate for shoplifters has fallen; believes that immediate action must be taken to stop the increasing number of unacceptable incidents of violence and abuse faced by shop workers; notes that the number of neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers has been reduced by 10,000 since 2015; and calls on the Government to back Labour's community policing guarantee, which includes scrapping the £200 limit on crown court prosecutions for shoplifting in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, creating a new specific offence of violence against shop workers, rolling out town centre policing plans and putting 13,000 extra police and community support officers back in town centres to crack down on antisocial behaviour.

Water Companies: Executive Bonuses

4.36 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House regrets that 13 years of successive Conservative Governments have broken the water industry and its regulatory framework; is deeply concerned about the scale of the sewage crisis and the devastating impact it is having on the UK's rivers, lakes and seas; believes it is indefensible that executives at UK water companies were paid over £14 million in bonuses between 2020 and 2021 despite inflicting significant environmental and human damage; condemns the Government for being too weak to tackle the crisis and hold water company bosses to account; calls on the Government to empower Ofwat to ban the payment of bonuses to water company executives whose companies are discharging significant levels of raw sewage into the UK's seas and waterways; and further calls on the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make a statement to this House by 31 January 2024 on the Government's progress in implementing this ban.

I will continue, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Yes, otherwise that would be the shortest speech.

Steve Reed: I will not be that kind to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Our beautiful waterways have been polluted by the highest level of illegal sewage discharges in our history under this Conservative Government. Last year, there was at least one spill every 2.5 minutes—and that is just the spills that we know about, because not every spill is properly reported. Over a year ago, Vaughan Lewis, an Environment Agency whistleblower, warned the Government about serious failures of regulation. He said that

“it was impossible for the Environment Agency to know what's going on”

because the Government had

“ceded the control of monitoring to water companies, which ended up being able to mark their own homework. They take their own samples and assess whether they are being compliant.”

Now, we have more evidence that that is precisely what has been going on.

Last night, the BBC's “Panorama” investigation exposed yet another scandal—exactly what that whistleblower warned about in August 2022, which has been ignored by four Conservative Environment Secretaries since. According to the “Panorama” team, leaked records show that United Utilities deliberately downgraded and misreported severe sewage leaks, including discharges into Lake Windermere, one of the most beautiful places in England. Of 931 reported water company pollution incidents in north-west England last year, the Environment Agency attended a paltry six. It is as clear as day that the water companies are covering up illegal sewage discharges. That is a national scandal.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Does he agree that the failure of the Conservatives to prevent illegal sewage leaks has led to a drastic increase in illegal discharges, which has affected our communities, damaged nature, damaged tourism, and put the health of kids and adults at risk?

Steve Reed: As always, my hon. Friend makes an important point very eloquently. I am sure that all our constituents up and down the country are appalled by what they have seen not just on “Panorama” last night, but when they have visited our beautiful waterways up and down the country. Raw human excrement polluting our waterways is not just disgusting; it destroys natural habitats, kills wildlife and damages tourism. Perhaps most appallingly of all, it makes people sick—children most of all—if they swallow parasitic bacteria and chemicals that should be nowhere near our rivers, lakes and seas.

How on earth did we get here? The Conservative Government cut the Environment Agency’s resources in half. That led to a dramatic reduction in monitoring, enforcement and prosecutions, leaving illegal sewage spills to double between 2016 and 2021.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Like me, he will have noted that the Minister is in her place. She was strangely missing yesterday for the Lib Dem amendment on compensation for those harmed by the criminal handling of sewage, though she was present in the Division Lobby just 15 minutes later. Does my hon. Friend think that she was allowed to abstain, or should she be sacked?

Steve Reed: It is hard to know whether discipline has broken down in the Conservative party; its Members seem able to rebel with impunity. When the Minister speaks, I am sure she will enlighten the House about what happened.

Instead of acting on the warnings, the Government have turned a blind eye to what has been going on. Thanks to this Government’s wilful negligence, we see record levels of toxic sewage swilling through our rivers and lakes, pouring into our seas and lapping on to our beaches.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I know that the hon. Gentleman would not want to make a partisan speech; he would want to make a balanced appraisal of the challenges, which we all regard with the seriousness that he has described. He mentioned beaches. Will he acknowledge that the proportion of bathing waters regarded as good or excellent has increased dramatically—from 76% to 93%, to be precise—since 2010, when his party was last in power?

Steve Reed: Heaven forfend that anyone would make a partisan speech in this place. I do not believe that the quality of water on our beaches is acceptable. Many campaign groups, such as Surfers Against Sewage, regularly point out the very low, even toxic, quality of the water that their families and they wish to enjoy. Many constituents of Members on both sides of the House will share those concerns. I hope that this debate is a time for us to come together to collectively identify the problems and move forward with proposals to tackle them. The right hon. Member, just like me and Members from all parts of the House, will share the concern that our once pristine waterways have been polluted by stinking, toxic filth. However, I hold the sewage party opposite responsible. The Prime Minister would not put up with raw sewage in his private swimming pool, so why is he happy to treat the British countryside as an open sewer?

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that when Labour was last in power, it produced a draft Flood and Water Management Bill in 2009 that aimed to reduce red tape and other burdens on water and sewerage companies. The uproar at the time forced the Labour Government to change their mind. This Government have tightened regulations and made water companies start paying for the pollution.

Steve Reed: The hon. Member can be as much as of an apologist as she likes for the filthy, toxic sewage swilling through our rivers, but her constituents will hear what she says, contrast it with what they see and draw their own conclusions when the election comes, I am sure.

Whistleblowers and leaked documents give us a very clear explanation of why the water companies are behaving in the way they are. If they downgrade and cover up sewage spills, they are rewarded with permission to increase their customers’ bills, which boosts their profits. Fewer reported spills—not actual, but reported—and more profits mean bigger bonuses for the water bosses. Profiteering from covering up lawbreaking is corruption—corruption to which this Conservative Government have turned a blind eye.

Labour will crack down on rogue water companies and strengthen regulation to clean up our waterways. We will place the water companies under special measures. As a first step, Labour will ban self-monitoring by water companies. Instead, we will require water companies to install remote monitors on every outlet, with the result overseen by regulators. That way, we will know exactly what is being discharged into our waterways. Any illegal spill will be met with an immediate and severe fine—no more delays, no more appeals, and no more lenient fines that are cheaper than investing to upgrade crumbling infrastructure. Rogue water bosses who oversee repeated, severe and illegal sewage discharges will face personal criminal liability. And we will stop the Conservatives’ disgraceful collusion in this national scandal by reinstating the principle that the polluter pays.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I welcome those strong interventions and regulations. One of the companies the shadow Minister is referring to is United Utilities, which made 27 sewage dumps—nearly 3,000 hours of sewage—in my constituency last year. Those are only the 27 that we know about. We need strong intervention and we need to get the referee on the pitch. Ironically, United Utilities is putting bills up by £110, so I welcome those measures.

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend rightly expresses the anger his constituents feel. Their bills are going up to pay bonuses to water bosses who have allowed this situation to continue to deteriorate. As I said earlier, there is a proposal in the motion, which I hope Members of all parties might consider supporting, to deal with the situation and demonstrate to the chiefs of those organisations which are responsible for the sewage outpours that Parliament and the people of this country will not continue to accept what they are doing.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The hon. Gentleman outlines very effectively all the failings of the water companies and of this Conservative Government to take action. Thames Water has been dumping billions of litres of raw sewage in the River Thames and there

are hundreds of millions of litres of water leaks every single day. That has undermined trust in water companies among bill payers and our constituents. Does he agree with me that, when they have extremely controversial proposals in my constituency and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) to take water out of the river and replace it with treated sewage, there is a huge amount of distrust? Given the construction impacts they will cause in the area and the potential environmental impact on the river, how can people trust them when they give assurances about the safety of such schemes?

Steve Reed: The hon. Lady makes a very important point very eloquently. She is a tireless campaigner on these issues and I am sure that many people who care about the state of our rivers will be grateful to her for leading on that work.

I am sure all Members will be concerned about this point as well. Despite some of the highest levels of illegal sewage discharges in history, water bosses awarded themselves nearly £14 million in bonuses between 2021-22. At the same time, they were planning to increase average household bills by £156. All that was signed off by a broken regulator and Conservative Ministers. That is an absolute abuse of consumers and Labour will stop it. Labour will give the water regulator the power to ban bonuses for water bosses until they have cleaned up their toxic filth.

The Conservative dogma that regulation is anti-business is economically illiterate. Fair regulation applied across a sector is pro-business and pro-growth, as well as being pro-nature in this instance. Businesses want certainty and predictability. If they are left to compete against others who undercut regulation and get away with it, we end up with a race to the bottom. Good businesses and investors need and deserve a level playing field, but this Conservative Government have distorted that. A regulator that is too weak to regulate leads to weak self-monitoring, cover-ups, financial corruption, and our waterways awash with stinking sewage.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I have been here for quite a long time, and the situation has been the same for the 23 years for which I have been a Member. I accept that things have got worse. What I suspect we need to do is take the main board of each water company and hold them accountable. South West Water, for instance, which serves Devon and Cornwall and the edge of the Minister's constituency of Taunton Deane, covers up by using a sub-board which runs the company. It is the main board with which we should deal, and the same goes for Wessex Water and every other company that we need to go after. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that action must be taken, although the situation including bonuses has been the same for the past 23 years.

Steve Reed: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's recognition that the situation is indeed getting worse. That should stimulate all of us to find ways of taking action to protect water quality for all our constituents, who really do deserve better.

I was talking about uncertainty in the regulatory field. The current level of uncertainty does not attract much-needed investment in our water industry; on the contrary, it deters it.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the impact he is making on an important issue that affects almost every community in the country. I am glad that he has taken such a robust line on the regulator, because it is the elephant in the room. We have focused our fire on the Government because they have failed and on the water companies because they have taken money and failed, but the regulators have failed as well, because it was on their watch that this has been allowed to happen. In the midst of all that, it cannot be right for consumers to end up paying twice, first for the dividends that have already gone out of the door and then for putting the system right.

Steve Reed: I am grateful for the work that my hon. Friend has led in exposing some of the same problems as my predecessor in this post. He clearly knows an awful lot about these issues, and he makes his point very well.

Let me move on to the broader issue of nature. The destruction of nature that this Government have encouraged is unacceptable. As a party, they increasingly position themselves against nature. On their watch, we now have one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, yet they have rowed back on their net zero commitments. They have broken their promise to fund farmers fairly to maintain environmental schemes on their land; they have tried to weaken environmental standards relating to nutrient neutrality to allow building alongside estuaries where the increased pollution would tip habitats beyond the point of recovery while refusing to build where the environmental impact could more easily be mitigated; and now they are turning a blind eye while our rivers are turned into sewers.

Economic growth does not have to stand in opposition to protecting and restoring nature. The two must go hand in hand. Labour's mission to make this country a clean energy superpower will create thousands of good, well-paid, secure jobs, and part of it is a national mission to restore nature, including our polluted waterways. It seems that the longer the Tories are in power, the more nature suffers. They have little concept of the pride that the British people take in our countryside, of its importance to our sense of who we are as a nation and to our sense of belonging.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Were the British people not told by Minister after Minister in this Government that environmental standards would be enhanced and improved as a result of Brexit, and have they not been betrayed again by this shabby Administration?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an accurate observation. People were promised one thing but the Government then tried to do the opposite.

Sir John Hayes: I share the hon. Gentleman's passion for wildlife. We need a diverse countryside of the kind that he describes and I make the case, as he does, for hedgerows, trees and so on. Among the things that blight the countryside, however, are onshore wind turbines, which kill bats and birds and which are anchored by hundreds of thousands of tonnes of concrete, and widespread onshore solar, which eats up agricultural land and turns the countryside into an industrial place. Would he oppose those things?

Steve Reed: The right hon. Gentleman's intervention started off well but it tailed off towards the end. If we can shift to a reliance on clean energy rather than on fossil fuels, we will support, enhance, protect and conserve nature, which is what we should all be seeking to do.

There can be no more graphic a metaphor for 14 years of Conservative failure than the human excrement now swilling through our waterways—the visible desecration of our countryside and the toxic legacy of Tory rule. It has often been the case in history that Labour has had to clean up the Tories' mess, but rarely quite so literally. It is time to turn the page on 14 years of decline and to embrace a decade of national renewal with nature at its heart. That is why Labour has a plan to clean up our waterways by ending self-monitoring; introducing severe and automatic fines for illegal sewage dumping; criminal liability for water bosses who repeatedly and severely break the law; and no more bonuses for water bosses who profit from pollution. Conservative Ministers have sewage on their hands. This debate—and the vote that I hope follows—is a chance for them to show whose side they are on: the water companies or clean water. If they refuse, the next Labour Government will clean up their mess and restore pride in our rivers, our lakes and our seas.

4.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I would like to thank the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) for raising this important issue. As I have said constantly, all sewage in our waterways is completely and utterly unacceptable. I am pleased to have this opportunity to put on record the huge strides that we have made to deliver clean water for customers and the environment. We are the party for nature. We are the party that brought forward the Environment Act 2021, although many of the measures in it were not supported by Opposition Members. It is a globally leading piece of legislation. If the hon. Gentleman went out on to the global stage, he would realise that we are revered for it, and we now have the whole framework in place to deliver what it states. There are many measures in it to tackle water.

I am genuinely proud to have instigated and driven through our plan for water, which was supported by hundreds of people. It had a huge amount of expertise put into it to deliver it, and we are delivering it. It sets out a genuinely holistic plan to deliver more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement, and make no mistake, it is cross-party. I would like to make the hon. Gentleman an offer. Would he like me to give him a copy, because I am not sure that he has actually looked at it? I would be happy to do that after the debate.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions the plan for water, but she will be aware that the previous Secretary of State came to Herefordshire, where she attended a roundtable in Hereford and promised that a plan for the River Wye would be brought to us by 15 September, three months after that meeting. We have yet to see it. I have to say, on behalf of the people of my county, that we are starting to run out of patience. When can we expect this plan to come through?

Rebecca Pow: I am well aware that the previous Secretary of State came to the River Wye, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) will know that I came to the River Wye some time before her visit—he could not make my visit—so I have some knowledge of the area, and I understand his concerns. The action plan is under way. As my right hon. Friend knows, we have had a few changes but the new water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), is here, and the action plan is very much on the cards. I thank the people who did all that work on the Wye, because it is not just about water and sewage; it is a very complicated issue that also brings in farming and farmers along the river, as my right hon. Friend is well aware from his involvement.

Whatever the Labour party might say, many of the problems that were vociferously raised by the shadow Minister actually started on Labour's watch. We are where we are because of Labour's failure to do anything about it. There was virtually no monitoring. In fact, it was Labour that allowed the water companies' self-monitoring that the shadow Minister criticises. It was his party that started the self-monitoring.

To set the record straight, I remind the shadow Minister that the Labour Government were given legal notice by the EU on sewage discharges from overflows in Whitburn. Labour certainly did not have a glowing record when it had its opportunity.

Mike Amesbury: A whistleblower made serious allegations against United Utilities on "Panorama", and the Minister mentioned monitoring. It was clearly gaming the system. What robust intervention has she so far made with United Utilities, which operates in my constituency and beyond?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman is right to be concerned. As I go through my speech, he will hear all the measures that we have put in place for all the water companies, not just United Utilities.

As I said at the beginning, I want to be clear that the current volume of sewage discharged by water companies is utterly unacceptable. They must act urgently to improve their performance so that they can meet both Government and public expectations, but it is because of the monitoring that this Government required the water companies to put in place that we now know what is happening and the scale of the challenge that we face.

We have upped the pressure on the water companies so that, by the end of this year, 100% of all storm sewage overflows will be monitored. We are taking the most ambitious action in water company history to tackle sewage pollution, including using new powers and new responsibilities in the landmark Environment Act 2021, which I was proud to take through Parliament—many of the shadow Ministers obviously engaged with the Act's passage—and there is also the additional £60 billion storm sewage overflow discharge reduction plan.

Despite saying that they care about our precious water, many Opposition Members did not vote for all these measures so that the people of this country—including you and me, Mr Deputy Speaker—can have the wonderful water and the beautiful environment that we deserve. It is through our measures that we are now holding water

companies to account, in a way that has never been seen before, with more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement. We will continue to go further in holding the industry accountable for its actions.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister knows perfectly well that we opposed some of these measures during the passage of the Environment Bill because we did not think it was strong enough. The Bill was very weak in places, hence our opposition. Given that the Minister's constituents are covered by Wessex Water, does she think it is right that the company is asking its customers to pay an extra £150 a year towards funding work on infrastructure, when the chief executive took home pay of £982,000 in 2021-22? I do not think my constituents, who are also customers of Wessex Water, should have to pay that extra money. Does she?

Rebecca Pow: That is an important point, and it is why we have made so many changes to the regulator—I will go into detail in a minute. It is quite clear that customers will not be paying for water company bonuses. Ofwat and its board now have very strong powers to oversee all of this.

I am going to go through the points one by one. I will start with more investment. We are ensuring that our regulators have the investment and the powers they need, and we are ensuring that the water companies deliver the infrastructure improvements that we urgently require. Since privatisation we have unlocked over £215 billion of investment in England, with £7.1 billion in environmental improvements by water companies over the period 2020 to 2025. It includes £3.1 billion in storm overflow improvements; and £1.9 billion of that is for the incredible Thames tideway tunnel, which is on track to transform tackling sewage pollution for the people of London. I am sure that our Liberal Democrats present will welcome that, because it is a game-changing project.

In addition, over 800 storm overflow improvements countrywide have been set in motion. They are under way and will be completed by 2025. It is because of all our monitoring that we were able to pinpoint where all this work needs to take place.

Seema Malhotra: Could the Minister perhaps say a bit more about consumer protection? We all want this problem to be dealt with, and she is laying out some of the actions that she is saying the Government will take forward, but with my constituents having seen a £175 increase and expecting that to continue, there is a real question about consumer fairness and what customers are actually paying for. It would be helpful to know what discussions she has had with water bosses about their increased bills and what they are going towards.

Rebecca Pow: That is a very sensible and important point. That is why the price review process is under way, and all the water company plans are being forensically analysed, with requirements that we have put on them to deliver all this infrastructure, but also always to be mindful of the costs to the bill payer. We have to get investors in to invest in this, but we also have to be mindful of what goes on the bill, which is essential, and that is what Ofwat will be considering. Members will be hearing a lot more about those price plans shortly.

There is also a system for vulnerable customers. We have upped the number of customers that water companies have to help if they are struggling with their bills, so there is a clear plan for that.

Our storm overflows discharge reduction plan goes even further. It requires water companies to deliver the largest infrastructure programme in water company history, amounting to £60 billion of investment over 25 years.

Munira Wilson: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will carry on for a minute, because I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will be urging me to speed up. For information, I wanted to say that in a recent High Court judgment it was found that our storm sewage overflows discharge reduction plan actually goes over and above the requirements of existing regulation. It would be nice if the Opposition recognised that, because it was specifically highlighted.

Neil Coyle: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Rebecca Pow: I am going to carry on for a bit.

Ensuring that our regulators are fit for purpose, to enforce our new regime, is absolutely crucial. With that in mind, we have increased the Environment Agency's overall grant-in-aid funding by over 40% and capital funding by 80% since 2010. We have also provided an extra £2.2 million per year specifically for water company enforcement activity. In May we did even more: we provided £11.3 million of funding increase to Ofwat to treble its enforcement activity, because both EA and Ofwat have enforcement powers. In June, in recognition of the urgency of action, Ofwat approved a further £2.2 billion of accelerated infrastructure, which included £1.7 billion of investment, in reducing sewage discharges, including a major project to reduce sewage discharges in Lake Windermere.

The shadow Minister mentioned automatic fines. That idea would backfire, because if the regulators found evidence of criminal misdemeanours, it would prevent them from going through the courts and we would effectively end up with even higher fines. So the system of automatic fines would not work, but we have just brought in our unlimited penalties for the environment, so the regulators could use that option, but we still need the option for them to go to the courts if necessary.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): On that point, will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will talk about stronger regulation now. We are bringing in even tougher regulations than ever before to hold water companies to account. In the summer, Ofwat confirmed new plans to ensure that customers no longer fund executive bonus payments where companies have not met Ofwat's expectation on environmental performance. Using new powers granted to Ofwat by this Government in the landmark Environment Act 2021, Ofwat announced in March that it will take enforcement action against water companies that do not link dividend payments to environmental performance. As I said, we have also legislated to bring in unlimited penalties on water companies that breach

[Rebecca Pow]

their environmental permits. The changes will provide the Environment Agency with the tools it needs to hold water companies to account.

Claire Hanna: The Minister may be aware of the evolving environmental catastrophe in Lough Neagh, which is the largest lake in these islands and a key biodiversity asset for Northern Ireland. It is dying in front of our eyes because of blue-green algal bloom related to agricultural run-off and sewage discharge from Northern Ireland Water, which is entirely Government owned. In that context, does she agree with me that Northern Ireland desperately needs an independent environment agency, to try to reconcile the competing priorities of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—DEFRA's sister Department in Northern Ireland—which is responsible for both swelling agricultural assets and protecting the environment? Clearly, in this context the environment is being failed.

Rebecca Pow: I have heard about this incident. I refer DAERA to our plans on water to see how we are tackling such issues. Farming is a big cause of some of the pollution. We have launched our slurry infrastructure grant and a range of measures to work with farmers to cut down that pollution, so lessons could be shared.

Neil Coyle: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I just wanted to say that we want to continue to drive down nutrient pollution from the water sector, which is why we have set a legally binding target to reduce phosphorus loads from wastewater treatment—

Neil Coyle: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman might be interested in this. We have set targets to reduce phosphorus loads from wastewater treatment works by 80% by 2038, relative to a 2020 baseline. In areas where protected habitat sites are particularly impacted by nutrient pollution, which I am sure interests the hon. Gentleman, we are going even further. In the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, we placed a new requirement on water companies to upgrade wastewater treatment works in designated areas to the highest technically achievable standards by April 2030.

Neil Coyle: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman is so unrelenting that I will give way.

Neil Coyle: It seems apt that this is debate No. 2 this afternoon. If the Minister has so much faith in the measures she is talking about, why was she absent last night from the vote on new clause 10 in the Victims and Prisoners Bill on the sewage illness victim compensation scheme, despite voting just 15 minutes later?

Rebecca Pow: We have such a strong plan and it will be fully operational. I completely support the Government with the line they took last night. I am lined up with what we were dealing with last night and I support the

Government position. I was dealing with some particularly urgent business last night. In my view, the new clause was superfluous because we already have powers, including those on criminal conduct, for people to act if they have been affected by pollution. They can already seek compensation when there is evidence of personal injury, loss or damage.

To get back to my speech, I am now on the bit about tougher enforcement. We recognise concerns about enforcement. We are working closely with Ofwat and the new leadership at the Environment Agency to ensure that regulators are holding the water industry to the highest possible standards. That includes bringing fines against water companies that do not comply with their permits and publishing the environmental performance assessment of water companies in England, giving a clear picture of company performance. Where that is insufficient, action will be and is being taken.

I had been meeting all the lagging water companies highlighted through that assessment to challenge them on their performance, and I am pleased that the new water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley, is continuing to do that. I believe he met Yorkshire Water yesterday and South East Water last night, so we are continuing our unstinting drive with the water companies.

The regulator has launched the largest criminal and civil investigations in water company history into sewage discharges at more than 2,200 treatment works, following new data that has come to light as a result of increased monitoring at waste water treatment works. We have taken robust enforcement action against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits. Since 2015, the Environment Agency has concluded 59 prosecutions against water and sewage companies, securing fines of more than £150 million.

I cannot miss the opportunity to say that in Labour-run Wales sewage discharges are double what they are in England, so it is hard to take any lessons from the Opposition. They have the opportunity to step in and sort that out but they have not taken it.

The Government have launched the revolutionary storm overflows reduction plan, which prioritises action on the overflows that cause the most harm, to make the biggest difference as quickly as possible. Our strict targets will see the toughest ever crackdown on sewage spills and, as I have already stated, will require water companies to deliver that huge infrastructure programme worth £60 billion. Our plan will protect biodiversity, the ecology of our rivers and seas, and the public health of water users for generations to come.

Munira Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: No, because I am moving on to bonuses and dividends.

The Government have taken unprecedented measures to bring into balance the remuneration of water company executives. This summer, Ofwat confirmed new plans to ensure that customers no longer fund executive bonus payments if companies have not met Ofwat's expectations on environmental performance. Ofwat will regularly review executive bonus payments and, when companies do not meet expectations, step in to ensure that customers do not pick up the bill. That answers the point made

earlier by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). There is no need for the Labour party's proposals, because we are already doing really strong work on bonuses and dividends.

I want to be really clear that bill payers come first. For the 2022-23 period, no water and sewage company in England and Wales is paying a chief executive officer bonus out of customer money, while half of CEOs are taking no bonus whatsoever. This is the first time that has ever happened in the history of the water industry, reflecting the industry's recognition that the public expect better.

In March 2023, Ofwat announced new measures on dividends that will enable it to take enforcement action against companies that do not link dividend payments to performance. I remind the House that in each year since privatisation, investment has actually been much greater than the dividends paid out.

I am going to conclude—

Munira Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I have given way enough; we want to get on and hear other speakers.

This Government will leave no stone unturned in tackling all aspects of water pollution and poor water company performance. That is why we have introduced the most comprehensive costed plan for water that delivers more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement. By contrast—

Neil Coyle *rose*—

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman has had his chance.

By contrast, the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrat party do not have credible plans to reduce discharges—we cannot just switch off storm overflows overnight, as some suggest—and their mixed bag of proposals would actually add hundreds of pounds to customers' bills. That addresses the point made by the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). Labour's proposals would involve the digging up of enough pipes to go two and a half times around the globe. [*Interruption.*] That is actually correct.

As I said, I am really happy to share our plan for water with the shadow Secretary of State so that the Opposition can see exactly what is in place—our comprehensive, costed plan—and see that we are delivering now.

5.19 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am really pleased to speak in a very important debate for me and my constituents. The east Durham coastline is a huge asset to the region and to the country. From Seaham to Blackhall, I represent the most stunning coastline in Great Britain. We have amazing beaches, with an abundance of sea glass, sand dunes and limestone caves. Our seas are home to a formidable group of open water swimmers, braving the North sea at all times of the year. Our marina at Seaham provides access to various water sports, including canoeing, paddleboarding and windsurfing. Crimdon Dene visitor hub and café is encouraging more people to visit and enjoy our east Durham coastline.

On the sea front and the clifftops of east Durham, there is also an array of art, iconic locations and national heritage. Seaham has a newly decommissioned field gun, a further attraction, and is home to Tommy, a Ray Lonsdale world war one sculpture, an artwork that was voted the Sky Arts No. 1 public artwork and attracts a large number of people to our coastline. From Easington, the site of the former colliery, the views stretch from County Durham to North Yorkshire.

A nature reserve sits at the centre of the once thriving industrial heart of the community, and it is also the site of a memorial garden that honours the 83 miners and rescuers who lost their lives in the terrible disaster at Easington colliery in 1951. Blackhall is another site of special scientific interest. The wildflowers and grass of the clifftops offer peaceful views, with easy access to Blackhall's beach caves. The coastline is also home to a unique music and film heritage. My constituency was the backdrop to the iconic "Who's Next" album cover and the location for a number of films, including "Get Carter", "Billy Elliot" and, most recently, "The Old Oak".

That is why I am passionate about protecting our precious coastline. Industrial spoil from coal mining once blighted it and the beaches were blackened with coal dust and abandoned colliery infrastructure, but we reclaimed the coastline for nature. The "Turning The Tide" project removed industrial pollution from the east Durham coastline, and the improvement has made the environment more enjoyable for everyone.

Coal spoil was once a visible scar on the environment, but water pollution represents a more insidious and more discreet risk to our health, welfare and environment. I was interested by the Minister's comments about personal injury, because water pollution hit the headlines recently when we had the ironman world triathlon championship series at Sunderland. There are three elements to the event, cycling, running and swimming, and after the swimming element, 88 of the athletes fell ill from swimming in waters contaminated with E. coli. I do not know what redress there was for personal injury, but we know the source of the problem.

Northumbrian Water, once a publicly owned authority but now under Chinese ownership, pollutes our seas whenever it rains. I looked yesterday at the Safer Seas & Rivers Service app, which I recommend to all hon. Members; we have had some terrible weather in the north-east, and as the snow thawed Northumbrian Water was polluting our seas at three sewage overflows in my constituency. That is just one of 164 incidents of Northumbrian Water dumping raw sewage in my constituency.

Neil Coyle: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about degradation. The Minister seemed to suggest that her Government were revered for their work on this issue. Do his constituents share my constituents' view that, on the contrary, this is a Government of the effluent for the effluent?

Grahame Morris: What an excellent intervention, if I may say so. The suggestion that things are getting better is not the experience of my constituents—and as for the Minister's commitment to addressing the issues, my feeling is that she is simply going through the motions.

[Grahame Morris]

We need a solution. I am an old-school socialist. Clean water, rivers and seas are very important, and private water companies have failed in their duty of care. Those companies enjoy a privileged position: no competition, a weak regulator and a compliant Government. I want to end those private monopolies—we should control and run water in the national interest—but I am a realist: the Tories and my own party do not have the appetite for nationalisation, so I will propose an alternative.

Private water companies have extracted huge dividends since privatisation, which they have secured through higher bills and a failure to invest, and by ramping up debt. In December 2022, *The Guardian* reported that water companies have paid £69.5 billion in dividends. Over the same period, they have racked up £54 billion in debts. Companies promise to invest in infrastructure, but only by passing on higher costs to consumers. Why do we accept water companies ripping us off, polluting our waters and telling us to pay to clean up their mess? The Government must take control of the situation.

I support the following: the Government must block all future dividend payments until water companies meet set standards including clean water targets, debt targets, investment targets and low consumer bills; we need a zero dumping policy—sewage overflows must be an exception, not the normal practice; we need a sustainable water industry, which means an end to the practice of borrowing in order to pay dividends; and new and modern infrastructure must be prioritised before dividends.

The promise of privatisation is always better service and lower costs, but we have seen worse service and higher bills every time. Private companies are driven by profits. The proposals that I have set out are a means of delivering the public interest. Dividends and profits should be awarded only when private companies deliver the promised services. If we cannot spend in the next Parliament, we need to regulate and reform. If privatised water is to remain, we must ensure that it works and benefits the people we all represent.

5.26 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a real pleasure for me to take part in this debate. I was born and raised in the heart of Cornwall, have lived there my whole life, and have always enjoyed the sea. Members who follow me on any my private social media platforms will know that I am found in, on or beside the sea at just about every possible opportunity. Therefore, I have taken a very keen interest in the whole issue of water quality, particularly bathing water and sewage discharge, throughout my life, long before I was first elected to this House.

We have to start by saying that this is not a new issue. Let us remember that Surfers Against Sewage was started in 1990 specifically to raise awareness about it and deal with it. At that time, less than 25% of UK bathing waters were at a minimum acceptable standard for bathing, whereas there is now only one beach in my constituency that does not meet that standard. I am sorry, but pretending that things are worse than they have ever been is absolute nonsense. We have seen incredible progress on this issue over many years.

I remember very clearly that the Labour Government did absolutely nothing in 13 years to address the issue—zero. When we came into office in 2015, we were the first ever Government to take this matter seriously and start to address it.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What my hon. Friend has just said is not actually accurate. Labour did not just do nothing; in 2006, it cut a deal with the water companies to agree self-assessment on their environmental performance. Does he agree that that is worse than nothing?

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Labour actually made the situation worse—so much so that in 2009, the Labour Government was taken to court by the EU for failing to deal with the issue—so I am sorry, but we will take no lectures whatsoever from the Opposition Front Benchers about dealing with it. We are the first Government who have ever taken this matter seriously and taken action to start addressing it. We do not even have to think back in history, because we have a living example right before us today: in the one part of the UK where the Labour party is in government, the situation is far worse than in England. Wales is responsible for 25% of sewage discharges for the whole of England and Wales, yet it has only 5% of the population, so again, we will take no lectures from the Opposition.

It was this Government who first introduced substantial monitoring of storm overflows. When Labour left office, 7% of storm overflows were monitored; that figure is now 91%, and it will reach 100% in the next few weeks. I place on record my thanks—and, I believe, our thanks—to one of my Cornish colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who started the process of dealing with this issue when he came into DEFRA. I do not believe we would be in the position we are in today with monitoring, or with any of the other measures, if he had not initiated that work when he first became a DEFRA Minister.

Jerome Mayhew: The Liberal Democrats often claim that they are very interested in sewage, yet they fail to mention that the water Minister between 2013 and 2015 was the former Member for North Cornwall, a Liberal Democrat. What did he do to improve the situation? Nothing.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It was not until 2015 that the Government started to take this issue seriously and take action; it did not even happen under the coalition Government. Therefore, all the crowing from the Liberal Democrats that they regard this as a really important issue is nonsense, because when they were in government, they initiated nothing to address it.

It is clear that there is now far greater public awareness and concern about this issue, and it is much higher up the political agenda than ever before, and rightly so. Some of us, particularly in Cornwall, have been pushing for that to be the case for a very long time, so I welcome the fact that sewage discharges are now a much bigger priority and there is much greater public awareness of them. However, again, let us be frank: people are only aware of what is going on because of the increased monitoring that we have introduced. For 13 years under Labour, all of this sewage was being discharged into the

sea, but no one knew about it because there was no monitoring. It is only because of the increase in monitoring over the past few years that we know what is going on.

The first step towards dealing with an issue is to know what is happening. The first step that the Government took was to introduce monitoring, and we now have the data that enables us to hold the water companies to account. Before we had that monitoring and that data, we could not hold them to account because we did not know what was going on; now, we are holding them to account. Since 2015, there have been 58 prosecutions of water companies for failing to fulfil their obligations, and £141 million has been secured in fines. That money is being invested in environmental improvements and in reducing pollution. We must always remember that under this Government, it is the water companies that get taken to court; under Labour, it is the Government who get taken to court.

We now have a plan to reduce storm overflows, which I had the great privilege of launching during my brief time as water Minister. I acknowledge that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) put in most of the legwork to produce that plan; I just had the glory moment of crossing the t's, dotting the i's and launching it. We now have a plan to invest £56 billion in upgrading the infrastructure to reduce sewage discharges, but we have to be honest with the British public. We hear comments from Opposition Members like, "Let's stop sewage immediately; we could do it straightaway," but that is nonsense. We are talking about Victorian infrastructure that has been in place for over 100 years: it is going to take an awful lot of money and an awful lot of time to upgrade and improve that infrastructure to address this issue. However, we now have a plan to make sure that it will happen, and we can hold the water companies to account to ensure that they make that investment and deliver on that plan.

There is also a myth—I am sure Labour Members will mention it today—that somehow Conservative Members voted to allow water companies to continue to discharge sewage. It is a lie: it is not the truth. Actually, we were the ones who brought forward the Environment Act 2021, which contains all the measures that enable us to hold the water companies to account. The Opposition did not support the Act so, if anything, they were the ones who tried to stop us taking action against the water companies, and we were the ones who voted for the Act and all the measures it contains. We need to be absolutely clear that we are the ones taking action and we are the ones taking this matter seriously.

The motion mentions directors' bonuses. It is absolutely right that directors of water companies who fail to keep their obligations when it comes to sewage discharge and other forms of pollution should not be rewarded because of that, but we are already doing it. Ofwat has confirmed that it has the power to review both dividend payments and bonuses where water companies fail to keep to their environmental obligations. I know it is difficult for Labour Members, because they probably sit there looking at all the things we are doing and thinking, "Why on earth didn't we do this when we were in government for 13 years?" I know it must be difficult for them, because they did absolutely nothing. They made things worse, not better, and it is this Government who are delivering on this issue.

I take this issue seriously. I have taken this issue seriously for many years—long before I came to this House—and it is right that the public are now much more aware of how important it is, but let us get real: we are dealing with it. We are taking the necessary steps to reduce the amount of sewage that will be discharged, and I welcome that. I believe that this Government will continue to deliver on our plan, and we will see things continue to improve in the years ahead.

5.36 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will try to do better than that.

I want to talk for a few minutes about Thames Water, which has the job of supplying water and sewerage services to about 17 million people in London and the south-east. I will speak, first, about my constituents' experience of Thames and, secondly, about the company itself and the people who run it.

Last night, as is often the case, my constituents were on social media talking about Thames, because a large number of people in West Kensington had been cut off without water for a day or so. This was the exchange:

"How long until we have water as it has been a day without supplies for many and people need drinking water?"

The answer from Thames was:

"Sorry for that. I have checked with my system there no timeframe mentioned in this issue. This is an unplanned event our team has hardly working this issue you are water is back to normal."

The exchange went on:

"So will they give us bottles of drinking water please?"

The answer from Thames was:

"I have checked with my system right now there is no bottle water available. Your water is back to soon normal our team has working hardly this issue."

That is typical, I am afraid, of its communications, and of the contempt, frankly, with which Thames treats its customers.

About a month ago, the whole of Shepherd's Bush—that is tens of thousands of people in East Acton—did not have water for three days. There was no communication from Thames whatsoever. I was on the phone to it the whole weekend. I was getting reports, I visited where the leaks and the breaks were, and I put it on social media. I believe that is Thames's job, but it does not do that. It simply does not do it, for whatever reason—whether it is unable to or it just does not care, I do not know. These massive breaks in pipes happen all the time. I think I know why they happen: it is because Thames does not maintain its pipes, and the pressure means that they burst. We often get a number of bursts at one time, and then it can spend up to a month or more repairing them, which involves digging up the road and shutting off roads. In that way, it is a law unto itself.

That is equally the case with sewer flooding. Two and a half years ago, there was heavy rain in London, and hundreds of my constituents' homes, basements and ground floors were flooded with raw sewage. For some of those properties, it was the third or fourth time it had happened. When it happened back in the 2000s, there was the Counters Creek flood alleviation scheme. It cost several hundred million pounds and was going to relieve sewer flooding in west London. I spent many hours in many meetings talking to Thames Water and

[*Andy Slaughter*]

constituents about how it was going to relieve the problem. Frankly, I cannot think of a much worse problem someone could have than to live with the risk of their house being flooded with raw sewage, whether it comes through the front door, up through the toilet, or whatever.

The Counters Creek flood alleviation scheme was comprehensive, but at that point, Thames said that it was not going to do it, and that instead it would fit non-return valves or FLIPs—flooding local improvement processes. Non-return valves are simply valves that stop the sewage going back up a pipe when there is heavy rain. FLIPs are slightly more sophisticated and are pumps that are buried under the roadway. They cost a fraction of the cost of a major renovation scheme and would therefore have saved Thames Water a considerable amount of money. Ten years on, and two and a half years after the last significant floods, very few of those things have been fitted. When residents apply for them, the answer is that they are low risk, even though some of the people who are at a low risk have had their homes flooded more than once. To my mind, that is no more than a cost-saving exercise and doing the bare minimum.

Typically, floods tend to happen in the summer, but they can happen in winter. When we have the next floods—as we undoubtedly will—perhaps the same houses will flood again, or perhaps those houses will have been lucky enough to get a FLIP or a non-return valve, in which case the neighbouring properties that do not have them will be flooded with even more sewage. Does the Minister really think that Thames Water is a responsible public utility when it acts in such a way?

The Minister mentioned Tideway. I agree that that is a good project, and it has been broadly well handled, despite being built during the covid period. It is mainly on time and to budget, and it will relieve about 95% of the raw sewage going into the Thames. One of the worst outflows is at Hammersmith pumping station, and I will be delighted if we have no more spouts of raw sewage going up next to Hammersmith bridge, as we did a couple of years ago. It was not Thames Water who built that; it was a separate company and not part of Thames Water.

As I have said, Thames Water does not appear to be able to run a tap, to flush a toilet or to manage its own finances. The company is partly owned by the Governments of China and Abu Dhabi. Last summer it summarily got rid of its chief executive, despite paying her £1.5 million a year. The company announced with a fanfare that it had managed to obtain £500 million of new investment from its shareholders, but according to the *Financial Times* last week—this is reported again today—the actual status of that money may well be a loan rather than equity or new investment. That, I hope, is something the Government will want to look into.

There have been a series of asset-stripping, incompetent, careless owners of Thames Water during the period of privatisation, the worst of which was probably Macquarie, which owned it for 11 years and paid out an estimated £3 billion in dividends. Its senior executives took huge payments in the tens of million over that time, and are now living a life of luxury as a consequence. That is the legacy of privatisation and this Government's record on private utilities.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Gentleman is right: in my view there was a failure of regulation in the noughties, because during that period the financial engineering took place to load those businesses with debt. Does he accept that that manipulation of debt was completed by 2009? If he does, what does he have to say about the Labour Government in power at the time? Were they asleep at the wheel?

Andy Slaughter: I accept that the debt has been loaded and that the gearing is completely out of proportion. Under Macquarie, Thames Water's debt went from £4 billion to £10 billion, but it is now at £14 billion under the current owners. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening to the radio or has read the media this morning, but Thames appears to be asking for a 40% rise in bills. It has £14 billion-worth of debt, and according to press reports, it might run out of money by next April. That would be the second scare within a year. This is a company that almost has a licence to print money. It has 17 million customers, all paying their bills every year. Its job is obviously not straightforward, but it is not the most difficult job in the world. It cannot perform any part of that function well, and it cannot run its own company well, and that is the parlous state into which it has descended. I therefore understand that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has called Thames Water before it tomorrow to answer some questions.

If the Select Committee can do that, what are the Government doing? I heard an extraordinarily wittering, complacent speech from the Minister the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) just now. There was no grasp of the risks. A major company could go under, with a failure to supply a basic service. What more basic service is there than the supply of water and sewerage services to a large part of the population in this country? There was no understanding of the risks or what the remedies need to be.

This is another area where this Government have failed completely. It is their job, which I do not believe they will do in the small amount of time they have left, to take this issue seriously. They will have to, because otherwise my constituents and those in London and the south-east will not be able to have any realistic purveyor of water and sewerage services going forward. I hope that when the Minister the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) winds up, he shows some awareness of those needs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): order. A significant number of Members still wish to participate. I will not put a time limit on at present, but it would be helpful if Members could keep their contributions to about seven minutes.

5.47 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): My constituents are not only bill payers and users of Thames Water, but they live with its decades-long failure to plan and invest. The River Thames flows alongside Chiswick, Brentford and Isleworth, where we walk, kayak, row and paddleboard. Too often, the Thames is polluted with dilute sewage just about every time it rains. Mogden sewage treatment works, covering 55 acres, sits in my constituency.

For decades, Mogden has been a regular source of pungent sewage smells and a virulent subspecies of mosquito.

In February 2020, the streets and parks of Isleworth and the pristine Duke of Northumberland's river was flooded with raw—not even dilute—sewage, because the main sewage intake into Mogden backed up and punched a hole through into the river. That was a direct result of maintenance failure and that issue not appearing on the risk assessment register. This debate matters to my constituents.

In October 2020, 2 billion litres of dilute sewage was discharged into the River Thames at Isleworth Ait over just two days. That was two thirds of the total discharges in 2020. In 2022, that same sewer storm outflow spilled 20 times for a total of 164 hours, discharging again into the River Thames. Just across the river at Petersham, another outfall regularly discharges. All of that is 10 years after Mogden sewage treatment works had its treatment capacity almost doubled.

I am struggling to find any evidence of any fines that Thames Water has received for the discharges I have just described. That is because they are planned. They are permitted discharges. The discharges of which we are notified are the only ones we know about, because, as the BBC "Panorama" investigation found, water companies appear to be covering up illegal sewage discharges, making sewage pollution disappear from official figures.

The water companies not only process our sewage and storm run-off, but supply fresh water. As other Members have already said, however, too much of that fresh water is wasted through pipe leaks. After too many water main bursts flooded shops and homes, we had, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) described, a programme to replace the Victorian fresh water pipes across the Thames Water area, but it seems to have stopped and we are just supposed to wait until the next burst happens. There is so much more that Thames Water could be doing to stop the leakages.

The overall picture of our water situation in the Thames Water area is a failure of oversight—a failure to upgrade the water and sewage infrastructure continually as London's population grows, and as drought and heavy rain become regular aspects of our weather. For over 20 years—first as a councillor, and as an MP since 2015—I have been pressuring Thames Water to take action, as have the Mogden Residents' Action Group, Hounslow London Borough Council and other residents. As a result of a legal challenge by residents, Thames Water was forced to increase the capacity of the sewage treatment works, to improve its reporting and to do continuous mosquito eradication.

Thames Water has also done some other work. We have had to put up with recent roadworks locally, because it has now installed a pipe to pump excess methane into the main gas grid, which is to be welcomed. We have had the multibillion-pound tideway project to take sewage out of the Thames, but it does not benefit those of us who live upstream of Hammersmith, so we are now faced with another expensive tunnelling project: the Teddington direct river abstraction scheme, which will address not high rainfall periods but periods of drought.

The Teddington DRA is designed to take millions of litres of water from the Thames, pump it across London to the Lee valley, and then replace that water with treated effluent from Mogden. That means a new pipeline and access shafts, so we are going to have a building site the size of half a football pitch on the Ivybridge estate, a low-income council estate in my constituency. The project will involve tunnelling beneath homes. It will also potentially impact on biodiversity in the River Thames and on riverside walks, and impact on river users as well. Are there really no alternatives to this three-year construction project across my constituency and those neighbouring it? The Environment Agency certainly raised doubts about the scheme when it wrote to Thames Water in March this year. The Teddington DRA will save only a 10th of the 630 million litres lost per day through leaks.

What are the rewards for this managed incompetence? Thames Water's chief executive, Sarah Bentley, received a £496,000 pay-out last year. At least she had the good grace this year to say that it
"just did not feel like the right thing to take performance-related pay this year."

I support the Opposition's motion calling on the Government to enable Ofwat to block company bosses' bonuses where high levels of sewage are being pumped into rivers; to end self-monitoring and force all companies to monitor every single water outlet; to ensure that water bosses face personal criminal liability for extreme and persistent lawbreaking; and to introduce severe and automatic fines for illegal discharges that bosses cannot ignore. We should not be dependent on whistleblowers to find out about failures. With a boost in the powers of the water regulator, water bosses who fail to meet high environmental standards on sewage pollution must be met with significant sanctions to ensure that they cannot profit from damaging the environment.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and apologise more generally for jumping up and down like a jack-in-the-box. Is she aware of Ofwat's press release of 29 June entitled "Ofwat delivers decision on executive pay"? In that, it says that it has recently announced

"new powers that will enable it to stop the payment of dividends" directly and in full if a company does not meet its performance targets, including environmental targets. It goes on to say:

"In line with the new guidance",

which it published that day,

"Ofwat expects water company remuneration committees to take full account of performance for customers and the environment",

and that, if they do not, Ofwat will intervene on every single basis. Does she not accept that the powers are already in place and being used?

Ruth Cadbury: I would like to see them—I find that Ofwat is just too powerless. On dividends, Thames Water has not paid them for five years—so it keeps telling me—but that did not stop it until this year paying its senior executives very high dividends.

Why should my hard-pressed constituents face an average increase of £39 in their water bills? They have lost trust in Thames Water after years and years of scandal,

[Ruth Cadbury]

putting up with smells, mosquitoes, building works, flooding and sewage through their streets and parks. Having met and talked to Thames Water for almost 20 years as a councillor and an MP, it is clear to me that it still has a lot to do to clean up its act. Bills are rising, service standards remain poor, and we continue to see raw sewage being pumped into the Thames.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I have looked at the clock again. After the next speaker, I will have to put a six-minute time limit on speeches.

5.57 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Like every MP across the House, I receive emails and postcards every week from constituents about the state of our environment, our nature and our planet. It is clear why our communities care so much about this: we are one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world and we are living in a dirty water emergency. The two main rivers in the Wakefield district, the River Calder and the River Aire, are the second and third most polluted rivers in the country. Last year, there were 1,316 discharges of raw sewage into Wakefield's rivers and waterways, totalling 5,816 hours—the equivalent of eight months non-stop. It is no surprise that that is happening under the Tories' watch. The Government see action on nature and pollution as something they must do rather than something they want to do.

This is not the first Opposition day debate where Labour has called for tougher action on polluters—but, time after time, the Conservatives block it. We have seen the Environment Agency's budget cut, leading to less monitoring and enforcement of the law. We have seen the Office for Environmental Protection launch an investigation into whether the Government and the water companies may have broken the law over sewage discharges, and we have seen mealy-mouthed statements and weak plans from a Conservative Government in denial. Labour is clear that the polluters should pay.

Earlier this year, we saw water companies asking for more money from customers to fix the problem. With a £111 increase for constituents in Yorkshire, it is no wonder that they faced such a backlash. If companies do not improve, the money should come from dividends going to shareholders, not from increasing people's bills. Those bosses who continue to break the rules repeatedly should face professional and personal sanctions for their behaviour. The soft-touch approach has to end. To allow us to get the information we need about the sewage being pumped into our lakes and rivers, we need mandatory monitoring of all sewage outlets as well as proper resourcing for the Environment Agency so that the law can be enforced. We will solve this problem only with tougher action and by sticking to our commitments. I do not want my kids to think that the current state of our waterways is normal. We owe it to future generations to sort this out once and for all, which is why I urge Members to support Labour's motion.

6 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate in support of the motion. I will raise the issues in my constituency and the part of Thames Water that covers south-east England outside London. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for talking about many other issues affecting Thames Water. Their speeches relate more to customers in London, but they made some excellent general points about the company's financing, the weak regulation and the Government's failure to act, which I will also highlight.

Serious and persistent problems affect wildlife and thousands of residents in the Thames Valley, particularly Reading and Woodley. We have seen things in our area that are truly shocking and deeply concern many residents. I have run a community survey, which hundreds of people have filled in to raise their concerns. This is a widespread issue for many local residents, which differs slightly from those described further downstream in London but relates to the level of concern and the impact on local people.

I will go slightly upstream from Reading towards Oxford, where there has been a well-known series of incidents linked to pollution in the Wolvercote stream. All the sewage pollution further upstream of the Thames, from many tributaries in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, flows through Berkshire into London and, ultimately, out to the Thames estuary. Residents in my area are suffering the direct result of that pollution. The simply appalling levels of pollution are monitored by people in Oxford. I pay tribute to local campaigners there, including my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). However, Thames Water does not seem to be fully addressing these matters. I hope that the company, the Government, the Environment Agency and the regulator are listening to the debate and will look into this further.

Of the issues affecting tributaries in our area—an important and environmentally very sensitive issue—is pollution in chalk streams. Very close to Reading, the River Pang tributary is a particularly beautiful chalk stream, which used to be in pristine condition. There is a beautiful landscape, with rolling hills on the edge of the downs in Berkshire and gentle footpaths next to the river. When I walked along there some time ago, I noticed that the riverbed had no apparent life in parts of it. Local anglers, many of whom live in Reading, have raised serious concerns about the Pang, and about other chalk streams across southern England. They are a unique ecosystem found only in the south of this country, where water comes up from the chalk aquifer into streams and flows into major rivers such as the Thames. I hope the Minister will take note of the specific issues affecting chalk streams. I would appreciate it if he or his colleague could write to me about them and the other specific issues in the Thames Valley and Thames catchment. I thank the Angling Trust for its excellent work on this matter.

Another appalling local issue is the long-standing pollution incident in a tributary called Foudry brook, which comes from a spring in the northern part of Hampshire and flows under the M4 motorway, through the outskirts of Reading, and ultimately into the Kennet and the Thames. I saw the pollution when I was running

the Reading half-marathon this year. There were pools and little tributaries of water that smelled pungently, and were a lurid neon green colour that one would see in an artificial and lifeless place, completely out of place next to the willows and bushes near the river. It should never have happened, and clearly was linked to the pollution incident upstream a few miles away.

I hope that the Minister is noting the level of revulsion that people like me have exhibited when we have seen that. It is an offensive thing to see when trying to enjoy a walk next to a river or, like many thousands of local residents, when living near a river. People who live along several miles of banks of the Kennet, the Thames and the Loddon have to put up with sewage floating past their houses. There has been a series of other terrible incidents, and I could go on and on. Many are happening all the time and, as we heard earlier, they are not properly monitored.

On Saturday, on a family walk, I experienced yet another such incident. Imagine the scene: frosty countryside just outside Reading—absolutely beautiful—with heavy frost on hedges and wildlife in abundance, walking down the hill through a nature reserve to the River Thames. I could see a heron on the bank of the river spying for fish and there was a cormorant diving into the Thames. In the middle of the river was what I thought were either flecks of snow—it was very, very cold—or rain or leaves. In fact, they were bubbles from sewage pollution. I could see banks of foam building up around small islands in the river, sometimes nearly a foot high, with white, brown creamy foam which was clearly linked to sewage pollution. The river was very high and I could tell that the outlets had been opened upstream. It was absolutely disgusting. That is the type of pollution affecting people's enjoyment of beautiful countryside, riverside walks, and their own gardens and homes in the south of England just upstream from London. I hope the Minister will note that and look into it.

I am aware of time and I do not want to overstep my limit. I commend the action plan put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed). I hope the Minister is listening and paying attention to what we are saying, because this is a very serious problem and I hope he will look at it again.

6.6 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Yesterday in Somerset, 67 millimetres of rain fell in 24 hours and 10 flood warnings have been issued at the time of speaking. This is not a one-off event. Flash floods in May flooded nearly 100 homes in my constituency alone. Yesterday I had a call from a constituent in her 80s with significant mobility issues. The entire ground floor of her home was flooded and she was struggling to leave safely. The water is not clean. The flash floods included raw human waste from an outdated local sewage system that failed to cope after decades of neglect. In 2021, all of Somerset's five rivers were rated poor by the Environment Agency. It has been left to volunteers, such as the Friends of the River Frome, to take action. Half of Somerset's bathing sites are rated poor and plenty of areas across the country, such as Farleigh Hungerford in my constituency, urgently need Government investment and attention to help clean up that pollution.

The Liberal Democrat amendment to the Environment Bill, now the Environment Act 2021, called for a sewage tax on pre-tax profits of water companies to fund cleaning our rivers. Statistics from the Environment Agency show that 0% of rivers in England are classed as good. An ambassador to the Rivers Trust, Imogen Grant—an Olympic rower as well as a qualified medic—told me that she has rowed past used nappies, used tampons and even a fridge on the River Thames. The board of Thames Water, which is causing most of that pollution, should resign today.

The risks to human life are bad enough and my constituents have their MP to speak loudly for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) rightly spoke up in this place last night for victims of sewage pollution. My colleagues and I are extremely disappointed that the Government voted not to provide compensation. We hope they will listen to our campaign for a new blue flag standard for rivers in England and Wales. Imagine how constituents in Westmorland and Lonsdale feel today after that treachery from the Government, and after the BBC's "Panorama" investigation showed the duplicity of the water companies. The Government have led our constituents up the creek, taken away the paddle, and then sold the boat to water company bosses.

I am sure the Chamber is aware of the "Panorama" report yesterday, which alleged that United Utilities misrepresented sewage pollution events and downgraded incidents to the lowest level so that they were not counted as pollution incidents. The BBC alleges that United Utilities, by doing that, was awarded the right to raise £5.1 million by increasing bills for their 7 million customers next year. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a criminal investigation to be opened immediately. The Government must support us.

I am concerned about the impact that this scandal will have on my constituents' finances. It is simply not fair that we should pay higher bills because water firms continue to pump out raw sewage. Water firm executives paid themselves £30.6 million in bonuses in 2020-21, and even the Environment Agency has described their behaviour as criminal. The Government should listen to Liberal Democrat policies and replace the friendly goldfish Ofwat—a harmless decoration with a poor memory—with a fierce and determined new regulator, a tiger shark.

It is shocking that water firms are not only polluting our waterways but using dodgy sewage monitors, the number of which actually increased this year. I was shocked to hear reports that in areas such as Eastbourne in Sussex, there are concerns that Southern Water's monitoring service, Beachbuoy, is not updating until days after sewage discharges on to a beach. Swimmers are taking their last moonlight swim before the great white attacks—but the great white is a patch of human waste with Weil's disease and dysentery dripping from its teeth.

Our waterways can recover, but they need action now, before it is too late. We need a tax on sewage water companies, not huge holiday bonuses. We need a tough, toothed tiger shark of a regulator. We need our environment to have long-term protection from a serious and committed Government. Liberal Democrats support a public benefit company model for water companies so that particular economic and environmental policy objectives must be

[Sarah Dyke]

considered explicitly in the running of the companies. This Government need to listen to the people speaking up for our silent water. The clock is ticking.

6.11 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As toxic sewage spills into our lakes, rivers and seas, it is clear that the Government are up to their neck in it—and this is not a stand-alone scandal. It perfectly encapsulates 13 years of Tory misrule by a Government who do not believe in governing, who see regulation only as a burden and who think that businesses always know best, allowing privatised utilities to make huge profits at their captive customers' expense and the bosses to line their own pockets, and ignoring the need for investment in our public realm and the infrastructure that we need.

In 2022, as we have heard, not a single river in England was free of chemical contamination, just 14% had “good” ecological status, and 75% of UK rivers pose a serious risk to human health, the single biggest cause of pollution being untreated sewage. However, we need to look at other causes of pollution as well. The Environmental Audit Committee warned in January 2022 of a “chemical cocktail” from plastics, slurry and farm run-off that threatens water quality, and criticised the outdated, underfunded and inadequate monitoring regimes that make it difficult to determine the health of England's rivers. CHEM Trust welcomed that report as “a vital call to arms to improve the quality of water in our rivers”, and called for action to tackle chemical pollution at source.

As we heard from the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), whose frustration was clear, industrial-scale agriculture is also an increasing problem. The River Wye has a massive problem with phosphate pollution linked to intensive poultry production. There are about 20 million chickens in the Wye catchment at any one time, and much of the manure is spread on surrounding fields, with nutrients leaching into the water supply. It is estimated that even if the source of the pollution were removed now, it would take between 10 and 20 years for the soil pollution to be reduced.

For now, however, I will stick to the subject of sewage, in which regard Wessex Water is a particularly bad offender. We have seen numerous cases of sickness among swimmers at popular local wild-swimming spots in areas around my constituency, such as Conham River Park and Warleigh weir. In 2021, Bristol Cable reported that between the beginning of January and the end of August, Wessex Water had dumped raw sewage into our local rivers 14,000 times, and sadly things have not improved: just yesterday, it dumped revolting raw sewage into the River Avon for more than seven hours.

Water companies are supposed to dump untreated sewage only during “exceptional” weather, but as “exceptional” is not even defined, they feel that they can dump untreated sewage whenever it rains—and, of course, in the UK rainy weather is far from exceptional. The BBC found that in 2022 Wessex Water dumped raw sewage into our rivers for 1,527 hours on dry days. That is meant to be illegal, yet Wessex Water, like fellow dry spillers Southern Water and Thames Water, was allowed to keep operating.

I have already mentioned the massive £982,000 take-home pay of the Wessex Water CEO in 2021-22. He has been with the company a very long time—since the 1990s—and if his pay then was adjusted for inflation, he would be on about £120,000, so he has had about a 700% pay rise. As I said, Wessex Water is now looking to its customers and wants to put up bills by £150 a year to pay for planned investment. I would argue that that money should already have been spent on maintaining infrastructure.

Last night's BBC “Panorama” programme exposed the failures of self-regulation, where water companies get to mark their own homework and cheat the system with ease. It is telling that we had to rely on whistleblowers from the Environment Agency telling “Panorama” what was going on at United Utilities, rather than the Environment Agency taking enforcement action itself. In the last three years—2020, 2021 and 2022—931 serious pollution incidents were reported in north-west England but the Environment Agency went to inspect only six of them. We are not blaming the Environment Agency for that. We know that it is under-resourced, and we know how little respect this Government have for our regulators and the protections they provide. Its environmental protection budget was halved by DEFRA between 2010 and 2020.

We see this time and again, with the Tories railing against red tape and bureaucracy and slashing costs, then wondering why everything has gone to pieces, when in effect they have created a wild west where companies can pollute at will. Companies do sometimes get caught. In 2020, for example, Severn Trent was fined £800,000 for letting 3.8 million litres of raw sewage enter a Shropshire stream, but these fines seem to be little or no deterrent because the companies try to pass the cost on to their captive customer base instead.

As foul waste poisons our waterways, killing fish, destroying habitats, seeping into our soil and making people sick, it is clear that self-regulation is not sustainable. We need water companies to face the consequences of their failures, and that is what Labour is calling for: criminal responsibility. Water bosses should face personal criminal liability for law breaking related to pollution, with severe and automatic fines for illegal discharges. It is time to clean up the filth.

6.17 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The right to clean water is one of the most fundamental, and that is why this debate is very important to my constituents. I rise to support the excellent case put forward from the Opposition Front Bench today. It is interesting to note that, in a debate as important as this, only one or two Government Members have bothered to turn up, and that the majority of their contributions, including those of Ministers, have focused on what happened 13 years ago under the Labour Government. When they start with that, they have already lost their case. It is convenient for them to somehow forget the 13 years that this Government have been in charge. They seem to forget the 13 years of a lack of regulation and inspection, the 13 years in which they hollowed out the Environment Agency and Ofwat, the 13 years of halving the funding, the 13 years of millions in bonuses being paid to water bosses and the 13 years in which families in our constituencies have had rises in their water bills effectively to support that.

Labour Members have spoken about how, in recent years, our rivers, coastlines and waterways have been polluted by the dumping of raw, untreated sewage, with over 800 sewage dumps a day across the country last year. In Bradford, sewage was dumped 5,200 times in 2022, putting us in the top 10 regions for sewage dumping.

Although we are wholly landlocked, one of Yorkshire's major rivers, the River Aire, runs right through the Bradford district, and it is here that the majority of dumping incidents take place, according to the Rivers Trust. In the constituency of the Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore)—I welcome him to his place—an outlet near Riddlesden recorded 96 spillages totalling more than 1,000 hours, and an outlet near Bingley recorded 69 spillages totalling more than 800 hours. In my own constituency, an outlet at Apperley Bridge recorded 96 spillages totalling almost 600 hours.

Although dumping directly into rivers has sadly become expected under this Government, the scale of dumping into smaller tributaries, becks and streams in my constituency is particularly alarming. In 2022, sewage was dumped 59 times into Fagley beck, 41 times into Bolton beck, 110 times into East brook, 36 times into Haigh beck and 75 times into Carr beck, all of which are watercourses that run through or along the back of residential estates. And that is just what has been recorded—the actual number of incidents in which sewage has been dumped in Bradford is potentially far higher.

Given the scale of sewage dumping across Bradford, my constituents are asking just what Yorkshire Water is doing to tackle it. The answer? Hiking water bills by an average of £111 in 2023-24, to pass the cost of the urgently needed sewer upgrades, following years of failing to invest properly, directly on to families in my constituency, even as it paid out £62 million in dividends to other businesses in its parent group.

Although the chief executive of Yorkshire Water has reported that she will voluntarily refuse a bonus that would have been as high as the eye-watering figure of £800,000, she still receives a staggering base salary of £515,000 on top of £140,000 in relocation expenses. This makes it clear that, in the week that Yorkshire Water has been forced to pay a record £1 million civil sanction by the Environment Agency, this public relations decision is not as principled as it first seems.

When water company chief executives and directors have presided over an unprecedented wave of sewage dumping while pocketing huge salaries and bumper payments, and when the Government have proven themselves completely incapable of tackling the crisis and holding water companies to account, it is obvious that something has to change. They should start by empowering the water regulator, Ofwat, to ban the payment of bonuses to the bosses of water companies that pollute our rivers, lakes and seas, and they should end by shutting down the monopoly and stranglehold of privately owned water companies on our water network by taking them into public control and ownership, where they belong.

6.23 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Despite what Conservative Members would have us believe, this Government inherited some of the cleanest rivers and

waterways in Britain's history when they came to power almost 14 years ago. [*Interruption.*] It is true. When Labour left office in 2010, the Environment Agency stated that our rivers were healthier than they had been at any point since the industrial revolution. Two years earlier, 80% of water quality tests in the Thames were found to be very good or good, compared with only 58% in 1990.

So what has changed? Thirteen and a half years of Tory government have polluted our coasts and our waterways, and we arrive at the appalling situation where over 800 sewage dumps are taking place across our country every single day. This is a green and pleasant land, but in the last seven years alone over 1,200 years' worth of raw sewage has been dumped into British waters.

My constituency of West Lancashire has a proud history of growing communities, but how can the farms and nurseries of West Lancashire have any confidence in the water they use to grow the food that ends up on Britain's plates? The growers in my constituency care about the quality of food they produce. If only they had a Government who cared about the quality of water used to produce it. Not one single river in Britain is classed as being in a healthy condition—not one.

It is not even true that the Government can be accused of inaction. It is worse than that: they have blocked amendments to the Environment Act 2021 brought forward by Labour to bring an end to sewage dumping scandals. My constituents expect bonuses to be paid only when people deliver and perform above and beyond how they are expected to. Other than the air we breathe, which is another sticky wicket for this Government but a topic for another day, is there anything more vital than water? My constituents do not expect bonuses to be awarded for polluting our rivers and seas while bosses' and shareholders' pockets are lined with cash.

To add insult to injury, water companies are asking customers to pay an extra £156 a year to pay for problems caused by the chronic under-investment in the network, while £14 million of bonuses were paid in just one year to the very people who have failed to maintain the system adequately. Under no circumstances is that acceptable.

Ofwat must have the power to ban the payment of bonuses to water bosses who allow significant levels of raw sewage to be pumped into our precious rivers, lakes and seas. If that had been in place over the last year, six out of nine water bosses' bonuses would have been blocked. They were not.

Labour will put the water industry into special measures and ensure change. We will end the farce of companies self-monitoring and require all companies to monitor all—all—water outlets. Water bosses that persistently allow their companies to break the law on sewage dumping will face personal criminal responsibility.

The current system for imposing fines simply is not working. Long drawn-out, expensive court cases are no credible deterrent for water companies and the Government know it, so Labour will introduce severe and automatic fines for illegal discharges. My constituents have a right to expect to be able to enjoy our rivers and coasts without fear of contamination from raw sewage—and they have a right to expect water polluters not only to

[Ashley Dalton]

pay the price where contamination does occur, but not to be rewarded for allowing it to happen. Labour's plans will shift the burden on to the water companies, rather than expecting the British public to carry the can.

Under the Government's plans, the Tory sewage scandal will continue for decades to come, but the next Labour Government will build a better Britain, where water bosses are held accountable for their negligence and the British public can have confidence that our waterways are clean and safe to enjoy.

6.28 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my party on securing this important debate.

Last year, in my constituency of Birkenhead alone, there were the ominous number of 666 sewage discharges, running for a total duration of over 8,000 hours. The effect for businesses and families in coastal communities like ours is devastating: it denies young people, many of whom are from deprived areas with little access to nature outside of our borough, of the natural spaces that by rights belong to them, while jeopardising the many businesses that rely on tourism.

Elsewhere across the country the situation is even graver, particularly for our precious chalk streams—which can be found almost exclusively in Britain—many of which now face an existential threat. Meanwhile, water company bosses continue to pay themselves millions of pounds in inflated salaries and bonuses, while the Government seem content to look away, even as evidence emerges of water companies covering up sewage discharges and making evidence of sewage disappear from official records.

The motion my party laid before the House today seeks to tackle the perverse injustice at the heart of our broken water system—a system that guarantees private profits for the water bosses and public squalor for the rest of us. The motion signals a clear and welcome change from the attitudes of successive Secretaries of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who all too often, when speaking from the Government Dispatch Box, have acted as if their job is to defend the interests of the water companies and their shareholders, rather than the constituents who elected them to this place.

From the hundreds of messages I have received from my constituents on this issue, it is clear that the people of Birkenhead expect us to go much further. They are sick to death with the decades-long rip-off that began with the privatisation of the water industry in 1989. They have had enough of pernicious standing charges and their bills rising year on year—they are set to rise, on average, by another 35% by the end of this decade—while water bosses who preside over crumbling infrastructure pocket millions in bonuses.

My constituents want to see water returned to public ownership. According to research conducted by Savanta, on behalf of the publication *Left Foot Forward*, 70% of the British public share that view. We need to deal with the practical and deep-rooted issues facing the water industry here and now, and confront the simple truth that seems self-evident to the vast majority of the

British public: the three decades in which we have treated water as a private commodity have been a manifest failure.

There has been much discussion in recent days about the entrepreneurial spirit that the Thatcher Government are said to have let loose with their policy of privatisation and deregulation. Today, that spirit can be seen most clearly in the tide of sewage swelling our rivers and lakes and drowning our beaches. We must prepare to face the challenges to come, because as we confront a future that will be increasingly defined by climate breakdown, drought, water scarcity and extreme weather events, the question of how we most effectively marshal our shared natural resources will be crucial.

I remind the House, as I have before, that the chief executive of the Environment Agency warned that large parts of the country are now staring into the “jaws of death”—the point at which we will not have enough water supply to meet our needs. To allow the profit motive to continue to dictate the management of a resource as vital as water, and to perpetuate a system in which shareholder profits take precedence over much-needed investments in infrastructure improvements, would be not just short-sighted, but an absolute dereliction of duty.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

6.32 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Sometimes we witness revelations that are incredibly shocking, yet simultaneously not surprising at all. And so it was with the exposure of this week's “Panorama” investigation that United Utilities, one of Britain's largest water companies, had been systematically falsifying its environmental performance to mislead consumers and regulators and to push up profits.

Although Labour had decided to use one of our precious Opposition day debates to discuss water companies and directors' bonuses in advance of those revelations, they have clearly added to the urgency and salience of the debate. Several Members commented on the fact that the issue has a much higher profile than it did. I pay tribute to Feargal Sharkey, who has done some amazing campaigning and played a significant role in raising the issue of water quality. He has proved that he has not just “a good heart”, but a switched on head as well.

It has been a good debate; what was said was important, as well as what was not said. The demeanour of Government Members spoke more loudly than the words we heard from them. My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) mentioned the number of Secretaries of State there have been—we have had six Secretaries of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs since 2019. Interestingly, the newest one, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), could not be bothered to turn up and respond to the debate. The Minister who did respond, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), could not wait to race away and has not returned to this important debate, despite having spoken at its start.

Even more powerful was the row upon row of empty green Benches behind the Minister during the debate. It is clear that Conservative Members of Parliament do not want to be anywhere near here to speak up for their Government's record on this issue. I have great affection for the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane, but she appeared to inhabit a parallel universe when it came to the state of our water industry. Had she been here to listen to the debate, she would have heard Member after Member reflect the fury of their constituents and of a raft of organisations including the Environment Agency, which last year described the performance of English water companies as "very disappointing", saying it was

"simply unacceptable to see a decline in this vital metric", in reference to the increase in pollution incidents.

Members have reflected what Surfers Against Sewage has said, and the Rivers Trust has slammed the Government's performance, yet the Minister—*[Interruption.]* She marches back into the Chamber just as I was saying that if she had been here, she would have heard about a very different reality in respect of our water industry from the one that she appeared to inhabit. She described the "wonderful water" that we deserve and are all experiencing. She seemed to believe that she and this Government had brought forward strong measures that Labour and the Liberal Democrats had stood against. She said that if we introduced automatic fines, it would somehow be good for the water companies because it would prevent other kinds of action from being taken.

I am afraid it was really quite bizarre to listen to that depiction of what has happened, but there were many other, very relevant, contributions to the debate. They started with the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), who cut through the word that might be used to describe some of what we heard and what is also in our rivers. He clearly admitted that in the 23 years he has been a Member of Parliament, the situation has got worse. He did not buy the idea that we are living in some golden age of river hygiene.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) spoke about the broken Government promises on environmental standards; the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) spoke of his frustration at the Government's failure on this issue; and my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) gave us a passionate and evocative description of the beautiful coastline in his area, and accused the Minister of—just like, unfortunately, the surfers in the constituency of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double)—going through the motions.

Steve Double *rose*—

Mr Perkins: I will come to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

The hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) made an interesting contribution. He slated the record of the Liberal Democrat Minister between 2013 and 2015, apparently forgetting that that Minister served under a Conservative Secretary of State, in a Conservative-led Government who were implementing policies as a result of the Conservative austerity programme. I stand

behind no one when it comes to condemning Liberal Democrats for their record between 2010 and 2015, but even I thought that was a bit rich.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke about the performance and failure of Thames Water. He said that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane had given an extraordinarily complacent speech. I think he spoke for many when he said that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) spoke about 2 billion litres of sewage outflow in two days in her area in 2020; my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about the appalling levels of pollution in his constituency; and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) spoke of the duplicity of water companies on self-monitoring. It is important to say that although some Members gave credit for the increased amount of monitoring, the "Panorama" programme has called into doubt whether we can believe any of the figures we see.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) rightly referred to the other causes of river pollution—another important factor, which was not covered as much in this debate. She also spoke about the lack of capacity in the slimmed-down Environment Agency to take on those alternative causes of river pollution. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), in a very good speech, mentioned the Environment Agency saying in 2010 that we had the healthiest rivers since the industrial revolution, and its frustration that we are seeing that progress stall under this Government.

Steve Double: I take note of what the shadow Minister says. He mentions both Surfers Against Sewage and surfers in my constituency. Will he acknowledge that when Surfers Against Sewage began its campaign in 1990, less than 25% of the beaches in the UK met the acceptable minimum standard for bathing water quality, and today that figure is over 90%?

Mr Perkins: The first thing to say is that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the state of the beaches back in 1990 was even more disgraceful than it is today. The vast majority of the progress was made between 1997 and 2010, almost—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it was. It was almost up to 80% by then. If we read its reports, the Environment Agency expresses its frustration that the significant progress made in that period has slowed since then.

Steve Double: Can the shadow Minister explain to me why it was that the Labour Government were taken to court by the European Union in 2009 for failing to address the issue?

Mr Perkins: The hon. Gentleman should listen to what the Environment Agency has said. It has said the improvements in water quality have slowed under this Government and it has expressed its frustration that we are plateauing.

The hon. Gentleman said in his comments that Ofwat already has the power to ban bonuses. If he had listened to the Minister, he would have known that that is

[Mr Perkins]

not true. What Ofwat has at the moment is the power to ensure that those bonuses are not paid from the money paid by bill payers. That is not the same as what we propose. Our proposal is very different, so he was incorrect to say that the powers we are proposing are those that currently exist.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) summed up the difference between the behaviour of bosses and the experience of his constituents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) made clear earlier, the Government have been complicit in this disgraceful practice, through the funding cuts that my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) referred to. They have cut the Environment Agency's funding in half, leading to the dramatic reduction in monitoring, enforcement and prosecutions that in turn has led to the dramatic increase in illegal sewage discharges.

Now, to make matters worse, the Government are simply ignoring the BBC's investigation. It was shocking that the Environment Agency did not provide anyone for that programme; it is a Government regulator and should be answering for the performance of the water companies. While Tory Ministers claim that they have a grip on this issue, even the Environment Agency has been forced to admit that the water companies' performance in the most recent year was "completely unacceptable".

Britain cannot afford years more of the decline in its natural habitat and of worsening water quality, but these years of failure may finally be at an end. Soon, people across Britain will have an opportunity to bring down the curtain on what by then will be 14 years of failure, and to elect a Labour Government to address this shocking situation. The Labour party's DEFRA team have already met with water company bosses and, while the meetings were cordial, the message was unmistakable: the days of a Government turning a blind eye to the failure and corruption of self-regulation will be at an end under Labour.

That starts with punishing the worst actors. We will give the water regulator the power to ban bonuses for water bosses until they have cleaned up their filth, but that is only the first step to clean up the water industry. Labour will go further, putting the industry under special measures. We will end the pointless practice of self-monitoring, and will require water companies to install remote monitors on every outlet overseen by the regulators and the Government. Any illegal spill will be met with an immediate and severe fine—no more delays, no more appeals, no more lenient fines that are cheaper than paying to upgrade crumbling infrastructure. Rogue water bosses who oversee repeated severe and illegal sewage discharges will face personal criminal liability.

The days of failure under this Government are now coming to an end. A Labour Government will get our water cleaned up and resolved.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): The Government welcome the opportunity to set out the scale of our action to tackle water quality. We have been consistently clear that the failure of water companies to reduce sewage discharge adequately is completely

unacceptable. We made that clear throughout the debate and in the opening remarks from the Treasury Bench. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who previously held the water quality brief and did a lot of work to bring forward the Environment Act 2021.

The Government have clearly set out that we are taking strong and decisive action to reduce sewage discharges that harm our rivers and coastlines. I am aware of and recognise the many concerns that our constituents raise regarding water quality. They, like all of us in this House, rightly want to see the quality of our waters improve. That is why the Conservative Government are taking action.

We introduced the Environment Act, which introduced legally binding targets for water quality and a new requirement for water companies to publish data on storm overflows, and gave Ofwat new powers to clamp down on dividends and bonuses. Those are the actions of this Conservative Government in introducing the Environment Act. Many Opposition Members did not vote for many of the measures included in that Act. That is what this Government are doing in taking action.

Munira Wilson: I welcome the Minister to his new role. I thank him for giving way, given that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who opened the debate, repeatedly refused to take any interventions from me.

The Minister talks about the importance that our constituents place on water quality, so I have one request for him. Sitting on the Secretary of State's desk—as the hon. Member for Taunton Deane knows, because she responded to my debate on this topic in September—is the water resources management plan for the south-east. It contains the highly controversial proposal for the Teddington direct river abstraction, which will see recycled sewage put into the River Thames and water taken out. There are real concerns in the Environment Agency about water quality. Moormead Park in my constituency, and Ham Lands in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), face being ripped up to build the scheme. The Secretary of State has to make a decision, so will the Minister ask him to take that scheme off the table?

Robbie Moore: I noted that the hon. Lady was not here for the whole debate to listen to the many positive contributions from the Conservative Benches. However, we have already spoken about this, and we have a meeting in the diary next week to discuss it, which I look forward to.

Our plan for water focuses specifically on increased investment, which includes £2.2 billion from water companies to spend on improving infrastructure; stronger regulation, including more Environment Agency inspections of waste water treatment works; banning the sale of wet wipes; proposals for new restrictions on forever chemicals that can be found in waters; and tougher enforcement, including bigger penalties for water companies and tighter control over their dividend payments. Let me be clear: the Government will hold the water sector and enforcement agencies to account. The Secretary of State and I are working closely with the new leadership of the

Environment Agency to ensure and reiterate to them and the water industry the expectation that they will be held to account and to the highest possible standards.

I will be glad to respond now to the many points that have been made by Members from across the House, starting with storm overflows, which many Members talked about. The Government are taking steps to prioritise storm overflows. We have now launched the most ambitious plan to address storm overflow sewage discharges by driving the largest infrastructure programme in water company history. We have been consistently clear that the failure of water companies to reduce sewage discharges adequately is totally unacceptable, and our new strict targets, which were brought out through the Environment Act, will see the toughest ever crackdown on sewage spills.

However, that all starts with monitoring—monitoring is absolutely key if we are to carry out enforcement. The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) may claim that water was previously better quality, but how on earth does she know? In 2010, under the Labour Administration, just 7% of storm overflows were being monitored; now, in 2023, we have driven that figure up to 91%, and by the end of this year we will be at 100%. The Opposition may make these ridiculous claims, but how on earth do they know? Under their watch, only 7% of storm overflows were being monitored. These monitors will allow us to understand the impact of sewage discharges in more detail than ever before, so we will hold water companies to account and target improvements where they are most needed.

To pick up on the point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), it was the Labour Administration who introduced self-monitoring. It is Labour's plan now to overturn one of the rules that it itself brought in. This Government have passed the Environment Act, which has required a landmark £6 billion investment through the storm-overflow reduction plan. We have instructed water companies to deliver more than 800 storm-overflow improvements across the country, and we are delivering Europe's largest infrastructure project through the Thames tideway tunnel to reduce storm overflows by 95% in the Thames Water region.

I will now turn to the performance of regulators, which has been mentioned by many Members from across the House, including the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke). We are working with regulators to ensure they have the tools and resources they need to hold water companies to account: we have provided an extra £2.2 million per year to the EA specifically for water company enforcement activity, and in May 2023, we provided a £11.3 million funding increase to enable Ofwat to treble its enforcement capacity. We have legislated to introduce unlimited penalties for water companies that breach their environmental permits and to expand the range of offences for which penalties can be applied. Those changes will provide the Environment Agency with the tools it needs to hold water companies to account. I only hope that the Opposition welcome the unlimited penalties that this Conservative Government are bringing in.

As for what we are doing to focus on performance, in 2022, Ofwat announced provisional financial penalties of almost £135 million for underperformance, applying to 11 water companies. That money is rightly being returned to customers through water bills during the 2024-25 period. This Government are taking the polluter

pays principle seriously—that is exactly what the provisions of the Environment Act bring into play. However, the answer is not a lengthy bureaucratic process carried out at the taxpayer's expense to create an entirely new regulator, as the Opposition have proposed. That sums up what the Labour party is about: process, not progress. This Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that progress is made on improving water quality.

The issue of dividends has been raised by many Members, and I will pick up on some of the points that the hon. Members for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) and for Easington (Grahame Morris) have mentioned. In March 2023, Ofwat announced new measures that will enable it to take enforcement action against water companies that do not link dividend payments to performance. That change will require water company boards to take account of their performance when deciding whether they make dividend payments; if the payment of dividends would risk the financial resilience of a company, Ofwat now has the power to stop that payment.

As a result of this Government's giving more power to Ofwat, it has increased power to take enforcement action if dividends paid do not reflect performance. As for some of the points that have been made about Thames Water, we have seen today that Ofwat is investigating Thames Water, which shows that the powers this Government gave to Ofwat are already being utilised.

Andy Slaughter *rose—*

Robbie Moore: I will pick up on the points made about Thames Water by the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) in relation to penalties. Since 2015, 12 prosecutions have been instigated against Thames Water, amounting to £37 million. Ofwat will rightly hold companies to account where they do not clearly demonstrate the link between dividend payments and performance. That has been made possible through the Environment Act.

I want to turn to bonuses. Quite rightly, picking up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, in June Ofwat confirmed new plans that will ensure customers no longer fund executive directors' bonus payments where they have not been sufficiently justified. Ofwat will regularly review all executive bonus payments, and where companies do not meet expectations, it will step in to ensure that customers do not pick up the bill, which is incredibly important to this Government. These new rules have already placed pressure on water companies to take action.

This Government will always prioritise bill payers, which is why in 2022-23 no water or sewage company in England and Wales is paying a CEO a bonus out of the money from customers' bills, while half of CEOs are taking no bonuses whatsoever. This is the first time that has happened in the water industry, and it reflects the industry's recognition that the Government and the public expect better. The Labour party, however, would simply raise taxes on water companies, which would send household bills rocketing sky-high. This Conservative Government have been absolutely clear that the polluter must pay, and that is exactly what we are doing by giving Ofwat more powers to regulate the industry and hold water companies to account.

Turning to debt in the industry, which was a point made by the hon. Member for Hammersmith—

Andy Slaughter *rose*—

Robbie Moore: I will give way in a second.

Ofwat is monitoring companies' gearing levels closely and has encouraged water companies to de-gear, with the average gearing across the sector falling to 69%, down from 72% in 2021. In March 2023, Ofwat announced new powers that will strengthen the financial resilience of the sector, including powers to stop water companies making dividend payments earlier this year. Those powers are already being put in place by Ofwat, despite what the Opposition may say.

Many Members across the House made the point about bathing water quality, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay. Bathing water has improved significantly over time. In 2010, the proportion of areas with good or excellent bathing water, meeting the highest standards in force at the time, was 76%. Now, in 2023, 90% are classified as good or excellent, which is a significant improvement. It has to be noted that Labour actively did nothing in its time to improve bathing water quality, but this Conservative Government are delivering on that point.

Steve Double: Would the Minister acknowledge that the reduction in bathing water quality is often to do not with sewage, but with water run-off from agriculture?

Robbie Moore: Picking up on that point, the quality is not only to do with sewage. Of course, that is one of the factors, but there are many other factors to do with agricultural run-off, as well as with faeces from birds and from dogs, particularly in beach environments. I have to be clear that where water companies are significantly contributing to the poor designations that have been identified for bathing water, we will take action.

The Labour party is all talk when it comes to protecting our water, but look no further than Labour-run Wales, where sewage is discharged into waterways more frequently. Just remember that this is what the Leader of the Opposition wants as a blueprint for a Labour Government in England. Look at Labour's record in government, when it managed to monitor only a tiny fraction of storm overflows—only 7% in 2010—and we are now at nearly 100% this year. If we do not monitor, we cannot enforce. Look at its voting history. Labour and the Lib Dems voted against reducing pollution in the Agriculture Act 2020. Look at their faces now. They know deep down that this Conservative Government are taking action.

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No.36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

Resolved,

That this House regrets that 13 years of successive Conservative Governments have broken the water industry and its regulatory framework; is deeply concerned about the scale of the sewage crisis and the devastating impact it is having on the UK's rivers, lakes and seas; believes it is indefensible that executives at UK water companies were paid over £14 million in bonuses between 2020 and 2021 despite inflicting significant environmental and

human damage; condemns the Government for being too weak to tackle the crisis and hold water company bosses to account; calls on the Government to empower Ofwat to ban the payment of bonuses to water company executives whose companies are discharging significant levels of raw sewage into the UK's seas and waterways; and further calls on the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make a statement to this House by 31 January 2024 on the Government's progress in implementing this ban.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Wine (Revocation and Consequential Provision) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 25 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Mark Jenkinson.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No.118(6)),

That the draft Data Protection (Fundamental Rights and Freedoms) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(*Mark Jenkinson.*)

Question agreed to.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL (SELECT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Mr Ben Bradshaw be discharged from the Holocaust Memorial Bill (Select Committee) and Karl Turner be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Angela Richardson be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Jill Mortimer be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Janet Daby be discharged from the Justice Committee and Rachel Hopkins be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Dame Angela Eagle be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Samantha Dixon be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Unpaid Carers

7.1 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition from the constituents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk relating to unpaid carers. There can be little doubt that those who have given up full-time employment to look after others have been among the hardest hit by the current cost of living crisis. Research from Carers UK has shown that thousands of unpaid carers have been pushed into poverty and are having to cut back on food and heating.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that unpaid carers continue to face significant financial challenges in this cost of living crisis; further that carers, including those in receipt of Carers Allowance, are extremely vulnerable to high costs due to their limited ability to earn an income and because of additional caring costs that they face; and notes that recent research from Carers UK found that thousands of unpaid carers are being forced into poverty, with many cutting back on essentials including food and heating.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider how the benefits system could better support unpaid carers of both working and state pension age, and to review Carers Allowance eligibility, so that carers can live a life beyond their unpaid caring responsibilities and continue to care safely as well.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002879]

**On-call Doctor Provision
at Westmorland General Hospital**

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise on behalf of just under 2,000 of my constituents in Westmorland and Lonsdale who oppose, as do I, the decision to remove out-of-hours doctor cover at the

Westmorland General Hospital on three nights of the week. That means that my constituents now need to wait for treatment to come from Barrow or Penrith, leading often to two-hour round trips, putting many people at risk.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares opposition against the decision from Cumbria Health on Call to reduce the on-call doctor provision from Kendal overnight three times a week; further declares the essential service which overnight doctors at Westmorland General Hospital provide to the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to urge Cumbria Health on Call to restore the on-call doctor provision from Kendal.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002883]

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mark Jenkinson.*)

7.4 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 5 December 2023

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Road Humps and 20 mph Speed Limits

9.30 am

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road humps and 20 mph speed limits.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. The issue that I am raising today affects a much wider group than just my constituents, but I am raising it on behalf of my constituents because of their particular concern that they are not listened to when they raise the problems that they face.

Let me be clear from the outset that this debate is not about a blanket opposition to traffic-calming measures, or even to road humps per se. It is, instead, about the unnecessary blanket use of traffic-calming measures in residential areas where they are not necessary. It is not about opposing traffic-calming measures anywhere where they are vital, such as outside schools or hospitals, where, properly applied, they are about safety. That is not the issue. Some are concerned that this is about blanket opposition. It is not; it is about an opposition to the way in which these measures are applied, the rationale behind them and the effects on constituents living in houses nearby.

I am concerned about the roll-out of 20 mph zones and the associated traffic-calming measures in residential areas. There are serious unintended consequences for residents that need to be considered if fairness is to be in the mix. Those consequences include significant vibrations. I have sat in a number of houses next to what I call the higher road restriction tables, where even at 20 mph, large, heavy lorries hitting the humps create enormous vibrations through the houses beyond. The attempt to brake as they go into them creates more emissions. The unintended consequences—the vibrations, damage to property, noise and interruption to sleep, as this is often at night—of vehicles going over these significant speed humps are why I believe that the 20 mph zone should be considered road by road, not on a blanket basis. It is vital to have local consent in these instances, rather than just having blanket measures.

Local authorities have the authority to set local speed limits, given their knowledge of local needs and priorities. They have the power to implement 20 mph speed limits: the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 (Amendment) Order 1999 enables local authorities to introduce 20 mph zones without, it appears, having to apply for permission. However, the Department for Transport has made it clear that any changes to the speed limit should be proportionate—that is an important word—and based on circumstances. I will come back to that point, because it appears that it is certainly not being applied in many areas where residents have concerns.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very strong argument. A great many people in Pembrokeshire and elsewhere have a lot of sympathy for slower traffic speeds, particularly in built-up areas outside schools, for example. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Labour Government have made two mistakes? They have got themselves into such a mess with their default, blanket 20 mph policy in Wales. First, they do not understand that what people want more than anything is proper enforcement of the existing 30 mph zones. Secondly, they are not trusting the local councils, which know their communities best, to come up with appropriate schemes in their local areas.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am a long way from Wales, but I take my right hon. Friend's point about decisions being taken in an arbitrary manner and sometimes in pursuit of a wider political objective. I simply say that his comments have been noted, and I am sure that the Minister will consider them when he winds up the debate. I agree about making sure that local authorities—and even wider authorities such as the Mayor of London or the Government in Wales—consult properly and discuss with local residents their needs and concerns. Their consideration is important in the application of these measures in their areas.

Too many Londoners in my constituency and elsewhere are struggling on main roads that have rapidly been brought down from 40 mph to 20 mph. The lower speed limit means that there is almost invariably some focus on the speedometer rather than on the road, because people are concerned that they cannot afford the fine. This may seem apocryphal, but taxi drivers are saying that they are moving out of their line of work simply because it is becoming impossible for them to navigate this process, especially taking into account some of the calming measures that have been over-instated throughout the city, where some of the roads they use are now blocked, even for some of the residents.

The important point, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) raised, is that enforcement can be lawfully carried out only by the police. The police are already under pressure, so it is difficult to see how the measures will not be abused, even when they are so little applied. The cost of the cameras alone is enormous. The extension of the 20 mph speed limits on main roads is affecting police workload.

I turn to a major issue in my constituency and, I believe, elsewhere. Speed bumps can be useful traffic-calming measures at times, but they are also extremely disruptive for residents, cyclists and emergency service vehicles in places where they may not necessarily need to be applied. My constituents have been genuinely affected by the roll-out of the 20 mph speed limits, combined with speed humps and the associated speed reduction measures in London. I know that I am not alone; many colleagues experience similar constituency issues.

Since the implementation of speed humps in residential areas, constituents have regularly raised with me the damage done to buildings by vibration transfer, such as cracking, possible subsidence, the long-term effects of the obstructions on local infrastructure, the increase in poor air quality, and emissions from vehicle engines,

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tyres and brake pads. Transport for London reports that in 2018, 75% of road transport particulate emissions came from tyre and brake wear. It is worth pointing out that many drivers naturally accelerate away from a speed hump, brake hard when they arrive at another, go over it and carry on. The emissions from brake pads and heavily used brakes are much greater than those coming out of the tailpipe of a diesel or petrol car. In a way, in the over-application—I stress the “over”—of these kinds of speed reduction measures, we are slightly contradicting our efforts to get pollution down.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Emissions are a subject that has been debated widely by London MPs and others in London, particularly because of the ultra low emission zone. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the increasing traffic that has resulted from a range of schemes—such as the low-traffic neighbourhoods that have closed off many side roads in London—carries a risk of increasing emissions? London is now officially the slowest city in the world to drive in.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I very much accept that point. I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention, because I was going to come to that issue. It is not an issue particular to London, but in London we have the problem that traffic-calming measures are causing higher emissions in parts of the city where the measures are applied, and at the same time traffic is being funnelled with no escape routes.

We also need to take into consideration the increase in noise pollution during the day. Conversations are being drowned out in many houses near the humps, and the effect of the additional noise on residents living in the vicinity of a hump—not forgetting that the traffic goes up and down such roads all through the night—is that sleep is disturbed.

I have been in a number of houses and have stood and watched as commercial vehicles have gone over large 20 mph tables. I could hear the equipment in the back leaping up and down and the thump as the vehicles hit the tables—and they were not going over the speed limit. That is the point. When I have raised it with the council, it has dismissed it completely on the basis that it does not agree that the measures cause any problem whatever. The effects of additional noise on residents living in the vicinity include disturbed sleep and the stress resulting from sleep deprivation.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that another issue arises when road traffic-calming measures have been put in place where there are suitable diversionary routes for some motorists to avoid the speed humps and traffic-calming measures? There is increased traffic on those roads as a result. People complain on the routes where the humps are, but people living on adjacent roads also complain because of the increased traffic that has resulted from the humps.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes, I agree. The funny thing, which I raised the other day, is that if we are moving towards low-emission or zero-emission vehicles, electric

vehicles, hydrogen-propelled vehicles and so on, which is the generally accepted plan for where we want to be, are we now aiming for road usage by low or net zero vehicles, or is it just a blanket anti-car problem? That is an issue that I never settle. In a way, we will be defeating ourselves as we head towards that process. Will the measures be lifted as more people have zero-emission vehicles?

The question is: why are the speed humps there? They are there, in essence, because in areas where they are necessary, no one objects to the idea of proportionate use. However, when they are combined with low-traffic neighbourhoods, it becomes a major problem. People are forced on to roads, which means that the poor residents who live near them get even further increased levels of noise pollution, vibration and brake pad wear. That is toxic anyway, and is made more so than if those drivers had been able to use other routes to get out of those areas.

I return to the point about disturbed sleep. I have talked to residents who are genuinely deeply stressed by what has happened since heavy speed humps have been put in place in 20 mph or even higher speed zones. As for the effects on the public’s mental health, some residents now genuinely suffer from some kind of clinical depression.

There is also damage to people travelling in vehicles, including buses, that traverse humps. Even if someone is doing less than 20 mph, they hit those things and they know it. For cyclists and others, as I mentioned, that is a major issue. I happen to be a motorcycle rider, and I must say that there are significant problems. Some of the tables are so high that riders have to stand up off the bike, making it less manoeuvrable. I have some sympathy for all those other road users, whom we rather forget about but whom we are encouraging to use those methods of travel more because they pollute less or not at all.

Research has been undertaken with bus drivers on the effects on their health of the constant impact damage on the spine and neck from the rocking motion. If we are asking for more buses and more public transport, we should recognise that those are bigger vehicles, and the effect on them and on neighbourhoods is significant.

Let me move on to the damage done to vehicles as a result of poor maintenance and the design of speed hump installations. In my borough, speed humps and calming measures on residential roads are the responsibility of the local authority, as they are everywhere else. The humps in the London Borough of Waltham Forest have been poorly maintained, with road surfaces on the exits dipping because of the impact of vehicles. Along with the scrape marks on the crown of the hump, which give some indication of the existing problem, vehicles grounding on the top of the humps when passing over them would suggest that those humps are not really fit for the purpose originally intended.

The authority installed the speed humps because of research generated by the Transport and Road Research Laboratory in 1981 and 1990, but the research data in those reports, astonishingly, dates back to 1958, the 1960s and at the latest the 1970s. That is my main point about the whole process: it uses data that is completely unrelated to traffic use today, the nature of cars, the size of vehicles and all the consequences. We rely on data that does not encompass any of that or the change in how cars and vehicles are used.

The old research data—on which my local authority and, I am sure, others rely heavily—was gathered using one double decker bus on a small section of one road in Lytham in Lancashire in 1977, where buses were scheduled to run once every 30 minutes. We then have data from 1978 from a small section of one 302-metre road in Winchester, which had only three houses on it, and one 438-metre road on the Isle of Wight. It cannot be fair or right that there is a blanket rejection of all concerns, as is happening in my local authority area, which refuses to look at the matter carefully because it says that its measures are based on studies. Those studies are irrelevant to traffic usage today.

The final study, which really threw me, looked at a 280-metre road in Rotherhithe, comprising very few houses. That was in 1978. I am not quite sure what they were studying at the time, but it certainly has nothing to do with my constituency or borough. This is not a Labour or Conservative issue; it is about residents and citizens who live in such areas trying to get to work and use their cars for different reasons. We need to consider the wider consequences.

None of the research data or reports is therefore relevant to east London or to 21st-century traffic. The traffic in the 1960s and 1970s was very different from today's: the dramatic increase in the volume, frequency and weight of all traffic, especially heavy goods vehicles and electric vehicles, means that it is not comparable with the data that is now being used to justify what is going on. To date, the council has not conducted an investigation of speed tables in my constituency or borough. It simply rejects the idea that it should do so or that there should be an independent study.

In October, councillors—they happen to be my Conservative group—proposed a motion that called on the local authority to carry out an independent review simply to monitor suspected vibrations and the nature of the traffic-calming measures. It was rejected out of hand. Unfortunately, there was no other recourse. That is why I secured this debate: it seems that there is no other way for my local councillors or me to raise the issue. My residents, regardless of where they live, are frustrated and unable to find any other recourse.

I ask the Minister: what are the consequences for a council that fails to comply with the statement contained in the Department for Transport's letter dated 26 April 2023? It states:

"Local councillors are responsible for ensuring that local decisions about street infrastructure take account of the needs and opinions of local people."

That is simply not happening. It is a wider issue. It does not matter whether it is a Conservative or Labour council; that statement is being thrust to one side in the desire to put the calming measures, as they are called, in place.

I want to quote from one or two of my residents who have raised the matter, because it is important. Tony Thorne said:

"My wife suffers with arthritis of the spine and we recently had cause to travel in Waltham Forest going to visit our son in Whipps Cross Hospital and when we got home she wanted to cry with the pain",

as a result of the constant jerking. He goes on:

"We now have to plan our journeys to avoid certain areas due to the speed humps which even when you travel over them at 10 mph there are still problems with the bounce on exit."

I have seen that for myself, by the way. He goes on:

"I have spoken to a number of bus drivers who drive the roads of Waltham Forest who all mention the problems these obstructions cause including drivers being off work sick with back and neck pain and additional stress due to having to negotiate these structures."

Lee Gilbert said:

"We suffer sleep deprivation and I suffer from anxiety and fear that the movements may cause the house to collapse whilst in bed. There are 20 mph signs although they are not adhered to. We have been trying to seek a solution to this major problem since the Speed Hump was installed in July 2022 with no results."

Tracey Gauld said:

"I was injured when my car was hit by a drunk driver which left me requiring surgery on my collar bone. Still to this day, going over humps is uncomfortable due to the seat belt".

Andrew Mckinley said:

"Since the speed humps have been installed outside my house, I have not had a full night's quality sleep...I do believe in a safer and clearer environment for all. I would normally cycle 12 miles to work each day but have been unable to do so as it would be unsafe as I'm very tired due to lack of sleep. This is having a big negative impact on my mental and physical wellbeing".

Finally, Adam Thackeray said:

"Since a speed bump has been installed on Station Road"—
that is in my constituency—

"my house judders when busses and large vehicles go past. The house, mainly the top two floors shake, the windows vibrate, and this has resulted in cracks appearing around the house on various walls, with the top floor suffering the most. It's also difficult to get to sleep on the top floor, due to the vibrations causing furniture to rattle and sash windows shake".

To some people, those issues may appear unimportant, but if we are elected to do anything at all, it is to represent the concerns and interests of our constituents when they spot a significant problem that affects their lives. That is why I make no apology for raising the matter. It is not a minor issue. It is becoming a significant issue where these things have often been imposed without any proper discussion or any sense of what is required on our streets and what the issues are in respect of traffic calming and speed.

As things stand, the Mayor of London provides funding to boroughs for the implementation of traffic-calming measures. I have been assured that, if successful, the new Mayor after the mayoral contest will ask the boroughs to ensure that all measures are examined so that the most appropriate are put in place; implement a review of all Transport for London-owned roads that have 20 mph speed limits; and, where appropriate, make changes. That is a natural position to take. I hope that the present Mayor of London will adopt the same policy, because it is clear that people living in houses near traffic-calming measures and people who drive public transport are suffering unnecessarily.

I am calling on the Department for Transport to carry out, where local authorities and others will not do so, a full independent inquiry to review roads with 20 mph speed limits, on a road-by-road basis, and to consider the impact of traffic-calming measures such as road humps and the speed tables that are even higher. Such a review could help to limit the unintended consequences of vibrations from ill-applied traffic-calming measures by finding out relevant information and up-to-date data.

I remind the Minister and others that the Department for Transport has made it clear that any changes to the speed limits and to traffic-calming measures should be proportionate and based on circumstances. Right now,

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there is no up-to-date independent review of how such measures should be applied, and no up-to-date independent analysis of what the effects are. The council in my area is therefore able to dismiss all requests for independent reviews. My residents, and residents all over the country, would feel better assured if the Department for Transport carried out a review to get the matter properly settled so that we can bring peace of mind to residents whose lives are being disproportionately damaged by bad implementation and ill-thought-through traffic-calming measures.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Robertson. I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for leading today's debate. He is right to highlight the problems of people who are affected by the measures. I will give some examples from my constituency—which the Minister is not responsible for, by the way, so he will not have to talk about the speed bumps in James Street in Newtownards that are causing concern to local people or about the cracks down the gable wall. That is not the Minister's responsibility.

Mr Gregory Campbell: But my hon. Friend has raised it anyway.

Jim Shannon: I just want to put it on the record. I feel it is important to give a Northern Ireland perspective. I will refer to examples of 20 mph zones where cameras have been put up, and where local endorsement and agreement were key to making that happen. If that happens, the problems by and large do not impact directly on those who live close by.

As always, some of the matters raised today are devolved, but I am here to give a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate and share some thoughts on where we are in Northern Ireland. In London, for example, there are many 20 mph zones and cameras that are used heavily to detect any form of speeding. Back home, the *News Letter* reported that a new study had found that lower limits cut accidents and reduce serious injury. One of the few 20 mph speed limits in Northern Ireland is in Belfast city centre. It makes sense to have it there. The impact is not on local residents who live close by, because not many do; it is on the shopping centre, which is very big with a pedestrian walkway. It is important to have that speed limit in Belfast city centre. Researchers have found that the measure led to a 2% reduction in crashes.

In 2021-22, we worked incredibly hard to push the then Infrastructure Minister, Nicola Mallon, to include Grey Abbey Primary School in phase 2 of the part-time 20 mph speed limit zones for schools in Northern Ireland. That included me, my Strangford MLA and councillor colleagues, and the principal of Grey Abbey Primary School, Mr Derrick—he taught some of my boys at school, so he has been there a long time. I make this point because that is an example of where 20 mph speed limits around schools save lives and make people aware of what they are doing.

After months of emails and chasing the issue up, it was fantastic to hear the announcement in September 2021, in the middle of covid, that phase 2 of the

part-time 20 mph speed limit scheme would be rolled out to 106 schools across Northern Ireland, including Grey Abbey in my constituency. It was, and it has made a difference. It has definitely slowed traffic in that area, and it was the right thing to do at a place where students are going to school early in the morning—from half-past 8 to half-past 9, say.

My office would send numerous emails about traffic calming and speed limits each day. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said that he gets an enormous volume of constituency mail about this; I do, too. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that it is one of the biggest issues that constituents have with the roads. While there is an understanding that enforcing speed limits and introducing traffic-calming measures is a long and costly process, there must be an acceptance that some areas are simply more dangerous than others, especially around schools.

Loughries Integrated Primary School is another example in my constituency of where introducing a 20 mph speed limit around a school has made a difference, as it has at Kirkistown Primary School in Main Road in Cloughey. Again, these are examples of where, even though the road may be wide—in Kirkistown it would be very wide—there is a real need to slow people's speed. Before Loughries was awarded a part-time 20 mph speed limit, it was on a national speed limit road on the Ballyblack Road. I drive on that road frequently back home, and I know many constituents who live on it. I find it quite incomprehensible that a national speed limit road, which posed such a danger to students, could have been allowed so near the school.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for raising this issue. Although we all have different guidelines for different parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we are all taking about the same thing: public safety. This is about agreement with the input of local people, especially around schools, where safety is critical. For some high-congestion areas, additional traffic management and a 20 mph limit have been proven to work. I have to say that, from my observations, looking towards London from the outside in, there are areas where it is critical that it happens. However, for the schools in my constituency, the introduction of 20 mph speed limits has gone a long way in protecting the students who attend school there, and moreover it will be a reassurance to the parents to know that this step has been taken.

I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I hope that my contribution from the Northern Ireland perspective has been helpful. This is all about making safety a priority and about the input of local residents. If we can get them on our side and agree that, then we do not have the impact. In fairness, where damage to property resulting from a high volume of lorries and cars has been highlighted to the roads service back home, the response has always been positive: to try to reduce the volume and avoid that damage.

9.58 am

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I must begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this debate. As ever, his finger is on the pulse of what people are thinking in his constituency

and across the country, and his determination to respond to that is undimmed. I echo his clear statements that this is not about opposition to the proper application of speed limits for reasons of safety or health. I should add that there is an important debate to be had about the balance between private and public transport, but that is for another day.

Even a short while ago, I would not have guessed that transport and the politics of urban speed restrictions would be an issue to energise the public at large. I can only assume that this was the view of the Labour Government in Wales earlier this year, when they swept such a restriction—a presumption that 30 mph limits would become 20 mph limits across Wales—through the Senedd. How wrong they were. Within 24 hours of the new restrictions being imposed, a petition to abolish them became the most signed in Senedd history—that is 25 years. Since then, some half a million aggrieved residents have put their names to the call to axe this limit. That is more people than who voted for any political party in the last Senedd election.

Indeed, polling today reveals that Welsh voters now back repealing the new restrictions by two to one. When we dig into those figures, we see that opposition outweighs support in every age bracket, every income bracket, every language grouping, every regional grouping and even every 2019 voting group. If anyone were to ask me what political issue unites the people of Wales today, it is opposition to the speed restriction.

That also raises the question: why? The Welsh Government have claimed that this restriction is moderate, even trifling, and is driven by concerns for safety. So why are voters so upset about it? Are voters in Wales foolish? Are they all careless petrolheads? No and no. We have strong communities that feel as deeply as any other when one part is hurting. We see plenty of tragedy on our roads each year—innocent, often young, lives cut short through road accidents where speed is a factor. But the truth is that the effects of this legislation are real, and its impact on services for households, families and businesses runs deep.

Already, businesses that make regular call-outs or that offer delivery services have complained that the 10-minute delays for normal journeys is impacting on the service they can deliver. I have had tradesmen come up and tell me they are losing an average of one job a day because they cannot move quickly enough between contracts. We have also heard of bus services having to skip stops to keep to the timetable for the services they are contracted to deliver.

I want to dwell on care services for a moment. Some 27% of people in my constituency of over Aberconwy are over 65 years old, compared with a UK average of 18%. One might therefore suspect, correctly, that the care services and agencies supporting vulnerable people in their own homes are vital; but the tens of thousands of visits made each year all take time and cost money. Extending that time by just a few minutes per call imposes a substantial cost on an already stretched public purse.

For a rural area such as Aberconwy, let us assume a very modest three-minute delay per round trip. That suggests an additional cost of over 1,000 hours of fuel and wages per year—that is eight-and-a-half to 10 wasted work weeks. If we also assume average UK engine

efficiency, current fuel prices and the minimum wage, it is at least £3,500 in additional fuel costs alone, and £11,000 in wages. That is an annual penalty in the region of £15,000 for doing the same work—more than any business can afford, and further than many budgets can stretch.

Costs will, of course, be higher if the pay is above the minimum wage or uses less fuel-efficient vehicles such as vans, trucks and minibuses. Most such businesses and public services will simply be forced to cut back on provision where they cannot charge more or pay their workers less, and those already struggling to break even will go under. In short, these new rules could almost have been designed to diminish services, reduce wages and increase the fatigue associated with running a business or a complex public service.

But what about other workers, parents and families? The vast majority of people in Wales rely on cars to go about their daily lives; for example, 83% per cent of Welsh residents rely on such vehicles to get to work. Similar proportions use them to visit friends and families, to shop, or to take their children to school. For such people the slower journey times are not trivial. Long journeys represent lost time at home with the children, with a partner, with friends, or less time out enjoying the things that bring meaning and enjoyment to our lives. In many cases, restrictions will mean that some weekend visits to friends and family will simply no longer happen. At the margins, the restrictions mark the difference between a home being a commutable distance from work or not. In other words, these speed restrictions take away what the car provides: an ability for many rural constituents to maximise the good things in life.

I will turn briefly to the subject of lost opportunity. The Labour Government in Wales have assessed the potential impact of this policy. They concluded that there would be a “substantial” economic disadvantage to car-based communities, with costs to business and households of up to £8.9 billion, and a central estimate of £6.4 billion. The total cost to the public so far has been £34.4 million. If we applied a simple cost-benefit analysis, we would conclude that, for the cost of this policy, we might have employed hundreds of nurses or doctors, or invested in vital transport upgrades that communities across this country are crying out for.

The suspicion across Wales is that this rule was not passed because it represents a good return on investment, or because Labour leaders believe it would improve the lives of Welsh residents. No, I suspect that at the heart of this move is a general disdain for cars, exuded by those who do not have to rely on them for their daily lives. For my rural community, cars are essential. They dramatically expand our choice of where we can live and work. They expand our social spheres, bring us closer to people we love, and save us valuable time for the things that really matter to us. They are indispensable to the economic and social life of Aberconwy communities. At a fundamental level, they also embody an ideal of Conservative politics: empowering the individual.

As has been pointed out throughout this debate, there are appropriate roads on which to restrict car speeds to 20 mph, for reasons of health and safety and the environment. The sweeping restrictions we see creeping into parts of the UK, however, appear to be the vision of a managerial minority without heed to the expanse

[Robin Millar]

of the majority. It is for this reason that I, too, must urge a roll-back of these restrictions. I started by commending my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green for his awareness of what people were thinking. This Saturday, two mums from my constituency, Tina and Debbie—the two people, if I might say, least likely to arrange a protest—will be holding a rally of “Conwy against the 20 mph limit”, in Llandudno. I will be there to support them.

10.7 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. Where to begin on this particular issue? I am glad that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) brought it before us, because while in some regard it is a very simple area to deal with, it is also a very complex area. I start from the principle of subsidiarity—namely, that the people best able to make the decision at, for example, a local government level, are the best people to make the decision at a local level: a determination by them of the needs of their community. I completely accept that should be in full consultation, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

I was chair of a highways committee when we started to introduce speed humps, bumps and tables over 25 years ago. That was because there were so many people who were sick to death of their residential areas being used as rat runs. They wanted us, the council, to do something about it, so we started that process. However, this is also part of the wider issue of, for want of a better phrase, speed awareness. Speed bumps, humps and tables are one way that we can start changing the culture of people speeding.

Only in the last few days, one of my local schools, St Oswald's Church of England Primary School, asked me to be a judge of posters made by children in reception to cut speed; I would like to announce the winner, but I do not think the school has announced it yet. The point is that people do recognise the need to cut speed. The figures are there. Starkly, there are 1,700 deaths and 29,000 serious injuries a year on our roads. The right hon. Gentleman talked about the cost of it, but the cost on the human side is absolutely dreadful. The figures from a Statista report show costs of £3.5 billion a year. Where is that factored into this? That has to be taken into account as well.

On the issue of subsidiarity, Parliament is here to set out a framework for how we operate at local government level, for example. I do not think it is for us to tell local government and local councils what they should be doing. I accept that the right hon. Gentleman is not necessarily saying that. However, it is worth pointing out that we give them the responsibility to do this, and it is also the responsibility of the electors in those areas to hold them to account and challenge them.

I welcome that challenge, as I always did as a member of the local authority, but this also has to be part of the wider traffic issue. For example, I understand that no pavement parking is permitted in London, but it is rife in my constituency. It is dangerous: people park on pavements all the time, blocking them, and obstructing elderly people and women and men with prams and

wheelchairs. That is also an issue, and it is part of the whole question of traffic calming. There are issues with people parking on cycle lanes, for goodness' sake, and blocking them—they do not care about anybody but themselves. That is not acceptable either.

In my view, the issue is all about trying to get people to understand that speed kills, whether in a pedestrian area, on a motorway, on an A road or on a B road. It is important that people understand that. Speed humps, bumps and tables—there are variations on themes—do help to control speed on roads. The evidence is there for that. They do reduce accidents, help to regulate traffic and ensure the safety of pedestrians. They are also relatively easy to construct. We know that speed humps are highly effective and important for avoiding road accidents.

If the Government, of whatever party, want more significant research into the issue, I welcome that. Neither I nor anyone else has anything whatever to fear from a full, unambiguous, substantive review of these proposals. I completely accept that that should be evidence-based and that we should learn from the evidence, but that does not detract from the fact that I do not want to tell people in any other constituency, or any Member in this room, what their local traffic-calming plans should or should not be—this should not be by diktat. Whatever assessment the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting, it cannot be a way for the centre here to tell local authorities what to do—where they can or cannot put speed humps or how far apart those should or should not be. That should be a matter for local determination.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The point I was trying to make was that if local residents have concerns about what is happening to them, their houses and so on, they have no ability to benchmark what the council is determined to do. If we want local decision making—yes, absolutely—that needs to be fair and on the basis of the best evidence available so that councils can understand when these things should be applied for best effect, rather than just making arbitrary decisions based on very old measures that actually did nothing at all. The request today is for better independent inquiry into what works, what does not work and where any measures should be. That would be far better. Councils could then discuss that with their electors.

Peter Dowd: As I said, I do not disagree with that. I am all for it being evidence-based. There are road bumps outside my house. They do not particularly bother me, I have to say, but that is my view. I do not think they particularly bother my neighbour either. They were introduced before I moved into the house over 25 years ago, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson). It was called the village entry scheme, because people in the village got sick to death of people speeding through at 60 or 70 mph. The price that we as residents pay for that, to some extent, is road humps outside our houses. If that is the way we want to dress this up, that is the consequence. The alternative consequence is people speeding through, which is more dangerous and more disruptive than the speed humps.

That is my personal perspective. It is a perspective as a Member of Parliament, as a councillor and former chair of highways, and as a resident. I want to take this

in the round. I welcome the debate introduced by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green; I just hope that we deal with it in the spirit in which it is intended and, as he said, that we do not politicise it. When we start to politicise things like road humps, speed humps or pelican crossings, there lies—excuse the pun—the road to perdition.

Robin Millar: The hon. Gentleman makes some strong points, and subsidiarity is key to this issue. The point is that those road humps are there because of decisions, and those decisions are taken by politicians, so how does he suggest that this is not a political matter?

Peter Dowd: There is a difference between a political matter and a party political matter. I felt that a bit of party politicking was coming into the debate with talk about the Welsh Government, or this council or the other. I accept that it is a political decision; almost every decision we make is political, but when we make them, we have to balance them in the round.

Without repeating myself, I completely acknowledge what the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said. But when we get the evidence—and we have been here many times in this place—we do not like it, so we try to ignore it. We ignore facts and we do not like experts. I exhort people: if we have a full, clear, unambiguous, independent examination of this matter, once we get the results and the evidence, in my view, it is for the local communities to have their say as part of the consultation process about when particular traffic-calming measures come into place, and whether they be 20 mph speed limits, 10 mph speed limits or whatever they might be.

10.18 am

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important debate. He has made some excellent points, particularly on local decision making, which I am also concerned about. I represent a number of villages in Meon Valley that are unsuitable for high-speed traffic. Some are on the A32, which is one of the worst roads in the country for people being killed and injured, but everywhere in our villages the problems of speeding traffic are a menace to the people living, working and going to school.

I was an MP in Portsmouth when it had recently become one of the first cities to introduce 20 mph zones. The evidence very quickly showed a reduction in the number of incidents because the average speed was brought down, and the change made drivers think more carefully about their behaviour. Everywhere that has done the same has seen a similar reduction in casualty figures. I am pleased that Hampshire County Council is now looking at allowing communities and parish councils to ask for 20 mph zones. I have been calling for that for a long time and residents have been asking for help, particularly along the A32. I hope that the council will allow communities to move forward when it takes a decision in January next year.

Hampshire County Council is considering a report mostly based on conditions in Winchester, as my right hon. Friend said, and other largely built-up areas. But

in our rural Meon Valley communities, things are very different. Narrow roads pass right outside people's front doors, and in many places there are narrow or even no pavements, including on the A32. Residents feel vulnerable because of the speed of traffic. Many notice the return to high-speed traffic after covid—if anything, they saw even more of it as people returned to the countryside. As my right hon. Friend mentioned, we have to recognise, too, that the average modern car is much bigger and heavier than those in the past. Pedestrians are feeling the squeeze, and so are cyclists, horse riders and even other motorists who might not feel so confident as the drivers barrelling along a village at above 40 mph in a 30 mph zone.

Peter Dowd: The hon. Lady will be aware that 60% of all road fatalities happen on rural roads. Would she agree that we must do something about that?

Mrs Drummond: Yes. That is exactly why I am so concerned, particularly about the A32. People have to walk along that road. There is no pavement and cars go very fast through villages. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

My constituents are delighted that we have recently installed average speed cameras on stretches of the A32 and the A272, which have been abused by speeding drivers for far too long. The cameras will save drivers' lives and improve the lives of residents in the surrounding villages. They have already told me what a difference those have made.

Cutting speed saves lives. I welcome the support of the Hampshire police and crime commissioner, Donna Jones. She backed the calls that I and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) have made to her to fund the cameras. I will continue to support my constituents across Meon Valley who want safer roads and safer lives for their families, so I hope that Hampshire County Council will let us have the choice of having 20 mph zones in those areas where residents want them.

I also hope that Ministers will look at what the Government can do to empower people to take control of roads in their communities, including through the use of acoustic cameras and properly enforceable noise limits on motor vehicles. This has been a blight on many communities, and I hope that the pilot schemes will soon show that they work and we can roll them out across the country, but especially in Meon Valley.

10.22 am

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I agree with several right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate: traffic cameras and speed limits should not be applied in a blanket fashion. I am a liberal partly because I believe in individual responsibility and partly because I believe that the state should not have overweening power and should not dictate what every single person must do.

Robin Millar: Would the hon. Gentleman consider crossing the Floor, in that case?

Richard Foord: I am grateful for the invitation. I think back to the new liberals at the beginning of the 20th century, who were very proud of the notion of the independence

[Richard Foord]

of the individual. However, they also recognised that there were times when the state does have to intervene to protect citizens. I want to talk about that sort of notion.

I would like to start with an anecdote. Ken Cooper lived in Newton Poppleford. During the Christmas period of 2020, he tried crossing a dark road; imagine a dark Devon rural road where the speed limit is 30 mph. He was walking across, in admittedly dark clothing. A car came along doing no more than 30 mph, and it killed him. It killed him on 23 December, which made for an absolutely tragic Christmas period for his family. If the traffic on that road had been travelling at 20 mph, he might have survived. His local councillor, Councillor Chris Burhop, pointed out to me last week that a collision with a pedestrian that occurs at 30 mph has a 47% likelihood of fatality or severe injury, but a collision that occurs at 20 mph has a 17% likelihood of fatality or severe injury.

That is just one illustrative example, but there are many others in my constituency. Since 2019, there have been 971 collisions in my constituency in which someone was hurt, including 246 this year alone. As a result, 12 people have lost their lives and 168 were seriously injured.

I did not anticipate this being an issue that was agitating many of my constituents until I went on a summer tour of village and town halls. I spoke to lots of residents and was struck by just how many villagers independently raised the matter with me. I represent a part of rural Devon where the towns and villages are on the coast or nestled in among the green countryside. Members will appreciate that Devon has one of the largest road networks in the country, and we use our cars every day to get around. It is false to distinguish between the interests of pedestrians and those of car drivers, or between those of cyclists and those of van drivers. We are one and the same—we use all modes of transport. As we do not tend to have facilities on our doorstep, we might drive to the supermarket rather than be able to walk to a local shop. If we commute, there probably will not be a bus for us, so we have to drive. Getting to school also often requires the use of a car. I do not like the idea that this is somehow a wedge issue where we pit urban pedestrians against rural car drivers, as it is just not that simple.

Obviously, on subsidiarity, local authorities should be trusted to rule on this issue. Clearly, local government is far better suited than national Government to weigh in, provided it has the resources to do so. Let me illustrate the point by referring to Devon County Council. In May, it announced that there would be six new 20 mph zones across the county, but 105 parishes applied to have a zone. It was reckoned that it would take £25,000 to introduce a zone—a change of speed limit—and Devon County Council could afford only six. When I went on my village hall tour, I spoke to villagers in Wilmington and Kilmington who have tried to cross the A35 and have found it next to impossible even just to get a bus on the other side of the road. These people are not typical agitators or rebellious people, but they are really cross about this. I had to get out to the villages and go to those village hall meetings to see the issue for myself.

What solutions are available? The one currently offered to residents in my part of Devon is Community Speedwatch. Although it is helpful to have local residents trying to enforce the speed limits that exist at the moment, that is sometimes just not enough. I have been out there with the Community Speedwatch group in Dulford, pointing speed cameras while receiving gestures from passing car drivers or van drivers who are perhaps pushing 45 mph in a 30 mph zone. This is partly about enforcement, but it is also partly about having a lower limit, because if someone is going to exceed a 30 mph limit, they might push it to 38 mph or 40 mph, but if they are going to exceed the limit in a 20 mph zone, that is more likely to result in their pushing it out to 26 mph or 28 mph. As we have heard, the survival chances improve markedly for every 1 mph reduction. Of course, we would like more enforcement of the zones we already have, such as the one at Dunkeswell, where residents do not feel the 20 mph zone is enforced by the police enough. However, the sheer existence of the zone means that people are driving less fast through that village, so if collisions happen, lives will have been saved.

I ask Members to note that I have deliberately not used the term “accident” in this debate, as there is no such thing. These things do not happen by sheer happenstance. This is about mistakes made, mostly by those involved in the collision—often, not by the pedestrian—but we also have a part to play in this process. It will not be an accident if we can intervene and give county councils like Devon the resources that they require to have proper speed limits in place.

To give another couple of examples, I went to the village halls in Colyford and Chardstock. I am proud that there are people in those villages who have a sense of civic duty such that they want to get involved in making their communities safer and more liveable.

To finish on a more optimistic note, last month, I joined the headteacher of Honiton Primary School at the school after he had spoken to his pupils and invited them, as a council, to come up with ideas for what they might like to do—their school council was allowed to put forward ideas. One bright youngster called Eleanor said that a speed hump ought to be put in outside the school. It was therefore a privilege to lobby the local council to introduce the speed hump and to join Eleanor and the headteacher at its opening. The speed hump will make a real difference to children and families at drop-off time at Honiton Primary School.

I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this debate. I am grateful to have been able to present the views of the people I represent in Devon.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches.

10.31 am

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This has been a very interesting debate, not least because we have heard a variety of opinions about the different approaches in different parts of the United Kingdom. Those demonstrate the vital importance of local decision making to reflect the different needs in different parts of the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), as he confessed, is a constituent of mine. He has speed bumps outside his house, in one of the villages in my constituency, but he made a point about his constituency,

which is urban. Over the years—this also happens in the more urbanised parts of my constituency—people have used urban and suburban roads as rat runs and, in some cases, racetracks. For many people in residential areas where such things happen, it is entirely appropriate that road safety measures are introduced, and I am sure that nobody here today would disagree with that statement. He also made the point about there being 1,700 deaths a year and that thousands more people are seriously injured.

Robin Millar: I spoke at length about the situation in Wales. The hon. Gentleman talks about statistics and the impact of these measures. Does he agree with what the Labour Government in Wales have done with their blanket imposition of the presumption of a 20 mph limit?

Bill Esterson: The hon. Gentleman will know that compared with the Welsh Government's approach, our approach in England as the Opposition—I will come to this in more detail—is to allow, enable and support local decision making and subsidiarity. Actually, that is also true in Wales, where local authorities can reinstate 30 mph zones, and my understanding is that that is happening. So the situation is not quite as simple as it has sometimes been portrayed in the media, as he well knows. However, it is for Parliament to set the framework that my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle discussed, and it is not for Parliament to tell local authorities what to do.

I thought that the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) made a very important case for local decision making, with her description of the rural roads and the A32 in her constituency. In contrast, I think the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) managed to mention every single village in his constituency during his speech. I cannot imagine why he might have done that, but I am sure that there is a very good reason. Nevertheless, he powerfully made the point about the difference in the likely outcome if somebody is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph as opposed to one travelling at 30 mph. The likelihood of someone dying is five times greater if they are hit at 30 mph than if they are hit at 20 mph. He touched on the point that drivers are also pedestrians, and sometimes cyclists and bus passengers, too. This is not a straightforward situation.

Our approach as a Labour Opposition and, hopefully, as an incoming Government is that it is for local communities to decide where 20 mph zones are implemented. I agree that local authorities and the people in their areas are best placed to know what works and what does not. It should not be the job of officials or Ministers in Whitehall to meddle.

It is disappointing that the Government seem determined to undermine democratically elected representatives and their communities. That is the reading of what they set out in October 2023 in their proposals, which included phrases such as taking steps “to stop councils”. The removal of local authorities' access to DVLA data, vital for enforcement through the use of cameras, is among measures that undermine and intervene in an unhealthy and divisive way.

The irony of what the Government set out in their proposals, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said in his

opening speech, is that it was a Conservative Government in the late 1980s and early 1990s who first gave local authorities the power to implement road safety measures, because they knew that people wanted to protect schools and some residential streets.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I do not wish to hold him up for any length of time. We have heard this quite a lot so far, and people have talked glibly about road humps not being or being a problem, but there is a massive difference in what we mean by road humps. The scale is enormous. In some areas, they literally just remind drivers of the speed limit and there is a slight movement in the car. In other areas that I referred to, such as outside residential homes, there are significantly high humps and they are implemented without any regard for what actually works or does not work. When traffic hits them, it causes all sorts of problems. That is the point that I am making: yes, local authorities have to decide, but they need to do so based on what works and what does not work. Right now, they can do almost anything they wish, and residents have no say in that.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. He called for a review, and I gently say to him that I hope he is also calling for a review of the state of road repairs. The bumps in the road from the excess number of potholes are also creating the kind of problems that he mentioned earlier. There is also an argument for a change in the design of buses, and the introduction of buses that can cope with whatever modern roads have, including physical road safety measures.

The role of the Westminster Government should be to support sensible decisions to boost active travel, reduce congestion and improve communities. That is the Labour view of where we should go on this issue. In Government, we would leave decisions on over 20 mph zones with locally elected leaders.

What do people think about the road safety measures that are in place? Let us look at a report that the Government published, which shows strong support for the 20 mph limits that have been introduced. A Government study found that 75% of residents and 67% of non-resident drivers found the speed limits that have been introduced appropriate. Even certain Ministers seem to recognise that these decisions are best made locally. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), said recently:

“Where there is local opposition to 20 mph low emission zones, then the Government has a duty to look and see what we can do to support those local communities...but to begin with, absolutely, it's the local authorities to determine where a 20 mph zone should be placed.”

The Minister without Portfolio, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), was Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for roads and local transport until a few weeks ago. He said in November last year:

“The Department has no remit to intervene in matters of local democratic decision making. Decisions on what traffic management measures to provide, including low traffic neighbourhoods such as the one that my hon. Friend talked about in Latchford—specifically in Westy—are entirely a matter for local authorities such as Warrington to make.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 492-493.]

[Bill Esterson]

That would have the support of the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), judging by the answer that that Minister gave at the time.

What of the Prime Minister? Even he admitted that councils will still be able to implement 20 mph limits, as long as they have consent from local residents. This really is a non-debate, as 20 mph zones have already been introduced, with local support, by local councils. The Government admit that the people who are best placed to make decisions on these traffic restrictions are local authorities, so let us take a look at some local authorities.

One council that has taken the Prime Minister at his word is Cornwall, which is controlled by the Conservative party. Cornwall Council is investing £3.8 million on a county-wide roll-out of 20 mph speed limits in built-up areas; it says that that will make roads safer for everyone. Where else is that enforced? In Conservative-controlled Kensington and Chelsea and in Conservative-controlled Scottish Borders. It is really no wonder that those Conservative councils have introduced 20 mph zones, given the guidance from the Department for Transport, which states that traffic authorities should

“consider the introduction of more 20 mph limits and zones, over time, in urban areas and built-up village streets that are primarily residential.”

Let us call out these announcements from the Government for what they are: meaningless political posturing without any substance to back them up.

Instead of being distracted by divisive posturing from the Government, we should look at the real issues that drivers face up and down the country. The cost of car ownership soared by 34% between 2018 and 2022. Car insurance costs have gone up by 58% in a year. Our roads have been left in a sorry state, with a one-time cost to the pothole backlog climbing to an eye-watering £14 billion. The charging infrastructure roll-out for electric vehicles is still years off track. Ordinary families will be left to pay thousands of pounds in hire costs due to the Prime Minister’s delay to the new petrol and diesel car phase-out, which, in turn, will result in fewer cheap-to-run electric vehicles reaching the second-hand market in the coming years. Meanwhile, data from Tusker shows that servicing an EV is 65% cheaper than servicing a diesel car and 37% cheaper than servicing a petrol car. And long-term plans to create more road space and reduce congestion by moving freight from road to rail have been cut by this Government, with the scrapping of the northern leg of High Speed 2.

The next Labour Government will support drivers, regardless of what type of vehicle they drive, by acting on their real priorities, such as cost of living pressures that they face each and every day. On 10 October, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) announced Labour’s plan to support drivers, which will save drivers hundreds of pounds by cracking down on unfair car insurance costs; reduce traffic on our roads by providing better public transport options; remove planning barriers to ensure that upgrades to our transport infrastructure are actually delivered; accelerate the charge point roll-out to give drivers confidence, no matter what type of vehicle they drive—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Gentleman wind up?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): How is this relevant to the debate?

Bill Esterson: I am very glad that the Minister asked me that, because I am about to make exactly that point. Combined, those changes would save drivers hundreds of pounds a year in lower insurance costs and cut journey times by reducing traffic on our roads. What a contrast that is with what the Conservative party offered at its conference, where, instead of taking steps to support drivers through the cost of living crisis, the Prime Minister was reduced to parroting bizarre conspiracy theories about so-called 15-minute cities. It is increasingly clear that he has nothing left in the tank. With the Conservative party becoming more and more detached from reality, it is clear that only Labour can be trusted to focus on the real concerns of drivers.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I have to bring the hon. Gentleman back to the debate, which is on road humps and 20 mph speed limits. I hope to bring in the Minister in a minute.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful for that, Mr Robertson. This is my final paragraph.

Labour’s credible plan means taking action on car insurance costs, removing barriers to transport infrastructure improvements being delivered, reducing the traffic that is clogging up our roads—which is what this debate is all about—and boosting the charge point roll-out. That is a plan for drivers, and it is a plan of action that will change driving for the better.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate and all colleagues on a constructive, positive and engaging cross-party debate. Politics aside, that was sadly missed in a speech in which 95% was written by a very enthusiastic staffer and about 5% was on the subject matter of the debate.

Bill Esterson: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will come to the hon. Gentleman in a second, but I want to start with a few key points.

Clearly, road safety is a priority for us all. It is a priority for Government, Opposition, all political parties and all local authorities. Clearly, all road deaths are tragedies for all affected, and injuries can cause suffering, economic loss and life-changing misfortune. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was entirely right to mention the individual circumstances of his local constituents, whether that was Mr and Mrs Thorne, Mr Gilbert, Mrs Gauld, Mr Mckinley or Mr Thackeray. Their upsets and concerns are legitimately raised and rightly brought forward, as are those of the constituents of other Members.

I should declare that 23 years ago, a young, much thinner barrister was asked to do a rather important case in the Court of Appeal: the case of *Marina Vine v. London Borough of Waltham Forest*. I was the retained counsel—that thinner barrister—on behalf of the Automobile Association. I was lucky enough to change

the law in respect of wheel clamping and the actions of individuals, particularly in the London Borough of Waltham Forest, which was the test case of the time that subsequently changed the law in this country. This debate therefore brought back great memories of individual people facing problems from local councils that had not necessarily undertaken the right degree of consultation, because in that case, the lovely Mrs Marina Vine, who had had to stop because she was recovering from a cancer operation, was unfairly clamped.

I was also a criminal prosecutor who prosecuted many death by dangerous driving cases, and I fully understand the consequences of all aspects of road safety in difficult circumstances. Like other constituency Members, I have residents who would be very upset if I did not mention their concerns about speeding in Heddon-on-the-Wall, Henshaw and other places. My first campaign as a candidate, let alone as the Member of Parliament, was to bring in a 20 mph zone outside Queen Elizabeth High School, whose students I welcomed from Hexham today.

I think we all agree that 20 mph zones, particularly in the right place, at the right time and with the right consultation, are a good thing. The obvious example, which we can all get behind, is near schools. I do not think a single Member or council struggles to bring in such changes, which are surely a fantastically good thing, but the key issue is having the right restrictions in the right place and at the right time.

Let me set out the national picture and the local picture in a little detail, before coming to the individual points raised. Clearly, central Government's role is to set the enabling legislative framework, set national policy objectives, provide good practice guidance—I will come to that point in a second—and then provide funding. Central Government have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day running of local roads. Local traffic authorities are responsible for managing roads and traffic in their areas. They have a high degree of autonomy in how they do so, with powers granted to them through enabling legislation, but legislation also places a duty on them to manage roads safely and efficiently for the benefit of all their communities, whether that means local residents, drivers, or people cycling and walking.

I think it is accepted that traffic calming measures, including road humps, can play an important role in improving road safety. They must meet the requirements in the Highways (Road Humps) Regulations 1999, which set out minimum and maximum dimensions. There are also requirements for signing and lighting. There are statutory requirements for local authorities to consult on proposals for new road humps. It is for local authorities to ensure that any measures they install comply with legislation and that due process is followed.

There is no specific requirement for a minimum distance to be maintained between road humps and private dwellings. However, during the development of the road hump designs, the Transport Research Laboratory carried out some research into road humps and vibration. That looked at the vibration generated by traffic travelling over humps and led to advice on predicted minimum distances between road humps and dwellings in order to avoid the possibility of vibration exposure. This is reflected in the guidance in "Local Transport Note 1/07".

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green made a very fair and compelling point. I am certainly going to ask the Department for

Transport—working with the Transport Research Laboratory—to do a fresh review and further research, given that it is patently obvious that the evidence basis on this is decades old and the world has moved on considerably. That does not predetermine anything in any particular way, but at the same time, what is surely self-evident from this debate is that we need a more updated attempt to understand the situation. I entirely accept my right hon. Friend's point that—without being too trite about it—there are road humps and there are road humps, and local communities are affected in different ways.

If ever we needed an example of where local consent is key, then, with great respect, the example in Wales is fantastic. That started as a positive attempt to influence certain things, but it cannot be a good situation when approximately one in three or one in four of the population are rising up to oppose a particular change. That would imply to anyone—and to all of us who have held elected office at a local level—that the pitch has not been rolled and consent has not been established.

The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd)—he knows, to his regret, that he is a friend of mine—has great experience, and not only as a local councillor with regard to highways. If we do not have local consent for the changes we are bringing in, whether that is through the entirety of Wales or in a local community or street, we will always struggle with acceptance and democratic accountability. The issue will become a political football, which is not what we want. Surely we want to avoid that.

I endorse the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) that there must be proper consultation and subsequent enforcement if an individual or council is going to introduce these changes. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) used his amazing abilities to bring Northern Ireland matters into this debate. I can tell the House that I have visited Newtownards not once, but twice, and have experienced the speed bumps he referred to in his speech. Notwithstanding the fact that I have no influence or ability whatever to change them, his point is fairly made and stands on the record. As always, it is a joy to have him in these debates.

Much of what the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) said did not have to do with this debate. He raised the issue of road repairs; £8.3 billion has been given to local authorities for that. That is a record sum, over and above the previous sum for road repairs and potholes, and I sincerely hope local authorities will be held to account for its use. The hon. Member mentioned many different MPs, and I sincerely hope he gave notice to them. He certainly did not give notice to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), my Parliamentary Private Secretary, who has asked me to point out that the low-traffic neighbourhood in the Westy area of Latchford has since been removed by Labour-run Warrington Borough Council. It was not supported locally, nor was it supported by my hon. Friend, because it increased congestion and emissions. Again, my hon. Friend was not given notice.

The situation in respect of—

Bill Esterson: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, I will not. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Guy Opperman: No, the Minister is continuing.

Bill Esterson: On a point of order, Mr Robertson. I seek your guidance. I have been accused of something by the Minister and not been given a chance to respond. How might I go about setting the record straight?

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): That is not a point of order.

Guy Opperman: Moving on, in respect of the situation in Wales, the hon. Member for Sefton Central appeared to say, “We do not endorse the approach in Wales”, but paused at the end of that.

I will make a couple of final points. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) is right to make the case for campaigns for cameras. I say with great respect, as the Minister for drivers, for walking and cycling, and for road safety, that it is not just a question of road humps or speeding drivers. There are cameras and other ways to slow traffic down. I endorse my hon. Friend’s approach. There has to be an alternative way forward, working with the police to ensure that we look at this properly. I will take on board her point about acoustic cameras and will do some more research.

On enforcement, the Department for Transport’s guidance is clear about what factors should be considered by local authorities when setting speed limits, including consultation with the police and that the limits set should be capable of being enforced. That is crucial. If changes are to be imposed, whether it is national in Wales or super-local on Acacia Avenue, there has to be consultation, and the police should be capable of taking action against drivers who break the speed limit.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green for securing the debate, which colleagues have addressed constructively. We understand and appreciate that there is a problem. I promise that the Department for Transport will look at it and review the situation. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on conveying his constituents’ concerns in a typically doughty way.

10.56 am

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I genuinely appreciate the tone in which this debate has been conducted. Everybody has their own view about their local area and wide

variations have been exposed. Speed is a very big issue for the residents of rural constituencies with small villages on major roads. I am astonished by how often motorists do not realise that once they enter an area that has lighting, they are automatically, without signage, restricted to 30 mph. They think that there is no speed limit, but there is. Therein lies the issue.

I do not want decisions to be taken away from local authorities. On the contrary: I want local authorities to make decisions, but they should make them on the basis of a proper consultation and an understanding of what residents want and need. They should not impose measures on the basis that they know better. I think that was the tone of the debate.

We have had a good debate. I want to come back to the issue of road humps. We talk about road humps as though there were a national standard, but they can be any height. The question is: are they there to remind motorists that there is a speed restriction and they should therefore watch their speed, or are they there in some cases as a kind of punishment for motorists being in their cars in the first place as they wallop into these things that are very steep and very high? That is the issue that I really wanted to raise today. I think that in my area, they are a punishment to drivers. They do not really warn them; they just make it a nightmare to drive a car, or to ride a bicycle or a motorbike.

I thank the Minister for saying that he will ask the Department to look at the standards, and at what works and what does not. That will help councils in their consultations so that they can make decisions in the best interests of local people. That is good government, and it will enable councils to have good local government. At the moment, there is so little evidence about the effectiveness of road humps, which are often put there rather lazily instead of having other measures. I find the signs that remind us of our speed to be often far more effective than anything else because most motorists, as I think was pointed out earlier, are pedestrians as well as drivers. The speed sign shocks motorists into lowering their speed, because they suddenly realise that they are over the limit. They react positively to that sort of thing. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister, who will now look at this matter, and I think my constituents will thank him as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road humps and 20 mph speed limits.

Zero-emission Buses and Air Quality in Sheffield

11 am

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered zero emission buses and air quality in Sheffield.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I will start with the issue of air quality. We know its importance. Poor air quality contributes to the early deaths of up to 43,000 people every year in the UK, according to Asthma + Lung UK. Children are in the frontline, as it affects their health in childhood and throughout their life.

Living alongside a busy road carries the same risk as passively smoking 10 cigarettes a day, so the fact that nitrogen dioxide levels in Sheffield were above legal limits was a huge concern. Clearly we are not alone—we are one of 30 towns and cities exceeding the limit of 10 micrograms per cubic metre—but we were keen to act, and the Government were keen to support us, as a city, in acting.

The Government directed us to implement a clean air zone. We welcomed that instruction because we want a cleaner and healthier future for all who live in our city. Based on the national figures I mentioned, we know that air pollution contributes to around 250 to 500 deaths every year in Sheffield. It can permanently damage children's lungs and cause strokes, lung cancer and cardiovascular disease.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. The motion refers to zero emission buses: such buses, manufactured in Northern Ireland by Wrightbus, were launched in Oxford only two weeks ago. The fleet of 21 StreetDeck Electroliners, the world's first efficient, double-decker electric buses, was launched as part of the contribution to net zero. Does the hon. Member agree that there is scope for Northern Ireland to pave the way across the United Kingdom in terms of electric bus contracts? For Sheffield, they are the answer to all his prayers.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I thought that on this occasion I had secured a Westminster Hall debate on which he could not find an angle, but I was obviously mistaken. He is right, and I hope that Sheffield, with the support of the Government, can pave the way alongside Northern Ireland on this issue.

Older polluting vehicles are a major source of the problems. We worked in partnership with the Government to deliver a solution, encouraging owners of commercial vehicles to replace them with compliant vehicles. It is not easy, and we would have welcomed additional support, particularly to help taxi drivers to transition to cleaner vehicles, but buses are the key. Several of our air quality hotspots in Sheffield are primarily influenced by buses. We have a fleet of about 400 and they are older than in most cities, with an average age of about 12 years.

We worked with the Government to tackle emissions, and the approach that they suggested to us, to which we were happy to respond, was to retrofit the fleet. Before the introduction of our clean air zone, the Government

awarded the council cash through the clean bus technology fund. The project ran in two phases from 2018 to 2022. It delivered 292 vehicle retrofits using selective catalytic reduction technology, with the expectation that the emissions of those vehicles would then be equivalent to Euro 6 standards. Buses operating on high-frequency services on routes where air quality levels were being breached were prioritised throughout the project.

When the clean air zone was introduced, 94 buses operating in Sheffield were older than Euro 6 and had therefore not been retrofitted. In the discussions between the council and the Joint Air Quality Unit on the clean air zone, run by the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, it was agreed that there would be clean air funding to provide sufficient support for further retrofit devices to be installed in the remaining non-compliant fleet.

Our clean air zone assessment forecast that all our buses would be retrofitted to a minimum Euro 6 standard and would deliver the significant reductions in nitrogen dioxide emissions that we needed, and so we were, in partnership with the Government, on course—until the Government hit a problem. After the launch of the clean air zone in late spring, the DFT informed the council that it had undertaken some initial studies on the real-world performance of the bus retrofit devices that it had required us to install.

The broad conclusion was that the performance of the retrofitted buses showed considerable variability, and that many were not performing at the expected equivalent Euro 6 standard. As a result, the Government paused new funding for selective catalytic reduction exhaust retrofitting and recommended that no further retrofit purchases be made until the research was completed. The DFT did not propose any changes to the clean air zone compliance status of the buses that had already been retrofitted while it carried out the further studies, and the council provided local exemptions from charges for the buses whose planned retrofit work could not proceed.

As a result of the initial study, the DFT commissioned further research and evaluation, which I understand it is on the brink of completing. The council was informed that the expected duration of the study was about six months, so I am guessing, given the timeline, that a formal position from the DFT should be imminent. From discussions with the Joint Air Quality Unit, the council understands that the main problem with the retrofit devices running in urban areas is that they do not reach the required temperatures to treat emissions as a result of the regular stop-start conditions. That happens significantly when buses run downhill, and anybody who knows Sheffield knows that there are a lot of hills to run down.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's raising this issue, because public transport is the key. It is a major solution to a lot of problems, including clean air. The strategy appears to be all over the place, and retrofitting diesel buses is not the answer. The Government have the ZEBRA—zero-emission bus regional areas—scheme for public transport, but I understand that of the 4,000 buses promised, fewer than half have been made, and 570 have been built by companies outside the UK. That worries me, because I think most of them should be built by UK companies.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Briefly, Mr Paisley.

Ian Paisley: Sheffield does have a lot of hills, and the answer is not batteries but hydrogen, which is a much better way of fuelling buses on hills. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to look at that, and I urge the Government to take resource away from diesel buses and to give councils and transport companies the opportunity to buy hydrogen or hydroelectric buses.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) will make some observations about hydrogen, which I think has enormous potential.

The Government's study is clear that retrofit will not be a suitable way of mitigating the emissions from buses, so alternative solutions will be required. The point of today's debate is that we need alternative solutions, including replacement buses—not refits—and electric buses, and exploring the potential of hydrogen. I will focus on electric.

Currently, about 75% of our bus fleet is not performing at the required Euro 6 standard, and a further 25% has had no change. Under direction from the Government, we were required to implement our clean air policy in the shortest possible time, but the failure of their retrofit strategy is putting our compliance at risk. That echoes the point that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) made about the lack of coherence in the clean air strategy.

The Government need to commit to clean air solutions fast. I hope that, as a first step, the Minister will welcome the bid that the council is submitting, in conjunction with the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, to ZEBRA 2. Further flexibility in the use of our funding from the clean air fund, including drawdown of stretch funding and the potential for additional funding to support electric vehicle roll-out, must also be considered. However, we understand the pressures on the relatively small funding—it is a problem that it is so small, with £129 million available for the ZEBRA 2 programme—and we know that there are other priorities.

We recognise that with all ZEBRA bids, the funding provides only a proportion of the cost of vehicles, so co-operation with operators is key. Therefore, I want to reassure the Minister about the close dialogue that is happening with both major operators in Sheffield—First and Stagecoach—and about the relationship that they have with the council. Stagecoach's managing director was in touch with me before this debate and stressed that Stagecoach is looking at the opportunities provided by ZEBRA 2 to lever in its own investment to provide 65 new electric vehicles on key routes in Sheffield. I know that First is looking at key routes that operate through both Sheffield and Rotherham.

In summary, reducing bus emissions in Sheffield is key to achieving the legal levels of nitrogen that we want and that the Government require of us as a city. Bus retrofit technology, recommended to us by the Government, has been found to be underperforming; 75% of our fleet, which has had it, is non-compliant, and the other 25% has not been treated at all. We do not have a timescale for when the Government will confirm the findings of their in-depth review of bus retrofit performance, but action is needed urgently.

Sheffield City Council has delivered all its clean air plan mitigations in the shortest possible time, which I know the Government have welcomed. However, we need Government support for our ZEBRA 2 submission. Further flexibility in the use of funding from the CAF, including the drawdown of stretch funding, will also help. We hope that a wider review of the potential for wider grant funding to upgrade buses in South Yorkshire will also be considered, with the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): As he has the permission of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) to make a speech, I call the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

11.12 am

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Robertson. This is a really important debate, because nitrogen dioxide is poisonous—particularly to children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) says. I congratulate him on raising this important issue.

I am pleased that Tinsley Meadows Primary School was built by Sheffield City Council, relocating the original school away from the motorway because the very high NO₂ levels there were damaging to children's health. One of the worst problems is that in inner-city areas, poorer communities often live close to major arterial roads. The roads running into the city of Sheffield are the ones where we tend to get the highest levels of pollution, so it is those communities who suffer most.

A point that I particularly want to make—it was very helpful to have a lead-in from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Antrim (Ian Paisley)—is that the topography of Sheffield is very challenging for traditional electric vehicles. Because of the hills, their range is less than it would be in flatter topographies. Vehicles have to be recharged more often, and the work they can do to complete their route schedules is therefore not as good as it might be elsewhere.

We have the possibility of hydrogen, which tends to allow for a much longer range. Wrightbus in Northern Ireland is already producing hydrogen vehicles for London, Aberdeen, Belfast and Dublin, showing the way forward. Very conveniently, in my constituency we also have ITM Power, which is the leading research organisation for green hydrogen in this country and one of the leading organisations in Europe. It is a manufacturer of plant that can produce green hydrogen, and it is already exporting that plant around Europe. There is a logic to linking up the refuelling stations that ITM Power could build with hydrogen buses in a city such as Sheffield. There need to be a number of buses to make it economical and cost-effective to have hydrogen refuelling stations. Joined-up government, with different Departments working together, would be really interesting and important.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman is making a fantastic point. That would join up the whole strategy of hydrogen production with a utility vehicle providing a public transport solution and clean air. At 11.30 am, the all-party parliamentary group for the bus and coach industry will be meeting in W2. I believe that the

Minister and the shadow Minister will be there, and we hope to promote the joined-up strategy that is necessary for hydrogen tech to take off.

Mr Betts: I agree with the hon. Member about joining up. Indeed, the Minister can happily say good things about ITM Power and what the Government want to do, because the Government launched their hydrogen strategy nationally at ITM Power a couple of years ago. The Energy Secretary and the Chancellor have both recently been to visit ITM Power to show the Government's support. It is well renowned, and it shows the way forward for green hydrogen. That is the way we should be moving.

I hope that the Minister will follow my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central in asking for more resources and more clean buses for Sheffield. When he is looking at new vehicles for Sheffield, I ask him seriously to look at the role that hydrogen buses can play and at how the Government can properly join this up.

ITM wants to play a role. It is happy to provide the refuelling capacity. It is happy to work with Government and bus companies. Let us have some joined-up thinking across Government and let us get things moving forward, not just for the clean air that we want for Sheffield, but as a major innovation and a major move forward for the use of hydrogen in buses in this country.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this very important debate. I declare an interest: my sister lives in Sheffield, and I have visited her regularly for many decades. I certainly understand what the hon. Member means about all the hills. I have walked and driven up and down them, and I completely understand the challenges that Sheffield faces in comparison with many other cities.

As the hon. Member said at the beginning of his comments, the Government completely share the ambition to eliminate air pollution. It is toxic, particularly nitrous oxides; that is why we set up the clean air fund. There have been a whole range of different Government initiatives to work towards that. We are also under a legal requirement by court action to act as quickly as possible. We do not want to delay or wait for new technologies that may eventually be helpful; we want to act now. Part of that scheme was the clean air zone programme that applies across the UK for cities where nitrous oxides and other pollutants are above permitted levels. As the hon. Member mentioned, Sheffield was one of them. Sheffield launched its class C clean air zone on 27 February 2023.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Rother Valley borders Sheffield, and many of my constituents go to work and drive vans into the Sheffield clean air zone. They are being penalised and the clean air zone is adding more money on to their bills. There is also talk of a clean air zone, or ULEZ-style scheme, coming to Rotherham. Can the Minister assure me that clean air zones and ultra low emission zones will be introduced only in areas where there is a business case for them and where people want them? At the

moment, people in Rother Valley are being hit by the clean air zone in Sheffield, and they are worried that a similar one will come to Rotherham as well.

Anthony Browne: That is a valid point. Clean air zones impose costs on people, but they are only necessary and only required where air pollution is above the legal limit. In those places, not only are we required to introduce them by law, but it is the right thing to do to reduce air pollution as quickly as possible. The clean air zones are temporary. They are there only while air pollution exceeds the permitted levels. Clean air zones are supported by the Government, but the design and structure of them, including which vehicles are included or excluded, and their funding are decided by local authorities. As a result, all the clean air zones in the country are variations on a theme. For example, ordinary cars are not included in the Sheffield scheme, but taxis are. It is different in other places.

Because of the need to act quickly, the Government introduced the retrofit programme. As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central mentioned, that has been troubled. I have been in this job for three weeks, and it has landed on my plate. As he says, it has not performed as we expected in real-world conditions. We are currently analysing exactly what the impact is and what the mitigations can be, and we will publish the results soon. I cannot release them now—we need to make exec decisions—but when we do, it will be within the framework of eliminating air pollution in Sheffield and other cities as quickly as possible, as we are legally required to do, and as is the right thing to do.

Ian Paisley: Sheffield has an application under ZEBRA 2. Those applications close at the end of December, I think. Does the Minister agree that something the Government could do is make sure that by the end of January, or the beginning of February at the very latest, those decisions are taken, the contract is offered, and we move on to ZEBRA 3 and get all of the £400 million spent on these carbon-zero buses?

Anthony Browne: I will come to the hon. Member's point. The retrofitting programme was only ever going to be an interim scheme, because those were the buses we had at that moment. As basically all other hon. Members have said, the ultimate long-term ambition is to go to zero-emission buses, for reasons of both climate change and air pollution. In the national bus strategy in 2020, the Government committed to 4,000 zero-emission buses; 1,600 of them are on the road at the moment. We have been pushing that in a variety of ways. We are also committed to announcing a date for the phasing out of non-zero-emission buses, which will be done in the near future.

There are two schemes for zero-emission buses at the moment. First, there was ZEBRA 1, which provided £270 million of funding. The beneficiaries included Sheffield, which got four buses, which will start in January, and the South Yorkshire metropolitan area, which got 27 zero-emission buses. We then opened ZEBRA 2. I know that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central wrote to one of my predecessors expressing interest from Sheffield in that scheme, and that Sheffield has lodged expressions of interest, which is great. The deadline is 15 December. I cannot announce the results, because the applications are not in yet.

[Anthony Browne]

On the request from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), we want to act as quickly as possible. I will certainly urge officials to announce the outcomes of the bid as quickly as possible because, as I said, we want to act quickly for reasons of both climate change and air pollution.

Various hon. Members mentioned hydrogen buses. The UK Government are technologically neutral: we have been very careful to try not to say that one technology will work and another technology will not, not least because we do not know how technology is going to progress. There are also very varying conditions, and one type of technology might be better in one situation compared with another.

The hon. Members for Sheffield Central and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) mentioned hills and the challenges they pose for battery buses. For longer ranges—there are buses in rural areas that have to go far longer distances—hydrogen buses may turn out to be more suitable than battery buses. However, I know that battery technology is advancing very rapidly. If we compare the debate now with a few years ago and five years ago, certainly from a manufacturer's point of view, there is a lot more emphasis on batteries as the ultimate solution, rather than hydrogen. The price of batteries has dropped by 90% since 2010 and the range is increasing by about 10% a year—it has increased by about 45% over the last four years. Hopefully, those technological improvements will continue and help us to decarbonise all forms of transport in cost-effective ways.

We are supporting hydrogen. There are various Government programmes supporting hydrogen buses. The Government provided £30 million to support the West Midlands Combined Authority's scheme for hydrogen buses, which are about to be launched there. The ultra-low and low-emission bus fund is supporting 20 hydrogen buses in Liverpool, and there are other hydrogen buses elsewhere. We will carry on supporting that, because hydrogen could end up being the absolutely appropriate technology for certain situations.

Mr Betts *rose*—

Anthony Browne: I was going to talk about the point that the hon. Member raised about ITM production, but I will give way.

Mr Betts: I hope that the Minister will respond to this point as well. Given that the Government want to be technology-neutral, they ought to explore hydrogen as well as simple battery buses. Would Sheffield not be a very good place to expand their understanding of how hydrogen buses can work, because of the topography and ITM Power, and to try to roll out more hydrogen buses in a fleet, to see whether that delivers what everyone wants?

Anthony Browne: The hon. Member makes a very valid point, which I will discuss with officials. I want to pick up on a point that he made earlier—

Alexander Stafford *rose*—

Anthony Browne: I still have time, so I will give way.

Alexander Stafford: Further to what my Labour colleagues the hon. Members for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, we in Rother Valley would also like hydrogen buses, and we hope to join in. There is cross-party support for hydrogen buses in South Yorkshire. I hope the Minister takes that point away.

Anthony Browne: I am reading the message loud and clear: everyone in the room likes hydrogen buses. I will discuss them with officials.

On the point about ITM Power, I was very interested to hear about that production facility. Again, as a Government, we are very keen not just to procure buses and other vehicles from other countries, but to make them in the UK—such as with Wrightbus in Northern Ireland and Alexander Dennis in Falkirk, Scotland—and to produce the power as much as possible in the UK, whether it is hydrogen or electric batteries. In my three weeks in the job, I have been doing quite a lot of work on sustainable aviation fuels. We want to make them in the UK, and to look at the whole supply chain and the whole energy transition that we are going through.

This technological transition creates an awful lot of opportunities in different sectors, including hydrogen. I do not like the phrase “green jobs”, because it has become a bit of a cliché, but these are green jobs. They are real jobs, they really exist, and they are often highly skilled. I have been meeting many companies that are entering this sector or developing the new decarbonised transport sector, if we want to call it that, and there are huge opportunities. The more rapidly we develop as a country, the more we can use it as an opportunity internationally as well for exports. If we solve the problems with hydrogen buses, for example, and work out how to make them work, how to power them and so on, I am sure that there will be an export opportunity for UK plc as well.

I am ready to wrap up. This has been a really important debate, and I am very glad that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central managed to secure it. He made many valid points. We will be publishing the results of the bus retrofit programme shortly, in terms of looking at how we can mitigate it. If Sheffield has not applied for ZEBRA 2 and is interested, it knows what to do. The deadline is 15 December. I will press officials to announce the results as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Sri Lankan Tamils and Human Rights

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Sri Lankan Tamils and human rights.

This story has a long and tragic history, and I am grateful to colleagues across the House who are here today and to those who work with the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils. I am also grateful to the British Tamils Forum, which plays a key role in supporting the APPG and has been working hard over the past 14 years to raise awareness. It has certainly helped in awakening my consciousness to the plight of the Tamils.

Since independence in 1948, there has been an appalling catalogue of massacres of the Tamil people, starting in 1956 with the Inginiyagala massacre and continuing right up until recent times. Generations of oppression have been suffered by the Tamil people—events that still haunt the survivors, with a cycle of violence and genocide that is sadly ongoing.

Forty years ago, in July 1983, a mass anti-Tamil pogrom broke out in Sri Lanka, during which an estimated 3,000 Tamil people died and 150,000 were made homeless. During the pogrom, Tamil homes and businesses were targeted, with buildings looted and burned and widespread violence. As well as the cost to lives, what has come to be known as Black July led to the loss of approximately 8,000 Tamil homes, more than 100 industrial plants, more than 5,000 Tamil shops and what is estimated to be over \$300 million in wealth.

The events of July 1983 proved to be one of the catalysts for the decades of civil conflict that followed. However, the pogrom itself was the culmination of decades of anti-Tamil policies and anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka, the seeds of which, if we consider the history, were sown back in the island's colonial era.

From the Ceylon Citizenship Act in the 1940s, which left many Tamils stateless, to the deportation of many thousands of Tamils to India between the 1960s and the 1980s, as well as the 1956 “Sinhala only” Act, which recognised Sinhalese as the sole official language, replacing English and excluding Tamil, it is clear that for Sri Lanka's Tamils their history is one of disenfranchisement, deportation and policies that discriminate against their community's language and culture. Black July was therefore not an isolated event; it was part of a wider picture of persecution and the cycle of violence.

It is an event that continues to scar Sri Lankan society to this day. Many Tamils in the UK will have arrived here after fleeing the 1983 conflict and will remember the events and violence keenly. In Sri Lanka, the pogrom had a devastating effect on the Tamil community, leading not only to the loss of thousands of innocent lives, but to the massive displacement of Tamil families who were forced to flee their homes, as well as causing injury and psychological trauma.

In 2009, under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Sri Lankan Government killed thousands of Tamils, including children. They were sent to a small strip of

land designated as a safe zone, where they were then bombed. Those atrocities were evidenced by satellite photographs. Furthermore, since the Easter Sunday atrocities in 2019, we have still not seen anybody brought to justice, despite the intelligence warnings of the attacks.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The experiences that the hon. Gentleman describes are very well known to many of the Tamil constituents I am lucky enough to represent. Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act is still in force today and is used arbitrarily as a means to discriminate against and intimidate the remaining Tamil community in Sri Lanka. Does the hon. Gentleman share my view that it is high time the British Government took more decisive action to put pressure on the Sri Lankan Government to end the use of that Act?

Martyn Day: The hon. Member and I are on exactly the same page; I will come to that section of my speech shortly. I agree wholeheartedly with his comments.

The scars are deepened by the fact that, years later, the Sri Lankan Tamil communities are no closer to getting any meaningful accountability or justice for the terrible pogroms. Many of the institutions and laws that enabled the violence remain in place today and are still responsible for human rights violations. Concerns remain about Sri Lanka's police force and armed forces, and there are allegations that they abuse their power by surveilling and harassing human rights activists. I have heard directly from Tamils that the outcome of Sri Lanka's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission was that the victims were further victimised by the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Concerns also remain about the laws that enable human rights violations. The Prevention of Terrorism Act, which the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) asked about, has enabled the detention of political prisoners for long periods since it was enacted in 1979. It was used to detain the 53 prisoners at Welikada prison who were subsequently killed during a terrible flashpoint in the Black July pogrom that has come to be remembered as the Welikada prison massacre. The Prevention of Terrorism Act was used to arrest state opponents. Although it may now be repealed, there are fears that its proposed replacement, the Anti-Terrorism Bill, may be worse, and that the Government's attitude towards human rights activists has not altered at all.

Meanwhile, domestic attempts at accountability for the events of 1983 appear to have failed. In 2002, the Presidential Truth Commission on Ethnic Violence published its report criticising the Government for failing to hold perpetrators to account and for failing to appeal for restraint during Black July. The report recognised the pogrom as a violation of Tamil human rights and recommended compensation for the victims. However, its recommendations have never been properly implemented and not a single perpetrator has ever been prosecuted.

The Sri Lankan Government are now implementing another truth and reconciliation commission. However, concerns remain that it will provide no route to accountability or proper witness protection mechanism, and that it will not cater to the victims' needs or adhere to international standards. I am grateful to the Sri Lankan high commission for providing me with a briefing update on reconciliation. It will take me some time to fully

[*Martyn Day*]

digest and consider the points made in it, but I highlight one of the first sections, on the Office on Missing Persons, which states:

“The Tracing Unit found 16 persons alive, and confirmed 3 deceased as of November 2023.”

Let me put that into context. It is believed that some 18,000 Tamils were handed over to the army. What happened to the rest? Where are they? What records exist to tell us? Despite the global pressure, Amnesty International has found:

“Serious human rights violations committed during the internal armed conflict remained unaddressed. Families of people forcibly disappeared continued to seek truth and justice.”

The UK Government know and recognise those facts. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s 2022 human rights and democracy report noted that the

“The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was used to detain Sri Lankans for long periods”

and that the UK

“continued to call on the government of Sri Lanka to replace the PTA with human rights compliant legislation.”

The report also noted:

“Security forces faced accusations of serious human rights violations.”

The Government concluded:

“There has been little credible progress on transitional justice” before promising that the UK

“will continue to advocate for improved protection of human rights in Sri Lanka.”

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. Many of my constituents concur with the concerns about human rights violations, including access to clean drinking water. Does he share my concern about reports that the Sri Lankan Government have refused to allow independent assessments of water quality in northern Sri Lanka? Does he agree that the Sri Lankan Government must ensure that all citizens of that region, who are mostly Tamils, have access to clean drinking water, and that anyone affected by contamination be provided with medical care and compensated adequately? It is a little-known but very important human rights violation.

Martyn Day: The hon. Member is correct that it is a little-known violation, and she has educated me in making that point. I concur with her assessment. As is often the case, it is the poorest who are most disadvantaged in these situations.

As a broad statement of intent, the Government’s position is welcome. However, the UK could and should go further. The Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice has called for the Sri Lankan Government to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act and withdraw the Anti-Terrorism Bill to ensure that all anti-terror legislation adheres to international standards; to establish independent mechanisms with prosecutorial powers to hold police, armed forces and Government Departments to account for human rights abuses; to incorporate Black July and other root causes of the ethnic conflict into its public education system; and to work with the Tamil community and international experts to find a

real political solution to the ethnic conflict that is acceptable to Tamils on the island.

I urge the UK, as a United Nations member state and an ally of Sri Lanka, to do more to support the calls for accountability, justice and human rights protections so that there might be lasting peace and reconciliation. The exact numbers are unclear, but according to a United Nations panel, more than 100,000 people, including 40,000 civilians, may have been killed during the conflict. Ultimately, there must be a right to self-determination for the Tamils. Everyone should be able to live without fear and according to their customs and traditions.

There is much that could be done. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to this debate; I hope that he will consider officially recognising the atrocities that have been committed as genocide and will look at introducing sanctions against the known perpetrators who have escaped being held to account, denying justice to the victims. Canada and the US have already sanctioned some war criminals. It is high time that the UK did the same.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The hon. Gentleman gets right to the point in suggesting that the UK Government should copy what Canada and the United States have done. Does he share my concern that we need greater openness and transparency about the role of the current Foreign Secretary? Before his appointment, the Foreign Secretary was known to be lobbying for Port City Colombo, and he has done a lot of work with China and Sri Lanka. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need a lot more openness so that we can know that the British Foreign Office is taking this issue seriously and is listening to Parliament and British Tamils?

Martyn Day: I agree entirely. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for making that point, which fits nicely with some of my comments on other aspects.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has recommended that states, including the UK, sanction key perpetrators of human rights abuses such as General Silva and other alleged perpetrators in Sri Lanka. By sanctioning individuals who are responsible for perpetrating crimes against the Tamils, the UK Government would support UN and US action in demonstrating that alleged perpetrators of mass atrocities are not welcome in the UK. Recently, the PM’s trade envoy went to Sri Lanka. Encouraging trade without demanding human rights gives the wrong signal to the world. We should be using our influence more effectively.

I hope that September 2024 will see the UN Human Rights Council resolution, which is due to expire, replaced with a new and stronger resolution. Does the Minister agree that that should include referring the issue to the UN General Assembly with the object of achieving a mechanism to bring the perpetrators to justice and achieve a permanent political solution? If we are serious about safeguarding the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the legacy of disenfranchisement, deportation and discrimination must be replaced by the principles of peace and democracy.

2.43 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and

East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this debate. I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute, and particularly to look at the importance of human rights in Sri Lanka and to speak up for those of my constituents who still have close links to the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

Wherever they are in the world and whatever religion or race they belong to, all people deserve to live in peace and safety, without discrimination or violence, but that is not the case for many Tamils who still live in Sri Lanka. Quite rightly, Sri Lanka is one of the UK's 32 human rights priority countries, as identified by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The Department's annual report on human rights and democracy says:

"Minority communities faced continued marginalisation by state authorities. State-supported land appropriation, so called 'land grabs', sparked concerns over their impact",

particularly communities

"in the north and east and their impact on the freedom of belief of non-Buddhist denominations."

There is a great deal of understanding in the FCDO about the situation on the ground. That is coupled with concerns that

"Security forces continued to disrupt Tamil commemorative events for victims of Sri Lanka's armed conflict, and arbitrarily accused Tamils of links to terrorist organisations."

That indicates that the Government are aware of what is happening on the ground in Sri Lanka, particularly the remarks about the challenges faced by activists, families of the disappeared in the north-east, and those who have faced surveillance, harassment and intimidation by the security forces. There appears to be a great understanding, and this debate gives my hon. Friend the Minister, a fellow Hampshire MP, the opportunity to update the House on the actions being taken to turn this understanding into support on the ground.

We have heard reports of Tamils living in Sri Lanka being subject to discrimination and threats of violence, as well as being subject to arrest under the Prevention of Terrorism Act on relatively weak grounds. There have been occasions on which Tamils have not been allowed to attend memorials for those killed or lost during the civil war, which is a vital part of community healing. Back in 2011, we heard from the UK panel of experts that there were credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The fact that they have not been fully investigated, and that no one has been charged or prosecuted, has diminished the country's ability to reconcile itself with the events of the past. Whenever such events occur, it is so important that well-thought-through reconciliation is put in place, particularly in Sri Lanka. It is important for stability and peace in Sri Lanka that there is reconciliation for the actions of the past, appropriate justice delivered where required and, above all, an end to the discrimination that we have seen.

The national unity and reconciliation commission was established earlier this year. It felt like a step in the right direction, but many organisations, including Amnesty International, have expressed significant concern that it will not be sufficient. In Sri Lanka, we need to ensure that the commission does what it needs to do and achieve real reconciliation that has a genuine chance of starting the healing across communities that would bring the whole country together. The first step must be

to end all discrimination against Tamils in Sri Lanka. They deserve to be able to follow their own cultural and religious practices in peace, without interference from other groups.

The Government and my hon. Friend the Minister continue to work hard to maintain strong relationships with Sri Lanka, which is important for the future of all the communities there and for promoting peace and human rights. They are clearly putting plans in place. For 2022 to 2025, the FCDO's conflict, stability and security fund for Sri Lanka will support human rights priorities with more than £11 million. UK funding for the United Nations Development Programme has also supported the resettlement of displaced communities on land cleared of mines.

It is important that we continue to work with countries such as Sri Lanka, and I am aware that the Government are consistently reviewing their global sanctions list. I am sure the Minister will want to take the opportunity presented by today's debate to update the House on the approach to sanctions, and my constituents and people back in Sri Lanka will be taking note of the comments made. I am sure he will listen carefully to hon. Members' views, because equality and freedom from discrimination are important not only to the people in this room, but to every Member of the House of Commons.

Wherever people live in the world, they deserve to have support from the UK in their bid to make sure that they live free and equal lives. Above all else, the UK must champion human rights and promote peace across the world. I hope that we will continue to do that in Sri Lanka, so that one day all communities there will be able to live in peace and prosperity.

2.49 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) not only on securing the debate, but on setting the scene so well. Briefly, I want to ask the question: how many more times will we have to come here and debate this issue before the UK plays its full role in securing justice for the Tamil community? Other Members in this Chamber have, like me, been around a long while in dealing with this issue. I can recall the situation before 2009, but I remember distinctly what happened at that time. The calculation is that more than 70,000 people—at least—were unaccounted for, with some disappeared. One of my constituents went back to Sri Lanka to try to find his family and he was disappeared as well. We have never heard from him since.

Like others, I have received the briefing from the Sri Lankan Government, and I have tried to examine it in relation to what I believe is the reality on the ground. The Sri Lankan Government claim that a process of reconciliation is taking place and that arrangements have been put in place that will ensure the protection of human rights and civil liberties, but those are certainly not the reports we get from our constituents who have families back in Sri Lanka. Let me give a few brief examples.

We have recently been told about what happened on Tamil remembrance day, when people were arrested and detained, and then memorials were smashed. That does not sound like the protection of civil liberties or

[John McDonnell]

respect being meted out to the Tamil community. The use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act has been a continuous abuse. The recent death in custody of a young man called Nagarasa Alex is another example of the result of the use of detention in this way. We know of claims that torture has taken place in some instances.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I went to Sri Lanka on a delegation in 1984, when I raised with the then President Jayewardene the issue of the human rights system, the abuse of human rights and the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. I have met many Sri Lankan families who have people missing from that period on. Unless they get closure and an understanding of what has happened to them, the horror for individual families will just go on and on. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, who represents many Tamil people, would endorse the need for us to get an open book on everything that has happened to every person who disappeared.

John McDonnell: My right hon. Friend provides evidence of the long history of this, including the long history of the PTA being used to detain, with example after example of its use involving not only torture, but deaths in custody. From what we hear, the new legislation being proposed might be worse than the PTA itself. This is the problem we face.

The issue that comes up time and time again in the Tamil community in my constituency is the continued militarisation of their Tamil lands and the way that those lands are being used. We have to recognise the operation of the military within Sri Lanka. They are not just a military establishment; they are a whole industry in themselves, often profiteering at the expense of the Tamil community, particularly through the seizure of the Tamil lands. The process of demilitarisation has hardly been evidenced by the Sri Lankan Government.

Why is all this happening, and why are the Sri Lankan Government continuing to operate with impunity? I think this represents a collective failure by the international community, including the UK. We have not done enough to pressurise the Sri Lankan Government. We have not taken the action that I thought we were going to take and targeted those identified as abusing human rights—in effect, we are talking about war criminals as well—in a way that we have in respect of other countries, for example via the use of the Magnitsky clause. From what I have seen, or from the evidence we have had, I do not believe that the Magnitsky provisions have been used a single time to sanction the human rights abusers from Sri Lanka. Let us congratulate the United States and Canada, as they have used those provisions. We should be following their example.

As for the truth and reconciliation commission that has been established anew, I believe it is the 15th or 16th that has taken place. What we were pressing for before is that this should be an independent, internationally convened commission, not just an in-house one, where the country is almost marking its own homework.

Finally, we have previously raised the reference to the International Criminal Court, because it is clear that during that period, certainly in 2009, there were offences against the Rome statute that could constitute war crimes.

I believe that we should now maximise the pressure that we can put on the Sri Lankan Government. We should now look at the use of sanctions and reviewing all aspects of our bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka. We have raised this before, but I believe that we should not have given Sri Lanka the benefit of developing countries trading scheme status and the concessions that brings. That is the only way to influence the Sri Lankan Government to abide by at least some of the commitments that they have given us to protect human rights and civil liberties and respect the rights of the Tamil community overall.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. To get everybody in, I ask hon. Members to limit their remarks to five to six minutes, please.

2.55 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this debate. It is great to see so many members of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils, which I am proud to chair, participating in today's debate. I also received the Sri Lankan ambassador's briefing in advance of the debate, along with an invitation to meet. Given that his predecessor frequently referred to me and members of the APPG as "white tigers", I think I will be washing my hair that day.

The case has already been compellingly put by colleagues. To reiterate some of the harrowing facts: in 2009, for example, tens of thousands of Tamils perished in the Mullivaikkal genocide, with many still unaccounted for. The Sri Lankan Government's continued denial of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide necessitates international intervention. We have already heard from other Members about militarisation, arbitrary arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, rising anti-Tamil nationalism and the absence of long-term solutions.

Even in the years preceding 2009, all the promises made by the Sri Lankan Government under human rights resolutions failed to come to anything. Militarisation is an area where the UK could go further. Militarisation remains pervasive, with 16 out of the 20 military divisions on the island in the north and east, otherwise known as Tamil areas. Demilitarisation is crucial to securing and fostering a sustainable and lasting peace. The referral to the International Monetary Fund for a bail-out after Sri Lanka's economy crashed could not be linked to human rights, but it could put conditions on Government spending. One thing we should push for in the IMF bail-out is a reduction in military spending. That must be a condition of that money.

There have also been calls for a consistent, long-term solution. I would like to ask the Minister for an update on the mechanism that was secured at the last UN Human Rights Council: resolution 30/1, which for the first time allowed the international community to collect new information. I know that the UK pushed hard for that resolution, and I welcome the FCDO's efforts in securing it, although it is up next year, as we have heard. Will the Minister provide an update on what further action he anticipates that the UK can take when we have had the opportunity to review that new information?

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): A number of councillors—Councillor Param Nandha and Councillor Jay Ganesh—and Nick Rogers of the London Assembly have pushed local authorities to celebrate Tamil Heritage Month next month. This will allow children to celebrate speaking Tamil, the oldest language still in use—there will be Tamil songs, dances, poetry and so on—but part of their heritage is this awful chapter. My hon. Friend talked about these resolutions, as did the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who opened the debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that rather than waiting for a third resolution, the first of which was backed by Sri Lanka, we can actually take some action, rather than having to keep renewing and taking no action?

Elliot Colburn: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, my predecessor as chair of the all-party group, for that intervention. He is absolutely right.

The last action that the Government must urgently consider is sanctions, especially against those credibly accused of war crimes, particularly General Silva, but many others as well. It has been said already that we are lagging behind the US and Canada, which have already implemented such sanctions. It is time the UK followed suit and imposed them without any further delay.

As we approach the 15th anniversary of the end of the war, I hope that the Minister can give us some reassurances that the UK will continue to stand in solidarity with the Tamil community in demanding justice and accountability. The diplomatic efforts and the internal efforts in Sri Lanka have not brought about meaningful change or any lasting peace. The Tamil community's quest for justice and peace must not be deterred. It is time for us to follow the international community, impose sanctions and continue to lead the way in standing up for the rights of Tamil people.

3 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing this debate and join other hon. Members in raising the plight of the Tamil people over many, many years.

Like others, I have been involved in these debates in the House all too frequently. I have tracked this issue in some detail over the last 26 years, as my constituents in Kingston and Surbiton who are British Tamils, and indeed others around south-west London, have come to me with their concerns about what is happening to their families and communities. It has been a very painful episode and, frankly, the situation is now worse than I can ever remember.

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka, with the corruption of the Government there, has just made things even worse for the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities on the island. However, the Tamil people, particularly in the north-east of Sri Lanka, are suffering under the militarisation from land grabs and from arbitrary detentions and arrests. There have been a whole series of injustices and human rights abuses, which this House is right to focus on.

Elliot Colburn: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point that we need to highlight. It is not just the Tamil community but many minority groups on the island who face human rights abuses. He mentioned the

Muslim community. During the pandemic, they were subject to forced cremations in Sri Lanka. I just wanted to make it clear to the Government, through this intervention, that it is not just the Tamil community but many minority groups that are suffering as a result of the regime in Sri Lanka.

Ed Davey: That is right, and that point exposes the regime and all its frankly undemocratic and outrageous behaviour.

I join other colleagues in saying that the UK Government can do more than they have done so far. They can follow the US and Canada in sanctioning individuals. People have quite rightly mentioned General Silva, but there is also General Jayasuriya and others who were involved in the last few months of the war in 2009 and quite clearly committed war crimes.

Beyond that, I would like the Government to use the IMF process to try to exert some leverage, as others have said, or the work of the UN Human Rights Council. We could also use trade deals. When I was Minister of State for Trade Policy, I urged the European Union, because we were then in the EU, not to give back what were called GSP+ or “generalised scheme of preferences plus” concessions. We won that argument in the trade council in Brussels and those concessions were not given back to Sri Lanka. Regrettably, they were given back in 2016 and now, after Brexit, Sri Lanka benefits from trade and tariff concessions given by this Government. I do not see why it should do so. We ought to demand the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Sri Lanka, security sector reforms and proper accountability before the Colombo Government receive such benefits.

One issue that I want to raise in this debate, which is not discussed enough in the context of Sri Lanka, is the role of China. The geopolitics of Sri Lanka needs to be looked at, and that includes the growing role of China and of course the influence of India. The UK, the European Union, north America and elsewhere have been remiss in engaging in the debate about Sri Lanka from that geopolitical stance and we see what has happened because of the vacuum that has been left.

We have seen China invest over almost the last two decades in Hambantota port in the south of the island. Yes, that has trade advantages for China, and many other countries use that port, but it is no doubt a significant strategic investment by China, not just for trade purposes but potentially for military purposes, given the significance of the port in controlling the sea lanes and shipping routes to the south.

China has a 99-year lease on the port and is indebted to the Sri Lankan Government, in what is sometimes called “debt-trap diplomacy”. Through the debt, China influences the Sri Lankan economy and politics. It is using that influence more and more, for instance through the second big port development, which is actually bigger than a port; it is a city. Called Port City Colombo, it is located on hundreds of acres of land reclaimed from the sea in Colombo. Again, China is taking a long-term lease on that, and what is essentially a Chinese Government-owned company is developing it.

One surely should be asking about the ability of the UK, the EU, North America and our Indian allies to respond to that. It is quite a serious geopolitical development. The human rights of the Tamil people,

[Ed Davey]

who are the subject of this debate, are disregarded by the Chinese, who are interfering in Sri Lankan politics. If we are going to support those Tamil people and all the people on the island of Sri Lanka, we must ask some tough questions about how we respond to the hard and soft power being exercised by the Chinese Government.

We have been too naive for far too long. If we are serious about wanting to influence what is happening on the island of Sri Lanka, we need to get serious about our diplomacy in Delhi and Beijing. In his reply, will the Minister say a little about the Government's thinking in that area? Is he prepared to meet cross-party MPs—I urge the Foreign Secretary to do the same—to discuss the matter, some of which I realise may be sensitive?

In my intervention on the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, I mentioned the Foreign Secretary's activities prior to his appointment. I am sure he acted with integrity, but the Minister must realise that people outside this place, listening in—the British Tamil community, the diaspora and Tamils in Sri Lanka—want to know what the British Foreign Secretary is going to think, say and do about the situation in Sri Lanka, whether with respect to India, China or the Colombo Government. In January, the Foreign Secretary visited Port City Colombo, trying to get investment and supporting the Chinese investment there. It is therefore a legitimate question for this House to ask.

I am sure there are answers, and I am sure we can be transparent about those. However, if we are to play a role as the UK, and if this Parliament is to play its role in influencing the Government, we need to understand that, given China's centrality to the future of Sri Lanka and, I would argue, to improving justice and human rights for the Tamil people.

3.8 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to speak in this debate, on which I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). In Lewisham East, I represent a significant number of residents from the Tamil community, and since becoming an MP I have written to Foreign Secretaries and attended several events all relating to human rights abuses committed against Tamils. I am also an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils.

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country that one day I hope to visit. Yet, as we have already heard, it has experienced a cycle of violence since its independence in 1948. As everyone here will know, in 2009 the Sri Lankan civil war came to an end when the Tamil Tigers were defeated by the Sri Lankan armed forces. The Sri Lankan Government in power at that time denied accusations of crimes made against the military and civilian Government, but there have been allegations of violence against women and girls—of sexual violence being used as a vicious weapon of war, of rape and of the most heinous of crimes, some of which are beyond my imagination, like cutting off women's breasts.

It was therefore disappointing that in February 2020 the Sri Lankan Government withdrew their support for a UN-led reconciliation process to investigate and prosecute

war-related crimes. In May 2023, the new Government announced that they were establishing a national unity and reconciliation commission, but organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, have questioned whether it will achieve anything and whether the victims will receive justice.

For a long time, my constituents have lobbied me about reported human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. The Prevention of Terrorism Act has enabled arbitrary arrests, detention without charge or evidence, false confessions and the torture of anyone suspected of terrorism. Although there have been amendments to the Act, Amnesty International has stated that the Muslim and Tamil minorities remain disproportionately affected by its use. That must be addressed and tackled.

I am pleased that the Labour party has recommitted itself to securing justice for the survivors whose families suffered grave human rights violations. The UK Government must follow the recommendations of the UN high commissioner and refer the perpetrators of these atrocities to the International Criminal Court. While we are waiting for that, the political and economic crises facing Sri Lankans, the humanitarian need and the geopolitical challenges in the region remain deeply concerning.

Accountability for past and reported current crimes is crucial to achieve political sustainability, as is justice for the affected Tamil victim-survivor community. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.11 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this debate. In Easter 2009, I spent my time out on Parliament Square watching London's Tamil community beside itself with grief as it received news of relatives, friends, communities and hospitals being bombed. We heard of people lying on the beach, unable to be removed by family or community members because the democratically elected Sri Lankan Government were dropping cluster bombs on their own people. I spent my time taking London Tamil students to see the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, to prevent some of them from taking drastic action and committing suicide.

In the 13 years since then, how much has changed? There is an attitude of always negotiating, always talking, always being calm—and doing nothing. Negotiating for what? Hundreds of thousands of people have still not been found and not one person has been prosecuted for committing a war crime; there are no more answers than there were before.

Now is the time for the Foreign Office to decide whether it will carry on with its mealy-mouthed diplomacy, or whether it will use the laws Parliament has given it to take action against those who perpetrated war crimes. Our Foreign Secretary needs to come forward and be honest about his role in promoting the Chinese Government's plan for a new port in Colombo. It does not bode well. Let us show Sri Lankans and Tamils something different. Let us take a different path and make some progress.

3.14 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing this debate. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said, people have been calling for the same things in this Chamber not just for the past few years but for decades, and yet the Government have continually failed to act.

Hundreds of people from the Tamil community in my constituency have written to me in the past few days to ask me to speak in this debate because they are deeply concerned about their families' futures in north-east Sri Lanka. Last week, thousands of Tamils in Sri Lanka and around the world commemorated their war dead on Maaveerar Naal. Once again, Tamils mourning in Sri Lanka faced oppression and a violent crackdown from the Sri Lankan state apparatus in their attempts to remember their war dead, as they visited the remains of the Tamil cemeteries that the Sri Lankan Government had already bulldozed. This means that 11 Tamils, including a young schoolboy, were arrested by Sri Lankan authorities, after those authorities stormed the remembrance events. The UN has always been clear that Tamils have a fundamental right to remember their war dead on 27 November, and that any attempt to infringe on this is a clear violation of international law. This is yet another reminder of the daily injustices inflicted on the Tamil people of Sri Lanka.

It is now nearly 15 years since the end of the armed conflict. Tamils in Sri Lanka are facing an onslaught from their Government, with increasing reports of land grabs, the destruction of Tamil places of worship, and the illegal construction of Buddhist viharas. Tamils and Muslims on the island face horrific state-led abuses, including the continued use, as many colleagues have mentioned today, of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act: the continued use of torture, sexual violence and extrajudicial killings by Sri Lanka's security forces. Efforts to stifle Tamil voices in Sri Lanka have grown increasingly bold, as seen through the arrest of a Tamil MP, Selvarajah Kajendran, who was detained by the police for commemorating the hunger strike unto death taken by Thileepan, who demanded the right of self-autonomy for the Tamil people.

The increasingly violent anti-Tamil nationalist rhetoric continues to be popularised by every single Sri Lankan policymaker. It is a vile, ethnic nationalist ideology that continues to echo through those corridors of power. It shapes the policies and the Government in ways that marginalise further the Tamil people. Let us be clear: Sri Lanka has a military that is almost double the size of the UK's. More than 75% of that, though, is deployed in the traditional Tamil homelands. This of course perpetuates a climate of intimidation and human rights abuses, and brutalises the nascent Tamil economy.

A variety of UN bodies and other human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, have called for justice for the victims of historic and present atrocities inflicted upon the Tamil people. Many of those accused, far from being prosecuted, have been rewarded with lucrative promotions, most notably the appointment of General Shavendra Silva to the head of the Sri Lanka armed forces—a total and utter disgrace.

In 2015, through investigation by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, there was strong and corroborated evidence that the 58th division, led by Silva, had extrajudicially executed surrendering soldiers and shelled marked civilian hospitals. For the healing process to begin for the Tamil people, monsters like Silva must face justice and be removed from the positions of power where they can continue to abuse the Tamil people.

As we have heard today, policymakers around the world need to be forceful in bringing forward the sanctions that would actually make a difference. We have increasingly seen calls for sanctions against Sri Lankan war criminals. In Canada, they recently sanctioned several individuals, including the former presidents Gotabaya and Mahinda Rajapaksa for their role in the war crimes—crimes against humanity and genocide committed against the Tamils in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Canada's Parliament also groundbreakingly unanimously recognised Tamil genocide in a landmark motion—the first recognition of its kind anywhere in the world. The United States has also issued sanctions on General Silva, and in a recent letter to Secretary of State Blinken, several congressmen and congresswomen from across the aisle urged the State Department to end the diplomatic impunity enjoyed by Sri Lankan perpetrators of human rights abuses.

Despite that, the UK is yet to sanction a single alleged Sri Lankan war criminal. In fact, in the past few years the UK has provided several million pounds in security assistance to Sri Lanka to aid training and capacity building for the Sri Lankan police and security forces. Given these troubling reports, I would like to hear from the Minister a commitment to publish an assessment of the impact of the financial support, and a full overseas security and justice assistance assessment for activities under this programme, to reassure the House that the UK is not contributing to serious human rights violations, as I have previously raised in the House on a number of occasions. The UK's failure to sanction the Sri Lankan military and Government officials who are credibly accused of war crimes against humanity and genocide is hampering international efforts for justice and accountability, and rightly enraging the Tamil diaspora around the world.

Too many lives have been lost in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Britain has a historic role in the root cause of this ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, due to our dark colonial past on the island, and our failure to maintain governance structures that allowed different communities to co-exist peacefully on the island. It is Britain's duty to play a huge and important leading role in supporting the Tamil community as they seek a peaceful, political solution in Sri Lanka that meets the aspirations of all people on that island, including the Tamil people's aspirations for self-determination.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing the debate and on setting the scene so very well. His leading of the debate has helped us all to participate.

Human rights in Sri Lanka have continually drawn my attention during my time as a Member of Parliament. Unfortunately, the human rights violations of the Sri Lankan

[*Jim Shannon*]

civil war have yet to be properly addressed by the Sri Lankan Government, and no perpetrators have been brought to justice. Some of those perpetrators continue to hold governmental positions, while reform efforts have had little effect. The Tamil population continue to suffer under governmental restrictions and human rights violations, including disappearances and death.

These issues and many others have been well documented by the United Nations. Clearly, there is a need for reform, which is what we are all asking for—we are asking for our Minister and our Government to be very active. The European Union helped to cement some changes during its talks. However, the amendments to the Prevention of Terrorism Act have done little to improve the human rights situation for the Tamils and other affected parties.

I want to focus on the Prevention of Terrorism Act and its effects on Tamil minority religious communities. There has been reference to religious minorities, and I will give some examples of minorities that are suffering. Freedom of religion or belief is a vital component of the human rights landscape throughout the world. FORB and other human rights are intrinsically intertwined—two fingers rolled over each other. Human rights and persecution of religious belief march hand in hand.

With the oppression of one human right, all others suffer. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, so I want to talk about that. The PTA has been a tool of the Sri Lankan Government to wrongfully detain and oppress political, cultural and religious outliers since its inception in 1979. Of course, a country has the right and duty to protect its citizens against terrorism and violence. It does not, however, have the right to wrongfully imprison its own citizens without just cause, nor should it allow any violations of human rights.

The environment of fear and oppression that the PTA has helped to form leads to divisive rhetoric, often grouping together minority populations, with the Tamil population centred in the north as a common target. This phenomenon is compounded by the fact that minority religious populations are represented in the Tamil population at a much higher rate. These sociological aspects of the situation are important to note because they contribute strongly to the political and cultural dynamic of the region. Violence directed against religious groups, including the Easter Sunday attacks of 2019, are red flag markers of this aspect of the situation. Other religious minorities are targeted.

I have had a chance to meet human rights campaigners working on the ground in Sri Lanka. They have described the situation of minority religious groups, including Hindus, Christians and Muslims, as one of fear and bureaucratic oppression. New laws make the building of religious structures more difficult, which is particularly harmful for members of minority religions, many of whom tend to come from less prosperous socioeconomic backgrounds.

Local bureaucracy can prove to be a major stumbling block for minority religious communities, many members of which are Tamil. Police, members of nationalist Buddhist groups and others cause difficulties and harass worshippers, often leading to supervision. Covid-19 protection laws, which required forced cremations for

all burials, forced Muslims to violate Islamic religious observance standards—the core of their beliefs. Thankfully, that policy has come to an end, but other measures remain in place for the oppression of Muslim community members.

According to the 2022 report on Sri Lanka by the United States Centre for Religious Freedom, Hindu and Muslim sites in the predominantly Tamil Northern province have been destroyed under the oversight of Government agencies, creating space for the building of Buddhist temples. The report notes that that practice is one of the biggest impediments to religious freedom in the Northern province. So what can the UK Government do? What can our Minister do? We have seen that bilateral talks can be effective in promoting change, but only to a limited extent. Sri Lanka's economic dependence on the European market was a key point in its PTA reform process. Perhaps that pressure could be applied again.

However, those reforms are not adequate to protect human rights in the country. A new strategy is needed, combining bilateral and multilateral efforts. The same is true for international organisations such as the UN. The UK is a leader in human rights advocacy worldwide; let us use that position to take a stand for the rights of our brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka, for whom we all are speaking here today. When international pressure is applied, states take note. I have seen that happen throughout the world, and again we ask our Minister and our Government to do the same.

In conclusion, it is very important to speak on this topic. Discussions such as these are a vital part of the UK's response to injustice and suffering throughout the world. It is encouraging to see debates like today's this week and next; we note the 75th anniversaries of the universal declaration on human rights and the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. It is very clear to me that genocide is taking place against the Tamil population, ethnic minorities, and religious groups to such an extent that many of the people—indeed, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred to some people from his constituency who went to look for members of their community or families and could not find them. There is an injustice to be addressed, so I hope that those commemorations inspire an increased effort to promote human rights domestically and throughout the world.

I very much look forward to what the Minister will say, and also to the two shadow Ministers—the hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West)—who I know will encapsulate all of the things that we wish to see. What we really want to see is justice, and, at this moment in time, we do not see that.

3.26 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), and I thank him on behalf of all my Tamil friends and colleagues for bringing this debate back here. It matters a lot to people, and I think he knows that. It would be easy to say that Sri Lanka has been debated and to move on, so I am pleased that this place will clearly be talking about this until something changes. I also pay tribute to all the familiar faces in here today. I know that their consistent commitment makes a big difference to people.

I will start by saying this:

“It is a crime against humanity that nobody has been found accountable since the war ended 12 years ago. There has been a sleight of hand performance between then and now, with successive Governments promising the international community and their own people that they will do X, Y and Z, then drawing back, then promising again, but at the end of the day progress is never made, accountability never happens, reconciliation is never credibly attempted, and peace never really comes to this beautiful island.”—*[Official Report, 18 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 563.]*

I have just repeated the words that I used in a speech on this issue in March 2021. I was not being lazy; I just wanted to show that it is incredible that I can do that because, two and a half years on, the situation remains almost exactly the same. Perhaps we should not be surprised; the civil war started 40 years ago, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk told us, the issues that led to the war date back many more years, so, in the scheme of things, the two and a half years since I last stood here and spoke in a debate about this issue is minuscule compared with the length of time the Tamil people have been waiting for justice.

That day, I went on to talk about my time in Sri Lanka, and I would like to spend a little bit of time doing that now because it is an incredible island, and it is an island that never seems to get a break. From the 30-year civil war that we are talking about today to the tsunami of 2004 that saw the deaths of an estimated 227,898 people, the flooding in 2017 that saw hundreds dead and thousands displaced, and the Easter Sunday attack in 2019 that others have spoken of, the people of Sri Lanka, as I say, never seem to get a break, yet they just get on with it.

Whether they are Tamil or Sinhala, there is a fortitude in the people of Sri Lanka; they accept the situation and make what they can of it. “Best not to look back,” one woman told me as we chatted about her new life in the US, years after her entire family were wiped out by that tsunami. I admired her greatly, and everyone must do what feels right for them, but I cannot say that I agreed with her philosophy. It is healthy to look back; it is necessary to look back, as long as there is a purpose to that, and, in the case of what we are talking about today, there is most definitely a purpose. Accountability and truth are essential to reconciliation.

I spent a very short three months in Sri Lanka during the civil war. It was 2008, and I was part of the Scottish Government-funded post-tsunami economic redevelopment programme. I have returned on several occasions, and I am in touch today with Sinhala and Tamil friends in Sri Lanka and here. In addition, I was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2009. Because I had talked about being in Sri Lanka, many Tamil constituents got in touch with me about being unable to contact their family trapped in IDP camps.

It was around then that I realised how powerless many of us are, even when elected, when powerful people are determined to have their way. At one point, I stood at a buffet table, of all things, with the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa at his home. I told him that I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament and asked him to help me find my constituents’ loved ones in his IDP camps. I was dismissed and swept away by his people, and off he went to look for those who were happy to make small talk. I spent time in Trincomalee, with a man so afraid of what might happen to me,

should I be caught reading his book about human rights abuses meted out to Tamils, that he removed the cover and replaced it with another to keep me safe.

My constituents who had sought asylum here told me more about the IDP camps: the missing people, those taken hostage—they were arrested but never tried, so in my book they are hostages—the torture, the sexual violence, the enforced disappearances and the shelling of the so-called no-fire zones. All of that was very well documented by the two-part Channel 4 documentary “Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields” in 2011.

The Tamil people cannot be expected simply to move on from that, particularly as we still do not know where all those who went missing are. I note what my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk said about the number of people who have been found, according to the high commissioner. Sixteen people have been traced alive, and three are dead—that is 19 people of the 18,000 he mentioned. All these years later, we have to find just the 17,981 who are still missing.

Those are shocking statistics, but each one represents a human being, part of a family, desperately being looked for by their loved ones, including the Mothers of the Disappeared. They cannot just move on because, as we have heard today, the worsening economic crisis in the country is leading to worsening human rights abuses. They do not have to look back to injustices, because they are still not getting justice today.

All of this is the fault of the Sri Lankan Government, although I acknowledge and agree with what has been said about our takeover of Sri Lanka. I also acknowledge that the UK Government have played a vital role as leaders of the core group on Sri Lanka in the Human Rights Council, but we cannot just pick and choose where we use our influence when it comes to human rights abuses.

I have listened in this place to Foreign Office Ministers telling us, on the one hand, “Don’t worry. It is all going to be okay. We will use our influence”—I am sure that is what we will be told today—and on the other hand, telling us, as they did in a Westminster Hall debate in 2015, that it was good news that Sirisena had become President because he was not Rajapaksa. However, Sirisena had been part of the Sri Lankan Government when the Tamils had been ruthlessly bombarded, and he subsequently made Rajapaksa Prime Minister, before handing over the presidency to the other Rajapaksa. The Rajapaksa brothers are credibly accused of a host of war crimes committed during the war and of violating international humanitarian and human rights laws. It could be said that the UK Government have been too trusting or that they are doing nowhere near enough to use that influence to safeguard the rights of Tamil people in Sri Lanka.

A couple of years ago, the then President pardoned a soldier—one of the few ever to be tried, never mind found guilty. That soldier was found guilty of killing eight Tamil civilians, including a five-year-old child and two teenagers. I can only assume that it was all part of his promise at the time to end what he called the “era of betraying war heroes”—disgraceful.

As the SNP spokesperson on international development, I support the calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk and other hon. Members,

[Anne McLaughlin]

and I am interested to hear the Minister's answers to the following questions. Will he refer the issue to the UN general council with the object of the International Criminal Court or another mechanism bringing perpetrators to justice? On trade, does he agree that Sri Lanka should be removed from the enhanced framework until it meets the already agreed conditions to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act with one that meets international standards—which is not what is happening? Will the Minister finally establish a screening policy for diplomatic meetings so that the UK is no longer giving legitimacy to individuals credibly accused of war crimes? Finally, as just about everyone has asked, will he engage the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 to apply sanctions against individuals credibly accused of involvement in mass atrocity crimes and human rights violations, as the US and Canada have done? It is the very least that the victims of this war, both living and dead, both here and there, can expect from us.

3.35 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. It has been an excellent debate. We have heard from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day); from those with extensive parliamentary experience, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn); and, of course, from the well known and very active all-party group, which works across different groupings and parties, including the outstanding contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who has done that casework day in, day out, since 2009 in particular. I also want to put on record the points that have been made by my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), particularly on the ongoing humanitarian situation in the north of Sri Lanka. That was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who also talked about water quality, which is a very pressing concern today.

As friends of Sri Lankans, we know that, for the many in the diaspora in our communities who come to our advice surgeries with concerns about the ongoing lack of consideration of what happened during that terrible period, until this is fully looked at and considered, there will be no peace. My question to the Minister is on the wide-ranging relationship we have with Sri Lanka as a country. I will first put on record the importance of the economic work done by the High Commission for Sri Lanka with Members across the House to call for economic help for Sri Lanka in the 12 months since the sovereign debt crisis. However, we all want that to be married with a socially just solution for those who feel that the true horrors of the civil war have not fully been heard.

In the context of both the economic imperatives and the social justice concerns, will the Minister, in his concluding remarks, state his view of the role of the current Foreign Secretary, in particular his support for the port project in Sri Lanka, in which he had a financial interest? As the Minister represents the Government, what does he think the relationship is between a state-owned

enterprise in the Communist party and the current Foreign Secretary? The House needs to know whether the current Foreign Secretary had a financial relationship with a state-owned enterprise that is basically a development company. Does the Minister think that was an acceptable relationship, and would he enlighten the Chamber?

There are a number of important questions from the past that need to be answered. We warmly welcome the announcement made in May of this year that the Sri Lankan Government will be undertaking a national unity and reconciliation commission. However, we are also listening to non-governmental organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, which was mentioned earlier. Those organisations say that there is a lack of genuine confidence in the milestones that need to be achieved so that we can all have confidence in that commission internationally.

I wonder whether the Minister might tell the House whether he thinks that the commission has achieved the milestones that would have been expected between May and December of this year so that we can all have confidence, and can give confidence to our constituents, when they come to see us in our advice surgeries, by reassuring them that the UK is playing its part in holding the Government in Sri Lanka to account and moving towards a process similar to that which led to the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa, which is held up as a gold standard for this sort of work. I am very interested to hear the Minister's assessment of where we are with that, given that eight months have gone by, and whether we have seen the sort of work that is needed to lead to the sort of outcome that was seen in South Africa.

The UN panel of experts has expressed a desire to see credible evidence of the war crimes and to see that justice is served. A number of Members have underlined the role that General Silva played during the conflict. Has the Minister made an assessment of whether this would fit into the Magnitsky sanctions framework? Post Brexit, that is our most important tool for holding certain individuals to account for their actions. We are all aware that the standard response from a Minister who is asked this question is, "We don't comment on these things, because that would spoil the process of sanctions," because they are supposed to be almost a surprise, but given our concern, could the Minister give us a hint of his views on that individual, whose name comes up in so many representations at the UN panel of experts?

Based on the Minister's assessment of the evidence at the International Criminal Court, does he believe that there is a case to be answered? Does he think it will be sufficient to have the process of national reconciliation, or does he believe that there will be another step after that, which will then go into the ICC? What measures are being taken to support Sri Lanka's pathway to becoming a pluralistic, multicultural democracy in which all of its people can flourish?

I recently had a wonderful briefing from a fantastic UK organisation called the HALO Trust. The Minister and other hon. Members will know of its great work. After a decade of sorting out land mines in the north of Sri Lanka, the trust's work is coming to an end. I just hope that as that chapter ends, a new one will open for all of the diaspora and the individuals whose lives were destroyed by that dreadful civil war—a chapter in which

truth and reconciliation are key. Is the Minister confident of that? If not, will he tell us what his concerns are, so that our Sri Lankan constituents of the diaspora and those who care deeply about human rights can have confidence that the UK Government are doing their part to uphold peace and democracy?

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

It is a pleasure to be here. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing this important debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is the Minister of State responsible for the Indo-Pacific region, would have answered this debate, but she is on a plane to Australia; it is therefore my pleasure to be here in her place. I am grateful for all the powerful and moving contributions from right hon. and hon. Members. I will try to cover the points that they made and set out the Government's position.

The UK Government pay close attention to the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, especially for the many Tamils. The perils of that situation have been movingly and powerfully described by all Members. I particularly note the interest of the of the all-party parliamentary group on Sri Lanka, including the chair and other members, and I am grateful for their contributions. Sri Lanka is one of 32 FCDO human rights priority countries, in recognition of our ongoing human rights concerns in a number of areas, including the rights of people from minority groups.

Hon. Members will know that the continuing marginalisation and oppression of Tamil communities follows many years of racial and religious tensions in the country, which culminated in the civil war; that was described in very clear terms this afternoon. It is important to recognise that a number of different communities, including Tamils, who predominantly reside in the north and east of the country, continue to face marginalisation by state authorities. There have been increasing numbers of land seizures and disputes that have sometimes centred around religious sites, such as the Ayyanar Hindu temple in Mullaitivu. That clearly has troubling implications for freedom of religion or belief. More recently, we are clear that there has been state-sponsored settlement of traditional pasture land in Batticaloa, which threatens the livelihoods of local farmers.

There have been several incidents of heavy-handed policing of peaceful protests and commemorations, and there is ongoing surveillance and intimidation by state security forces in the north and east of the country. That particularly focuses on civil society activists and Tamil communities affected by the war, including former combatants and the families of the disappeared. Those events have heightened communal tensions and continue to stoke perceptions of forced displacement from traditionally Tamil areas.

A running theme of the debate has been the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which was described in stark terms by a number of hon. Members. The UK Government remain concerned about the ongoing use of the Act, despite the Sri Lankan Government's long-standing commitment to replace it with a version that meets their international obligations. It continues to be used—indeed, it was used as recently as last week. We continue to call on the

Government of Sri Lanka to deliver on their promises and live up to their international obligations, and we acknowledge the concerns laid out this afternoon with regard to the PTA legislation.

For this Government, promoting human rights, reconciliation, justice and accountability is a key strand of our policy towards Sri Lanka. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Indo-Pacific visited Sri Lanka in October, when she met the President, Foreign Minister and Justice Minister. She also met the Governor of the Northern province, as well as Tamil representatives and civil society activists in Colombo and Jaffna. She visited community projects, including a de-mining project run by the HALO Trust and paid for by British assistance.

Jim Shannon: This is a side issue, but the Minister mentioned everything the Government are doing. May I gently suggest that human rights and the persecution of Christians and so on form an integral part of any discussions on economic ties—whether that is banking, more business or whatever it might be—and that those economic ties are conditional on those issues?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and the role of the trade envoy was mentioned this afternoon. We are clear that human rights and trade discussions go alongside each other; they are not mutually exclusive, and that is a perfectly reasonable suggestion.

On her visit, my right hon. Friend raised with the Sri Lankan Government the need for progress on human rights for all communities in Sri Lanka, and for justice and accountability for violations and abuses committed during and following the armed conflict. As has been mentioned, we recognise that other communities in Sri Lanka, including Muslims as well as Tamils, face discrimination, harassment and a lack of justice.

In addition to our face-to-face diplomacy, the UK Government have an £11 million programme that supports human rights and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. We have specific projects and programmes that help to tackle the legacy of the conflict, support civil society and democratic processes, promote gender equality, and reduce inter-community tensions. We have been a leading member of the core group of countries that work to improve human rights, justice and accountability in Sri Lanka, and we will continue to be in that core group.

We have worked in the UN human rights system to raise concerns and build international support to strengthen human rights, and we used our statement to the UN Human Rights Council in September to highlight the vital need to respect freedom of religion or belief and freedoms of expression and association in Sri Lanka. We also pressed for progress on justice, accountability and reconciliation. The UK delegation led work on the most recent UN Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka, which the chair of the APPG asked about, and we will continue to use that as a tool to argue for progress.

Jeremy Corbyn: I want to get an assurance from the Minister that the British Government's relationship with Sri Lanka will ensure that there is always unfettered access for UN human rights monitors and inspectors in Sri Lanka, because there has been, at times, more than reticence—indeed, obstruction—towards their inspection and it is obviously necessary to get an independent view of the situation.

Leo Docherty: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We argue for unfettered access for these inspectors and will continue to do so. In the resolution asked about by the chair of the APPG—my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), whom I commend for his tremendous activity in that office—we focused international attention on the human rights shortcomings. We also succeeded in renewing the mandate of UN human rights experts to report on these issues and to preserve evidence of abuses and violations committed during the armed conflict, so that justice can be pursued. We will continue to use that resolution as a lever to argue for positive change. I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question.

I will now talk about some of the small positive steps, because when working with countries to strengthen their human rights adherence, it is important to acknowledge any progress that has been achieved. In that spirit, we welcome steps taken by the Sri Lankan Government to address some Tamil grievances. Those steps include the release of some disputed lands and the release of long-term detainees. We welcome the Government's engagement with Tamil representatives on a long-sought political settlement, and we have urged the Government to consider further confidence-building measures and engagement.

We welcome steps taken by the Government to improve connectivity between the north and countries in the region, including through regular flights. That should help to increase economic opportunities for the north and others in that region. We also welcome the Government's commitment to a truth and reconciliation commission, and we encourage them strongly to consult widely and come forward with detailed proposals.

Siobhain McDonagh: I am sure that the Minister genuinely believes the speech that he is making, but the Foreign Office has for the last 13 years been beseeching the Sri Lankan Government for an independent truth and reconciliation process. To date, that has not happened. At what point will the Minister try something else?

Leo Docherty: These are clearly profoundly difficult issues that will not be solved quickly, but our judgment is that we must continue with our diplomacy and our strong encouragement for the Government of Sri Lanka to come forward with detailed proposals about a truth and reconciliation commission. As unlikely as it may seem this afternoon, that is the intent of our diplomacy, and we will continue to do that. We will also continue closely to monitor human rights developments in Sri Lanka, including the marginalisation and repression faced by Tamil communities and other minorities.

Catherine West: Given the scepticism about yet another announcement of this sort of process, will the Minister pledge to continue more truthful and thorough approaches? For example, with regard to the question raised earlier in the debate about the role of the ICC for certain of the terrible events that happened during the civil war, is it the assessment of the FCDO that there is a case to answer in the ICC?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady will know that the ICC, being independent, will make its own judgments about the prospect of prosecution, but of course, candour and frank speaking are at the heart of the relationship that

we have with the Sri Lankan Government, and we will continue to press the need for a truth and reconciliation commission.

John McDonnell: I do not want to be too harsh to the hon. Gentleman, particularly as he is standing in for another Minister, but the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) used part of her speech from 2021 and this sounds distinctly like the same response that we had at that debate, almost word for word. Could the Minister address one issue for me? This is solely up to the Government: will they now explore the use of Magnitsky clause sanctions against known human rights abusers from Sri Lanka?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He knows that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on sanctions from the Front Bench—no Minister would do that—but we note the strength of feeling expressed by colleagues this afternoon.

We are concerned about the ongoing land disputes, the continued harassment and surveillance of civil society, and limitations on freedom of expression, assembly and association. We will continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to adhere to their human rights obligations and fulfil their commitments on transitional justice and legislative reform, and to take steps to build trust in their institutions.

Elliot Colburn: I understand the Minister's point about not commenting on sanctions from the Front Bench, but could I urge him once again to communicate the strength of feeling in this debate back to the FCDO? We have been asking for this for many years now.

On the point about the ICC, it is independent, but private individuals are taking forward independent referrals to the ICC against certain members of Sri Lankan military society. Although the UK Government are not engaged in that process, will the Minister review whether the FCDO could, at the UN, encourage the information being collected as part of the recent human rights resolution to be passed on to those who are trying to bring forward that prosecution?

Leo Docherty: I know that the Minister of State for the Indo-Pacific will hear that plea in due course and give it her consideration.

I will wrap up, because I want to leave two minutes for the conclusion. The UK Government will remain leaders on the international stage, working with civil society and the UN to deliver meaningful human rights improvements for Tamils and all Sri Lankans. In response to the question posed by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) on the role of the Foreign Secretary, let us be very clear that as Prime Minister, Lord Cameron led the way in ensuring that the UK spearheaded international efforts to seek improved human rights justice and accountability for sanctions. No one should doubt that our China policy is very clear-sighted, and any mature consideration of the facts will lead one to believe that the Foreign Secretary brings tremendous experience, credibility and integrity to his role.

3.57 pm

Martyn Day: We have had a very consensual debate with Members from all parts of the House speaking, which shows the strength of feeling that crosses normal political divides.

It is quite clear that far more needs to be done than has been done to date. Although I am grateful for the Minister's response, the fact that the UK Government are concerned and will call on Sri Lanka to deliver on its promises just does not cut it. We have heard all that before. We really need further action, particularly on sanctions, and we need to ensure that there is international scrutiny of the reconciliation process. That is vital to getting any long-term solution. Unlike South Africa, where a minority were the oppressors of the majority and then power changed, Sri Lanka has a very different dynamic and it clearly needs international scrutiny.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Sri Lankan Tamils and human rights.

Digital Devices: Search Powers at the UK Border

4 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered powers to search digital devices at the UK border.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. We live in a digital age, but the powers that our law enforcement agencies have do not mirror that. Our Border Force is one agency that cannot carry out its duties properly because of the powers that it was afforded in an analogue age, which have never been updated.

In the United Kingdom, 835,000 individuals represent a sexual risk to children. The proliferation of online child sexual abuse and exploitation material means that more and more children can become victims of sexual predators. One place where our law enforcement agencies can intervene is at the ports of entry into our country. It is there that previously unknown predators can be identified, stopped and prevented from harming our children.

Eighty-five per cent of online child sexual offenders are also hands-on abusers. If Border Force were able to intercept individuals who offend digitally, we could stop children from being abused physically. Border Force is in a unique position to help to tackle this problem and I believe that the Government should afford them the statutory power to search passengers' digital devices for child sexual abuse and exploitation material. I also wish to see a new offence of obstruction allowed where individuals refusing to co-operate with any reasonable digital searches are prosecuted.

The current scope of the search powers of the UK Border Force is designated by the out-of-date Customs and Excise Management Act 1979. Those powers grant Border Force the power to search the person and the baggage of an individual entering or leaving the United Kingdom in order to detect the import or export of prohibited goods. "Prohibited goods" has a very broad definition under the Act, including child sexual abuse and exploitation material such as images, videos and childlike sex dolls.

Under the Act, the UK Border Force is not required to have reasonable grounds to suspect that an individual entering or leaving this country possesses prohibited goods in order to search them in a port environment. However, the scope of Border Force search powers granted under the Act was conceived for a world that knew nothing about the internet, let alone the smartphone. Almost every passenger who passes through a UK port carries a digital device, be it a smartphone, tablet, laptop or hard drive. Some of these passengers travel with digital child abuse and exploitation materials, images and videos, created in the UK or abroad, on their devices. Under the provisions of that Act, Border Force officers cannot compel a passenger to unlock a digital device, but the police can—not at the Border Force area, but in the country.

If a passenger refuses to unlock their device at the request of Border Force, there is nothing that Border Force can do—nothing at all. The passenger is not committing

[Mrs Pauline Latham]

a criminal offence, because we do not have a criminal offence of obstruction for this circumstance. Border Force must then let the passenger suspected of possessing prohibited goods pass into our country and there are no grounds to arrest them.

As 85% of digital child sexual offenders become hands-on abusers, we need to prevent, at the first possible opportunity, individuals from having the chance to abuse our children. Our Border Force could be part of that arsenal to stop those offenders at our border. Its powers do not extend to being able to require a person to “open” their digital baggage so that a search can be conducted; its existing powers are no longer fit for purpose.

Back in the 1970s, child sexual abuse material would amount to a stack of Polaroid photographs, which border officers could readily detect; they were on paper before the eyes of staff who had suspicions. Today, these images are carried digitally, more often than not behind locks such as passwords, passcodes and encryption software. Under the existing legislative framework, Border Force is unable to penetrate those locks without the passenger’s consent.

I believe that many children could have been saved from predators if Border Force had intercepted them when it had the opportunity. There have been numerous examples where passengers entering or exiting the UK have been travelling alone and without dependants and have been identified as having been in possession of paraphernalia associated with the commission of sexual offences against children. If a passenger travels with toys, lubricants, condoms and children’s underwear, many of which are key indicators of an abuser, it is highly likely that the passenger will be in possession of digital child sexual abuse and exploitation material. With digital search powers, Border Force could arrest the passenger if he possessed such material.

To counteract situations such as I have described, we need to introduce a new criminal offence of wilful obstruction, under which an individual would be prosecuted where he refuses to unlock his digital device so that it can be searched for obscene or indecent material. Such a search can be done in seconds, because the technology already exists—our police have access to it. We would protect more children by granting Border Force that power, as individuals entering our country who pose a sexual threat to children would be arrested as soon as it was discovered that they owned indecent child abuse images on their phones and laptops. Granting Border Force the power I have outlined would enable it to become an active part of the cross-agency response on identifying previously unknown persons who pose a risk of harm to children. Where digital devices seized by Border Force contained new sexual abuse and exploitation material produced by the passenger that had not yet been uploaded to the internet, that material would be prevented from being uploaded to the internet.

Critics might say that that proposal is too intrusive, and I have heard that said. They might also say that there is grave potential for the infringement of an individual’s right to a private life, as set out under article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998—it does not worry too much about the children who are abused. A standard operating procedure would make sure that a

device is inspected by a scan that looked for codes associated with known child abuse files already catalogued and verified by the Home Office. No file would be downloaded by Border Force and no manual inspection of the device would be needed as the scan is driven by code only. As such, there is no possibility of collateral intrusion and an individual’s digital private life being invaded. It is worth noting that a similar power exists for the police in relation to terrorist material under section 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000.

The power I wish to see for Border Force already exists in customs legislation across a number of countries globally, notably New Zealand, which is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance. New Zealand brought in a similar digital search power under its 2018 customs Act, which introduced a step process for examining devices in furtherance of detecting prohibited materials, including child sexual abuse material, at its borders. The New Zealand process is comparable to that which I believe would work for the UK. Border Force could carry out a step 1 initial scan to indicate the presence, or not, of indecent material. If such material is detected, the UK police or the National Crime Agency would carry out a more intensive step 2 scan.

New Zealand has already begun to see success stories arising from that legislation. New Zealand’s Act also provides a coercive power for the customs force to require access to an electronic device, the breach of which triggers a \$5,000 fine and device seizure. I believe that that would be a sensible mechanism for the UK to adopt. Detection at the border is often the starting point for wider investigation, which encompasses identifying further devices and materials held at the suspect’s home address, or contact offences against minors.

Where that power exists in other countries, it is typically without the requirement for reasonable suspicion. However, the power I am seeking will be legally used only when there are reasonable grounds to suspect an individual possesses indecent and obscene material. We would avoid any abuse of that power, as a high burden will be placed on the Border Force ahead of its use.

The UK’s current baseline for detecting individuals representing a risk to children at the UK’s borders is near zero, due to the absence of the ability to verify digital media. They then have to alert the police about their suspicions, and it can take a couple of weeks for the police to trace the individual. There have been cases where the suspected individual has raped two or more young girls before the police have caught up with them.

If Border Force were granted these powers, we would protect children from the lifelong harm of being abused by a sexual predator. Even without immediate prosecutions for possessing child abuse material, the detection of a suspect at the border will enable a management plan to be developed at pace, to mitigate risk to minors with immediate effect. If Border Force had the same access to the devices that the police have, it could scan them very rapidly, pass the suspects on to the police, and we would close that gap and stop those children being raped and abused. For the sake of our children in this country, we need to do that.

I hope that the Minister will agree that it is time to make our Border Force able to tackle digital baggage. Border Force is well placed to detect individuals who pose a sexual risk to our children. For Border Force to

perform its duty to protect us now, we must give it those necessary tools, and the tool to search digital devices is one that, frankly, should be given to it today.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing the debate. I compliment her on her steadfast commitment to the rights of children, and protecting them from sexual exploitation in a range of ways.

I will start with some preliminary observations. First, my hon. Friend presents a compelling case, which I undertake to take back to ministerial colleagues and discuss further. The opportunity represented by inspecting digital devices at the border to increase our ability to tackle and prevent sexual abuse is one that we should take seriously, and it is a key priority for the Government.

I will go through the scale of child sexual abuse, with which she is familiar. The Office for National Statistics estimates that perhaps as many as 7.5% of children in this country will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16. That is the equivalent of just over 3 million people across England and Wales. Reports from the Internet Watch Foundation show that the fastest-growing age group appearing in online child sexual abuse imagery is seven to 10-year-olds, and the prevalence of the most severe forms has more than doubled since 2010. Not only are children being abused, but these moments of their lives are being captured, uploaded on to the internet and essentially frozen in perpetuity. For them, it is a never-ending cycle of abuse from which they will never escape. The files are not even hidden in hard-to-reach parts of the internet; many can be accessed in just three clicks.

My hon. Friend knows how seriously we take child sexual exploitation in this country. We are the Government who implemented the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. It had a historical focus, but it none the less informs our continuing work.

We also recognise the unique vulnerability of children online. We have tackled that to some extent through the Online Safety Act 2023, which brings companies in scope under legal duties to proactively combat the threat of child sexual abuse on their platforms and to identify, report and remove material. We are now working

with the independent regulator Ofcom and the National Crime Agency to implement and operationalise those new powers and duties. However, I do not want to duck my hon. Friend's wider point, which is that the border provides an important opportunity to apprehend and arrest perpetrators. On occasion, there will be important probative material that would lead a member of Border Force to reasonably suspect that an individual has images on their device that suggest serious criminality and that would give an opportunity for interception.

When people enter or leave our country, we can see where they are going and where they have been. We can create risk profiles based on their movements and note when someone has travelled to multiple locations that are well known for child sex tourism. Under our existing customs powers, Border Force can, without the requirement for reasonable suspicion, check the baggage of people entering and leaving the country. That baggage may include obscene or indecent materials. Notable examples include child and baby-like dolls, which sometime have purpose-built internal sex organs. Specialist Border Force teams are trained to capture this key information, seize materials and arrest where appropriate.

Mrs Latham: I recognise what the Minister is saying, but the gap exists and Border Force needs these powers. It can search bags and pockets, and strip-search individuals, but it cannot look at their phones or devices. That is where the gap lies and if we do not close it, there will be even more children being abused on a regular basis.

Laura Farris: My hon. Friend has accurately pointed out what looks like a lacuna in the law—where physical objects that may be identified in someone's baggage indicate something, Border Force simply does not have the power to search devices. I have already undertaken to go back to Ministers and discuss that with them.

I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government remain firmly committed to exploring and exercising all potential levers that can be used to safeguard children and bring offenders to justice. We will continue to work across the whole system to ensure that we are doing all we can to tackle this abhorrent crime, and I thank my hon. Friend again for securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

4.18 pm

Sitting suspended.

Violence and Abuse towards the Retail Workforce

[*Relevant Documents: e-petition 647093, "Make abuse or violence towards retail workers a standalone criminal offence"; e-petition 328621, "Protect Retail Workers from Abuse, Threats and Violence".*]

4.30 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of violence and abuse towards the retail workforce.

It is a pleasure to present this debate and to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I applied for the debate following a visit to a Tesco supermarket in Rowlands Gill in my constituency of Blaydon—other brands are available, of course. I also visited my local Co-op more recently to talk to the staff there. That visit took place to mark Respect for Shopworkers Week, the yearly campaign led by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers in the run-up to the busy Christmas shopping period.

The campaign has several aims. First and foremost, it is about making it clear that the abuse of shop workers is not a part of their job and is not acceptable. It is about ensuring that employers, police and politicians are aware of the scale of the problem of violence and abuse against our retail workforce and do something about it. From an MP's perspective, it is about listening to shop workers, recognising their concerns and looking at what we can do to support them.

From my visit, it was obvious to me that we are simply not doing enough. The shop workers I spoke to told me about the growing frequency of theft, which is an issue right across the country; figures from the British Retail Consortium show that there was a 26% rise in incidents last year. But the shop workers also wanted to emphasise that the kind of incidents has changed—not only are there more incidents of theft, but they are increasingly violent in nature. Shop workers are feeling intimidated and threatened. They fear going into the workplace, particularly when returning to work after experiencing or witnessing violent behaviour towards them or their colleagues.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I went with USDAW to see shop workers in my constituency of Putney. At the Co-op, I was also surprised to hear of so many incidents of violent attacks and the intimidation that so many people face just going to work. Does she agree that it is particularly disheartening that the Government continue to resist Labour's plans to make violence against shop workers a specific criminal offence? That would make things much safer for shop workers across all our constituencies.

Liz Twist: I most certainly do agree. My hon. Friend's experience of visiting shop workers has clearly been the same as mine. She has heard the same stories, so we must do something to make such violence a specific offence.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. This is a massive issue in my constituency. My eldest son used to manage

a local shop in the high street of the main town where I reside. He has made me aware of a few occasions when young people have gone in at night to steal items from the store and created a severe sense of fright and fear among the staff. A young girl who worked in the shop, a 19-year-old, was scared stiff—I use those words on purpose.

Does the hon. Lady agree that retail staff often face the most violent torrents of abuse and that more must be done to protect their security? That could include two things: panic buttons or immediate access to the police. Quite often, the police do not attend.

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Member, who is right to remind us that the issue is about not only supermarkets, but small shopkeepers; I think of some of the villages in my constituency.

I want to talk about some of the comments from shop workers in the north-east given in response to USDAW's survey. I thank USDAW for sharing them with me. These are quotations. One person said:

"I have had name-calling, threats of being hit with bottles, needles and actual assault."

Another person said:

"Shoplifters swing crutches, punches and bags. They have made threats on my life and talked of getting me jumped."

Another said:

"There are homophobic insults, intimidating words and being spoken down to."

Yet another said:

"I have been pushed over, punched in the head and jostled by a large group."

I am sure that MPs across the House will agree that no one deserves to suffer such abuse simply for doing their job, and that is true whether someone has been working in a shop for 20 days or 20 years.

We should also highlight the fact that retail has a young workforce. More than one in four retail workers is under the age of 24 and more than 60% of new starters in retail are in that age bracket. Indeed, a small but significant proportion of retail workers are aged just 16 or 17. Retail offers fantastic opportunities for young people to get into employment and it is shameful that they might be deterred from doing so because of the abuse that might be inflicted on them. Many workers also have caring responsibilities that they fit around their shift patterns. It is unconscionable that they are experiencing such fear in their daily working lives.

I encountered these stories in my own constituency, but the figures suggest that this local picture is representative of national trends. In March this year, the British Retail Consortium published a report on the scale of the abuse and violence towards shop workers. It found that incidents including abuse, physical assault and threats with weapons had risen from 450 per day in 2019-20 to around 850 per day in 2021-22. It also found that only 7% of incidents of violence or abuse were prosecuted.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid to say that there are violent incidents towards shop workers in Harrow town centre, which I am privileged to represent, and also too many antisocial behaviour incidents. A couple of years ago, Harrow just missed out on securing a dedicated town centre police team, allocated by the Metropolitan police, which similar town centres

across London are benefiting from. Will my hon. Friend encourage the Minister to use his influence with the current Metropolitan police commissioner to allocate a dedicated town centre police team to Harrow, which other similar-sized town centres across London already have?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. I hesitate to venture into other police areas, but we find this issue across a number of regions and I will come on to the issue of antisocial behaviour. Dedicated police teams can be very helpful, so I hope that the Minister will listen to that plea from my hon. Friend.

I am not the first person to bring this matter to the attention of the House; in fact, two Westminster Hall debates have considered similar motions in just the last five years, and one of them came from the Petitions Committee. Clearly, our constituents care enough about the subject to have signed a public petition that has secured over 100,000 signatures.

In 2020, the Government produced their response to a Home Office consultation, which had begun in April 2019, on violence and abuse towards shop staff. The response promised to address the roots of the problem and provide support to victims. In 2022, an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill was enacted, meaning that if a victim of one of a range of specified offences had been providing services, goods or facilities to the public at the time of the offence, that would be considered as an aggravating factor for sentencing purposes. The Government have said that they consider the existing law sufficient to protect retail workers. That leads me to this question: which retail workers have the Government been asking? I say that because, having spoken to workers on the ground, it is clear to me that the protections already in place are insufficient.

Despite the debates and the consultation, incidents of violence and intimidation are still rising. USDAW's survey of retail staff in 2023 found that two thirds of its members who work in retail suffer abuse from customers, 42% had been threatened by a customer and 5% had been assaulted. We are talking about being spat or coughed at, being slapped, punched or kicked, or being attacked with weapons. Shockingly, the executive chairman of Iceland has revealed that three Iceland workers are now HIV-positive as a result of needle attacks on staff. Last year, USDAW's figures showed that four in 10 retail workers experienced anxiety about work and three in 10 were considering changing jobs as a result. That is why we are continuing to see them speak up about the conditions that they are working in.

As I said, the Westminster Hall debate in 2021 was prompted by a petition asking the Government to enact legislation that would create a specific offence of abusing, threatening or assaulting a retail worker. As I also said, it reached over 100,000 signatures, but still the epidemic of violence continued. Therefore, this year, another petition has started—it is still in force—calling for the same measure to be taken. There is a strong, consistent public demand for change.

From speaking to them, I know that shop workers in my constituency—and store managers, in fact—feel strongly that the creation of a specific offence is the right path to follow. They believe that that would not only recognise the scale of the problem but encourage

police attendance, which they feel is lacking, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) has said. There is a widespread feeling within the retail sector that theft has been effectively decriminalised over the past 13 years of Conservative Governments.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I wonder whether my hon. Friend agrees with me on these two points. First, this is a very serious matter and impacts every single constituency in the UK. Secondly, tackling violence and abuse against shop workers does not seem to be a priority on the Government Benches; as far as I can see, there are no speakers from the Government Back Benches in this debate.

Liz Twist: I certainly agree that the Government have failed to go far enough. They had the opportunity last year when they introduced the aggravating-factor legislation, but we need to go much further than that.

As I said, there is a widespread feeling within the sector that theft has been effectively decriminalised. In the same vein, another policy being criticised is the practice of issuing fixed penalty notices for shop thefts under £200. The failure to investigate those thefts leaves workers feeling as though the crimes that they have experienced, often involving abusive behaviour towards them, are not taken seriously by the police or the Government.

The lack of confidence in our institutions has been reflected by a drop in the reporting of incidents of violence and abuse. The British Retail Consortium notes that there has been a decline in reporting of such incidents to 32%, as workers have increasingly lost faith that the police will take action. The commitments made in the retail crime action plan, which tells police to prioritise incidents involving violence, are welcome, but we must ensure that local police forces are encouraged and supported to implement that approach on the ground. We must also ensure that they have the resources to respond. In my area, Northumbria police are still 400 police officers down from 2010, and it is the same in other parts of the north-east.

Retail workers find themselves at the frontline of antisocial behavioural issues, but the problem goes beyond shop floors. Across my constituency and the country, people are concerned about the antisocial behaviour taking place in their own communities. When my submission for this debate was accepted, it sparked a conversation in my office about times that, as customers, we have seen those acts of aggression play out. In the winter months, with the nights getting dark ever earlier, the worry of bad behaviour in shops will create not just a fearful situation for the staff but one that risks turning away customers.

Strikingly, USDAW's most recent survey suggests that an estimated two thirds of abusive incidents are linked with addiction, yet we see nothing in the Government's announcement of the Pegasus programme acknowledging that relationship or exploring the role that drug and alcohol treatment services have to play in tackling this issue. That is another area in which the Government's promise to address the root causes of retail crime rings completely hollow. It is astonishing that, despite those statistics, the debate, the personal examples and the outcry from businesses and staff alike, workers still feel afraid of their place of work and

[Liz Twist]

are worried that, just by showing up for their shift, they will be putting themselves in harm's way. The sector has long been calling out for more to be done on the issue, and I am proud that Labour is a party willing to listen to that call.

On a local level, I am pleased that our police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, has been getting heads together within the retail sector and local police forces to identify what has been working and what has not—listening to our retail workers, so that they feel recognised and supported. There is also work to be done nationally. Labour will create a new specific offence of assault against retail workers. That has been called for by the likes of the chief executive officer of Tesco, Jason Tarry, who said:

“We want our colleagues to be safe at work. Creating a standalone offence not only sends a strong message to the small but violent group of people who abuse and attack shopworkers, but also makes it clear to shopworkers that as a nation we take protecting them seriously.”

Labour would go further, scrapping the £200 rule that stops shoplifting from being investigated and putting guaranteed neighbourhood patrols back into town centres, with 13,000 more neighbourhood police and police community support officers.

When it comes to the abuse and crime that affect our shop workers, the numbers do not lie. Sadly, they have become common practice and although so many across the industry are calling for something to be done, their calls are going unanswered. To put it simply, we need to do more to protect the retail workforce. No one should have to go to work in fear of being verbally abused, assaulted or victimised just for doing their job. I hope that the Minister will reconsider the seriousness of the situation and make this abuse a crime in its own right. That is what those people I spoke to in my constituency want. It is what the sector wants and what our retail workforce deserve.

4.47 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as a proud member of the USDAW trade union.

Everybody deserves to be treated with respect and fairness at work. Nobody should have to carry out their job in fear of receiving verbal or physical abuse, but sadly that is becoming the reality for many of our retail workers. Abuse of and attacks on shop workers have doubled since 2019. In an excellent opening speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) set out the statistics: two thirds of USDAW members working in retail suffer abuse from customers, there has been a 25% increase in shoplifting in the past year, and the British Retail Consortium reports that there are 850 incidents of violence or abuse against shop workers every single day. Those figures are shocking.

Having to deal with violence and abuse at work has a far-reaching impact beyond the incident itself: there is the stress, anxiety and potential for injury, but there are also mental health issues down the line. I have been a supporter of USDAW's Respect for Shopworkers Week and the Freedom from Fear campaign that it has run for many years. I congratulate USDAW on those campaigns.

Like my hon. Friend, I visited a number of stores as part of the Respect for Shopworkers Week a couple of weeks ago.

I have been engaging on this issue for a number of years. I remember having a meeting a few years ago with retailers in Didsbury, in my constituency, to talk about the problem of gangs going from store to store shoplifting and how difficult that was to address. They set up WhatsApp groups and communication between the various stores and tried to contact the police, but the problem is difficult to resolve without some kind of offence that makes it easier to take action against the people perpetrating the crimes.

That was a problem in Didsbury, and I met trade unions, shop people and the police some time ago. It has eased off a little there, but in my constituency, as in many constituencies, there is a problem across the retail sector. A couple of years ago, I noticed that the shop assistants in my local Co-op, in Withington, were wearing headsets. I asked one of the staff what that was about, and he said, “We've had so much abuse and so many people giving us a hard time that we have to be able to communicate with one another and talk to the manager in the back.” The Co-op has done that in Withington and in a number of other stores. I spoke to staff in Tesco last week, I think, and it is doing a similar thing, improving its communications and the support it gives its staff. That is commendable—it is a good thing—but it should not be necessary.

Stores are doing what they can, but retailers often say the problem is that, when they report shoplifting, nothing happens. That is partly to do with the reduced numbers of PCSOs and police staff on the streets and in our district centres in recent years, with town centre patrols being cut. Perpetrators are also rarely sent to court, as charge numbers have plummeted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon said, fixed penalty notices for shop thefts of under £200 have led to fewer crimes being investigated and prosecuted. A significant proportion of retail crime is thought to be linked to drug addiction, but—as my hon. Friend also pointed out—drug treatment services have been cut.

Seeing fewer uniformed officers patrolling shopping centres and other areas gives criminals more confidence, which I think is a key factor in the increase in retail crime. It is really disappointing that Conservative MPs have repeatedly voted down a protection of workers law—one already exists in Scotland—and that there was nothing in the King's Speech to tackle the epidemic of abuse against retail workers.

In the run-up to Christmas, the pressure on shop workers is likely to ramp up even more. It is a busy and stressful time, and it is essential that customers treat these valued retail staff with respect. However, more than that, we need legislation and proper police resourcing. Labour's community policing guarantee will put the police back in our town centres and neighbourhoods, making high streets safe again, with increased patrols and 13,000 more neighbourhood police and PCSOs on the streets. Labour would introduce a new protection of workers law, making violence, threats and abuse against retail workers a specific offence, with tougher sentences. That would make it simpler for the police to take action. It would also send a clear message from Parliament to the police and the public that this issue is being taken seriously and that we will not tolerate the abuse of retail workers.

That measure is backed by USDAW, of course. It is also backed by the Co-op, Tesco, the British Retail Consortium and lots of small convenience stores. There have been numerous opportunities to back the measure in Parliament, but time after time it has been voted down. I just make this request to the Minister and Government Members: I really hope that, in the face of the overwhelming evidence and testimony from retail workers and the retail sector, the Government will think again and introduce a specific offence of abuse and threats against shop workers, because if this Government will not, the next Labour Government will.

4.52 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend—my good friend—the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate. I declare to the House that I am a member of USDAW, the retail sector trade union. I worked in the retail sector for six years, so I was, and I remain, a member of USDAW. I also refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In my constituency there are 9,000 retail workers, whose jobs make up 16.4% of those in the constituency. In my region, the north-west, there are 523,000-plus retail workers. Retail jobs are important in my constituency, in the north-west and across the UK. As part of the recent Respect for Shopworkers Week, I visited the Co-op on Castle Street. As on previous visits, I spoke to the managers and shop floor staff, and they told me about the incidents of antisocial behaviour, violence, sometimes threats, shoplifting and all of that. Often they feel that nothing is done. What are the police doing to tackle those issues? This is a serious matter, and it causes problems not just for shop workers but for customers who have to witness such incidents.

The stats were mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Blaydon. There are about 850 incidents of violence or abuse against shop workers daily, so the figures are quite high. The recent survey by USDAW, which had about 3,000 responses from retail workers, found that 65% of retail workers had been verbally abused, 42% had been threatened and a shocking 17.5% had been assaulted, with 4.8% assaulted just this year. Those figures are staggering, and we need action rather than just warm words from the Government.

This debate is about violence and abuse towards the retail workforce, but I want to add a point about the value of retail jobs. These are important jobs. Often, they are low paid—they are not seen as well-paying jobs—and they involve long hours, and sometimes people are on zero-hours contracts. USDAW produced an updated report in July 2023 called “A Plan For The Future Of Retail Work”. I would be happy to give my paper copy to the Minister if he is interested, because these jobs should be good, well-paid jobs and people should be able to afford to bring up their families and look after their communities. Often, however, these jobs are difficult and, on top of the financial difficulties, staff face violence and a lot of abuse. That needs to be tackled.

I am sorry to say that the Government have failed us. Not only do we not have a specific offence for violence and abuse against shop workers, but we have seen

significant cuts to my local force, Greater Manchester police, in the last 13 years of Conservative Government. The officers I speak to—just last week, I spoke to a senior Greater Manchester police officer in the Stockport district—do a difficult job. They have their own issues with regard to the workforce, the capacity of officers, the complexity of crimes, the rise in population, the rise in crime and all those issues, and they are often not able to support shopkeepers, shop workers or bigger stores with these incidents. We have seen a perfect cocktail of failure, where the Government have not legislated and there has been a massive increase in these crimes, but where there have also been cuts to police numbers. We need to address that.

The Freedom from Fear campaign, which is run throughout the year by USDAW, the retail sector trade union, is important. There is also Respect for Shopworkers Week, and USDAW's general secretary, Paddy Lillis, was on the parliamentary estate earlier this year when my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington hosted him for a meeting with MPs. I met Mr Lillis last week and spoke to him about the concerns in the sector, and he told me that there are significant issues.

We need action from the Government, and we need to make sure that a specific offence is created. I worked in the retail sector for just under six years, and I had a good experience at a large national retailer. However, I did come across incidents where the customer was unpleasant or made derogatory, racist or sexist remarks. We need to make sure we legislate.

My final point is that Labour has made a specific commitment—and not just offered warm words about jam tomorrow—that it will table amendments to the Government's Criminal Justice Bill to strengthen the law to protect retail workers. We need that, and we need it urgently. We also need to make sure that police forces, including Greater Manchester police, have the resources and the support they need to tackle the issues that make life difficult for shop workers and members of the community.

4.57 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate on violence and abuse towards the retail workforce. It is vital that we address a growing concern that is plaguing our communities and affecting the very fabric of our towns and cities. The scourge of retail crime cannot be ignored any longer: it threatens the safety of our hard-working retail staff, as well as the wellbeing of local businesses that are the lifeblood of local communities.

Shoplifting is not a victimless crime or an attack on a faceless business. At its core, it is an attack on a person—an individual who is simply carrying out the duties of their employment—and it brings with it long-lasting consequences in many cases. According to the annual Scottish retail crime report released last year, a staggering 100% of respondents reported experiencing shop theft at least once a day. That alarming statistic is accompanied by a harsh reality: virtually all retail staff will regularly endure some form of abuse, violence or hate speech throughout the course of a day's work. From major retailers to local corner shops, the threat of violence, or actual violence, is never far away. That cannot continue.

[Steven Bonnar]

Our retail workers deserve to be at their place of work and to carry out their duties without the fear of violence, abuse or intimidation. Disturbingly, violence and abusive attacks on retail staff have nearly doubled from pre-pandemic levels. According to the BRC's crime survey, more than 850 incidents were reported daily in the UK between 2021 and 2022, including racial and sexual abuse, physical assaults and threats with weapons. In Scotland, we witness 70 incidents a day—a sharp increase from 45 attacks a day in 2019-20—so this is on the increase right across the UK.

The economic toll of retail crime is also staggering. The total cost reached £1.76 billion in the last financial year, with customer theft alone accounting for £953 million. Retailers are having to spend an additional £715 million on crime prevention measures.

Some 100 retail CEOs wrote to 41 police and crime commissioners in England and Wales last year, urging them to make retail crime a priority in local policing strategies. The Government failed to listen to them. In contrast, the Scottish Government have taken a key step forward, with the introduction of the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Good and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021, which fully recognises the gravity of violence and abuse against retail and shop workers.

The private Member's Bill introduced in Holyrood on this issue received widespread support across the Scottish Parliament. It was introduced by a Labour MSP, Mr Daniel Johnson—credit where credit is due—which proves that the SNP is an open and listening governing party. The Bill was enacted in 2021, passing through the Holyrood Parliament with no dissent, so congratulations on that.

Police Scotland figures reveal that nearly 8,000 cases of abuse and assault against retail staff were reported in the two years to August. National statistics office figures on criminal proceedings for 2021-22, published in October, indicate that progress is being made, with 543 of those charged under the Act receiving criminal convictions from 2021 to 2023. Twenty-six individuals were convicted in a Scottish court, with 13 receiving a custodial sentence under the Act.

I am sure the Minister will tell us that a specific law is not required in England and Wales for the protection of retail workers. However, it has been proven that, where there is confidence that, if someone reports a crime, it will be taken seriously, as is the case in Scotland, victims are far more likely to report the crimes, racial abuse or threats of violence they experience in their workplace to the relevant authorities. We ask the Minister to think again about that.

It is important that we stand united against the tide of retail crime that threatens our communities. We must ensure that our retail workers are safe, protected and free from the threat of violence and abuse. The Protection of Workers Act is a beacon of progress, and I urge the Minister to consider following it.

Finally, I would like to say to all the hard-working people employed in the retail sector across Scotland and beyond, "Thanks again for your service every day. The outstanding service you provided for us all throughout the pandemic should not be forgotten. We owe you

huge gratitude still. If you suffer abuse, racism or any threat of violence at your workplace, please come forward and report it."

5.3 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. It is also a pleasure to stand across the Chamber from the Minister for the first time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate, and I thank all the Members who have participated and put on record why it is so important.

I spent a great many years—about 10 years from the age of 14—working in retail. Granted, that was a long time ago, but I do not remember things being so bad for retail workers. The impact of the abuse of shop workers is far-reaching, whether that is the physical and emotional toll on those who suffer the abuse, the impact of theft on employers and retailers or the knock-on impact of those issues on our high streets, which lose out massively when local residents say they do not feel safe in their communities.

I pay tribute to the contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar)—I hope I have that right. Retail crime is a blight on our high streets and local communities. Anecdotally, it is felt by our constituents on a daily basis, but that is also borne out in the statistics, which reveal horrible and worrying trends. Retail crime, violence, threats and abuse towards shop workers have increased substantially in recent years, and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon set out the harrowing levels of violence and assaults.

Research by the Co-op shows that there have been 300,000 incidents involving shoplifting, abuse and violence in its stores in the past year alone. Figures from the British Retail Consortium, the retail trade body, show that retail crime in England and Wales was up 26% in 2022, which equates to a staggering 850 incidents every day. That is goods being lifted and staff being abused physically or threatened with weapons. Of course, there is a cost to retailers and consumers too. The BRC estimated that, in 2021, even before the current peak in shoplifting incidents, stolen goods had cost retailers £1 billion.

If we talk to anyone in retail, they will say that it is not just petty thieves behind this, but serious and organised crime. Criminals operating in gangs are stealing large quantities of goods and selling them, and retail workers are operating on the frontline of this shoplifting epidemic. The Co-op sees an estimated 1,000 cases of shoplifting in its stores a day, and every day four or five staff members are physically attacked. As we have heard, they describe attacks involving syringes and knives; it is truly appalling. No worker should ever have to go into work in such fear or under such a threat of attack.

I pay tribute to the shop workers' union, USDAW, for running a robust campaign on the issue to better protect its members, and to the retailers investing in anti-theft measures and better security for their stores. Shockingly, it has fallen to them to act, because retail crime and the abuse of shop workers has exploded under this Government. After 13 years of Tory Government, over 90% of crimes

are going unsolved, meaning that criminals are less than half as likely to be caught than they were under the last Labour Government. More criminals are being let off and far more victims are being let down.

The Tories' shoplifting charter means that offences involving goods under £200 are rarely investigated properly and criminals are rarely brought to justice. We have also had the decimation of neighbourhood policing, with town centre policing controls cut. Even when offenders are detained by security—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon—the Co-op says that they are let go in 80% of cases in its stores because the police are stretched so thinly that they cannot attend the scene. It is therefore no surprise that, despite the amazing work of our police officers in testing circumstances, public confidence in the police has been on a downward trend since 2017, falling from 62% to just 55% in 2020.

It is the first duty of any Government to keep their citizens safe, and the Government are failing badly—that is the abysmal Conservative record on law and order. The Opposition are determined to end this chaos. Labour will not stand for any more failure to combat crime. To deliver on that, we have set out our community policing guarantee.

First, we will put police back on the beat. We will bring in proper neighbourhood policing, with 13,000 new police officers and PCSOs on our streets. That will mean more local officers embedded in and servicing local communities, with a named officer assigned to every high street. Secondly, we will have zero tolerance of antisocial behaviour, with repeat offenders banned from town centres. Thirdly, we will build pride in neighbourhood policing by giving local people and businesses a say in how their local area is policed and ensuring that there is proper career progression in the police for neighbourhood police officers. Fourthly, we will end the £200 shoplifters' charter, reverse the Tories' decision to downgrade such crimes, and properly crack down on all shoplifting once and for all. Finally, we will create a new specific offence of assault against shop workers. Everyone has the right to feel safe at work, and Labour will deliver on that promise.

I pay tribute to USDAW and to colleagues in the Co-operative party, who have fought hard, and continue to push, for this change. After years of this Government's failure to tackle crime, Labour is determined to turn the tide on rising shop theft and antisocial behaviour, and to make the streets safer.

5.10 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your august chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to follow—for the first time, I think—the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), whom I welcome to her place in the shadow Front-Bench team.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate, which follows one on the Floor of the House. The Opposition day debate this afternoon was on a broadly similar topic, but it is good to have a further opportunity to discuss the matter in a little more detail and in slightly less heated circumstances.

Before I respond to hon. Members' very good points, I want to say that I agree with the assessment that retail outlets are the lifeblood of our community. They are

often centres not only for shopping, but for meeting others. They are far more vibrant than just buying something online and having it delivered to one's doorstep in a cardboard box.

I also agree that it is unacceptable that retail workers are suffering from assaults and threats. I have particular sympathy with them because my very first job in south London was stacking shelves, among other things, in a Sainsbury's not far from my current constituency, although I must confess that unlike Labour Members, I never joined a trade union.

Feryal Clark: You should give it a go.

Chris Philp: I thank Members for their kind entreaties, but I will probably give it a miss.

This is a serious issue and the Government are taking it very seriously. Of course, crime in general is coming down. The crime survey for England and Wales, which according to the Office for National Statistics is the only reliable measure of long-term crime trends, shows that overall crime is down 10% year on year, and like-for-like crime is down 56% since 2010. That is very welcome, but—in common with other countries in the western world, including the United States, France and Germany—we have seen a worrying increase in shoplifting and assaults against retail workers in the past year or two. As I say, the phenomenon is not confined to the UK; it is wider than that.

Although it is welcome that prosecutions for shoplifting have increased by 29% since last year, the Government said in response to a number of retailers, including the Co-op and others, that more needs to be done. That is why I sat down over the summer with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for serious organised and acquisitive crime—Amanda Blakeman, the chief constable of north Wales—to talk about developing a police action plan to do a lot more.

That action plan was published with the agreement of the police four or five weeks ago and was launched at No. 10 Downing Street. It contains a number of important components. The first is a commitment that the police will always follow up all reasonable lines of inquiry in relation to all crime. That is relevant to all kinds of crime types, but shoplifting is one of the most important. That means that if there is evidence that can be followed up, such as CCTV footage, the police will always do that regardless of the value of the goods stolen.

In the past six to 12 months, the artificial intelligence algorithm that enables facial matching has become a lot more sophisticated. If an image is received from a crime scene—it could be from a Ring doorbell, a dashcam, a mobile phone or CCTV anywhere, including in a shop—as it should always be under this new commitment, it can be run through the police national database, which contains millions of facial images from custody records. The algorithm is so good at matching now that even blurred or partially obscured images can be matched. The commitment always to follow lines of inquiry and always run images through the facial recognition database will lead to a lot more offenders being caught—shoplifters, but others as well. I set the target for police forces across England and Wales to double their use of facial recognition searches this year.

[Chris Philp]

The first element is always to follow all reasonable lines of inquiry, with a particular emphasis on CCTV and facial recognition. Secondly, there is a police commitment to prioritise attending incidents of shoplifting in person where that is necessary to secure evidence; where there has been an assault on a retail worker, which is obviously relevant to today's debate; and where an offender has been detained by, for example, store security staff. I heard statistics from the Co-op suggesting that where store security staff had detained an offender, the police had attended only in a quarter of cases. That is frankly unacceptable. We now have a commitment from policing to prioritise attendance in all cases where an offender has been detained. I would like Members of Parliament of all parties and police and crime commissioners to hold the police to account for delivering that.

Thirdly, the plan contains a commitment to use data analytics to identify and go after prolific offenders—that is, identifying what is often quite a small number of people committing a large volume of offences and specifically going after them. Fourthly—it may have been the hon. Member for Blaydon who mentioned this—there is an element of serious and organised crime, with organised criminal gangs targeting retail outlets. Project Pegasus, led by the Sussex police and crime commissioner Katy Bourne in partnership with 16 retailers, gathers data from those retailers and passes it to OPAL, which is the police data analysis centre for serious organised crime, including acquisitive crime, to identify the criminal gangs and go after them. That is partly funded by those retailers but is supported and organised by the police.

Those are the four components: following all lines of inquiry, including CCTV and facial recognition; targeting prolific offenders; attending incidents a lot more frequently; and going after serious and organised crime. That package together will lead to a significant increase in the number of offenders who are caught and the number of assaults prevented, and we will see that 29% increase in prosecutions go up considerably more.

Navendu Mishra: I appreciate the points that the Minister has made about policing and meeting the Co-op. Will he give a commitment to the House that he will meet USDAW, which is the sectoral trade union for retail workers, because the people who are at the forefront of this crisis are the low-paid retail workers themselves?

Chris Philp: Yes, I would be happy to do so—it would seem churlish to decline such an invitation.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned wages. I observe in passing that the minimum wage will go up by about 10% from next April to £11.44 an hour. That is quite a considerable increase, well above the rate of inflation. Of course, under the last Labour Government, it was only £5.93. If we adjust for inflation and the increase in the tax-free threshold, the take-home wages of someone working full time on the minimum wage are 30% higher than 13 years ago, which is welcome.

The Greater Manchester police were mentioned by, I think, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). I commend Chief Constable Stephen Watson, who is doing a great job with GMP and led the way by implementing this concept of always following up all

evidence, which seems like common sense, but it was not being universally done. He implemented that in Greater Manchester about a year and a half ago, and it led to a 44% increase in arrests and prosecutions. It is exactly that approach that worked under Stephen Watson's leadership that we are applying nationwide, including to shoplifting.

I will say a word or two on several other points raised in the debate. The first is the offence of assaulting a retail worker. We know that Scotland has a separate offence and that there have been calls to have a similar one here. Of course assaulting a retail worker is an offence: it is assault. It could be common assault, grievous bodily harm, grievous bodily harm with intent and so on. It is a criminal offence and, as I believe the hon. Member for Blaydon acknowledged, we legislated in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 to make it a statutory aggravating factor where the victim is a public-facing worker—that includes retailers and others. That means that a judge is obliged, in statute, to pass a higher sentence than they otherwise would, in recognition of the fact that the victim is a public-facing worker.

Liz Twist: The problem is that if cases are not taken through to court for prosecution, that aggravating factor does not come into play. I think that what all of us here are arguing is that the assault itself against a shop worker should be seen as a particular offence.

Chris Philp: Obviously, as I have said, that is already an offence—it is assault, it is illegal and it is a criminal offence. We need to make sure that the culprit is identified by the police and that those cases are then prosecuted. The retail crime action plan that I set out a few moments ago will increase the number of prosecutions of those who assault retail workers, as well as of those who steal from retail stores. I am confident that that will be the result of that action plan.

One or two hon. Members mentioned the £200 threshold. I want to make sure that everyone is clear about that. A change to the law in 2014 made the theft of goods valued at under £200 triable summarily only, which means triable just in the magistrates court. To be clear, it is still a criminal offence, it can still and should be prosecuted, and the maximum sentence is six months' imprisonment, which is the maximum that a magistrate these days can impose. Stealing more than £200-worth of goods is triable either way, meaning that it can be heard in a Crown court. The maximum sentence upon conviction in the Crown court for that offence, of theft, is seven years. So, to be clear, stealing goods to the value of less than £200 is criminal; it can and should be prosecuted; and it is punishable by up to six months' imprisonment.

I hope it is clear from my remarks that we are taking this issue extremely seriously. The increase in shoplifting in the past year or two in this country, as well as in the US, France and Germany, is of concern, which is why we are taking the action that I set out. We need a zero-tolerance approach, because if we do not have one, the problem just escalates. We have seen in some American cities, such as San Francisco, the situation getting completely out of control. Looting has become commonplace in San Francisco and elsewhere, and we cannot allow that to happen in the UK. That is why we have developed

our plan, and why I have asked the police to take a zero-tolerance approach. I am sure that all of us, Members of Parliament and PCCs up and down the country, will hold the police to account to deliver the plan.

Liz Twist *rose*—

Chris Philp: I was about to sit down, but as the hon. Lady secured the debate, it would be extremely discourteous not to give way.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister. Will he address the issue that I raised about the resourcing of the police? In my local Northumbria police area, we are still 400 police officers down. That is irrespective of whatever the picture is nationally, and the situation is the same across the north-east. Clearly, that affects the response of the police. What can he say about that? Can he commit to increasing the numbers in Northumbria?

Chris Philp: I can confirm that across England and Wales as a whole, as I think the hon. Lady knows, we have 149,566 police officers; that is as of 31 March this year. The number is higher than it has ever been in history and it is about 3,500 higher than the previous peak in March 2010, so there is a record number nationally. As for each individual force area, the choices made by individual PCCs—

Navendu Mishra *rose*—

Chris Philp: I am going to conclude, because I do not want to overburden the Chamber and I wish to finish answering the point. The numbers in individual force areas reflect choices made by individual PCCs over time, for example, about the precept and about the balance between officer numbers, police stations and so on. What we have done in government is make sure that there are record numbers nationally. We have also put more money into policing, so this year PCCs had £550 million more available to them than last year. In addition, we fully funded the 7% pay rise between 2.5% and 7%, which this year entailed an extra £330 million.

Those resources are going in. In addition, from next April we are funding—in every one of the 43 police force areas in England and Wales, including the hon. Lady's—specially funded antisocial behaviour hotspot patrols. I would expect them mainly to concentrate on town centres and high streets, where shoplifting may also occur. Where we have piloted those in the past four or five months, including in Blackpool, parts of Staffordshire and parts of Essex, we have seen reductions of 20% or 30% in antisocial behaviour and other forms of criminality. We will therefore fund each force, in

addition to its regular funding settlement, to have those hotspot patrols, which should deliver something like 30,000 hours of specialist patrolling in each force area each year from April. I think that that will make a real difference.

Liz Twist: With regard to the Minister's explanation of the differences and the choices that local police forces have made, I am sure he will know that the impact of increasing the precept and the value of housing in our local communities mean that authorities such as mine suffer disproportionately because of the way the precept is worked out. Choices there may be, but they are choices within the funding envelope.

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Lady for her final intervention. The police funding formula, which is rather old now, accounts for the council tax base as well as population, crime levels and so forth, but it needs reviewing and updating. As I said, when we lay out the police funding settlement for next year, which we intend to do this side of Christmas, I hope that police forces up and down the country, including in her area, will see that they will get a material resource uplift next year, as well as the special funding I mentioned for hotspot patrolling that has made a huge and visible difference in the areas in which it has been trialled.

This is a serious issue and the Government take it seriously. We have a plan, we have agreed it with policing, and we will now get on and deliver that plan operationally.

5.26 pm

Liz Twist: This has been an interesting debate, and a very important one to our retail workforce who are suffering violence and abuse, both verbal and physical. Clearly I am disappointed that the Minister has not gone a step further and agreed that violence and abuse towards the retail workforce should be a crime in its own right. I know that the shopworkers and retail staff in my constituency would very much welcome that recognition. Although there are other assault offences that can be used, this is a very specific one that needs to be addressed. I regret that the Minister has not made that change. Retail staff and I will continue to push for it to be recognised as a specific crime.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of violence and abuse towards the retail workforce.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 5 December 2023

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committee: International Partnerships Report

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament has today laid before Parliament a report entitled “International Partnerships”. The Government recognise and welcome the important oversight provided by the Committee. I thank the Committee for the comprehensive and detailed nature of the report and the extensive work behind it. International partnerships are of crucial importance to the UK intelligence agencies in their work and I am grateful that this is endorsed in this report.

I welcome the Committee’s finding that, overall, it is satisfied with the management and development of the UK intelligence community’s partnerships, and the recognition that our agencies take both the letter and the spirit of their legal and ethical obligations with the utmost seriousness in managing these relationships.

The partnerships that the UK intelligence community maintains are critical to our ability to protect our national interests. These international partnerships allow the UK to benefit from intelligence sharing, shared analysis and assessment, and joint co-operation, maximising its capabilities and reach. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Departments, agencies and their international partners for their work in maintaining these relationships, which are deeply important to our ability to keep the UK safe.

The Government will consider the Committee’s recommendations carefully and respond in due course.

[HCWS93]

Intelligence and Security Committee’s Annual Report

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament has today laid before Parliament its annual report, covering its activities between April 2022 and March 2023. The report demonstrates the Committee’s wide-ranging work across a number of important issues.

The ISC is a leading and essential part of the machinery that provides expert and democratic accountability for our security and intelligence-focused Departments and agencies.

The Committee’s membership has changed during the period covered by the report, and I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) for his work on the Committee, and welcome the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) to this role.

The Government continue to support the Committee with its ongoing international partnerships, cloud technologies and Iran inquiries, and look forward to seeing the Committee’s recommendations in due course. During the period covered by this annual report, the Committee published a report on extreme right-wing terrorism. The Committee also finalised its report following

a long-running inquiry on China, which was recognised as an exceptional, complex inquiry. The Government have published responses to both reports and are grateful to the Committee for devoting its time and attention to these topics, and thank the Committee for its recommendations. The Government will keep the Committee updated on our progress with its recommendations.

I would also like to thank the Committee for its work on the National Security Act 2023. Its engagement, understanding and expertise was invaluable and helped the Government to pass the biggest reform of national security in over 100 years.

The Government value the oversight provided by the Committee. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, the National Audit Office, and other parliamentary Committees that, combined with the work of the ISC, provide an effective framework for oversight and scrutiny of the Government’s national security and intelligence work. The UK can be proud of its laws and values, and oversight is essential to maintain public trust. I reiterate my thanks to all those who carry out this essential work.

The Government note the Committee’s comments regarding the provision of sensitive information to parliamentary Select Committees, which were also contained in the 2021-22 annual report. There is existing guidance establishing that classification of material is not a reason for the Government to withhold information from parliamentary Committees and agreed processes are in place to provide sensitive information as required.

As raised by the Committee, the National Security Act 2023 obliges the Government to consider whether the current memorandum of understanding between the Prime Minister and the Intelligence and Security Committee should be altered or replaced to reflect any changes arising out of the Act. The Government look forward to working constructively with the Committee and Parliament on this matter.

I would like to again thank the Committee for its ongoing work to maintain robust oversight of the UK intelligence community.

[HCWS92]

DEFENCE

Israel and Gaza

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Since the terrorist attacks against Israel of 7 October 2023, the UK Government have been working with partners across the region to secure the release of hostages, including British nationals, who have been kidnapped. The safety of British nationals is our utmost priority. In support of the ongoing hostage rescue activity, the UK Ministry of Defence will conduct surveillance flights over the eastern Mediterranean, including operating in airspace over Israel and Gaza.

Surveillance aircraft will be unarmed, do not have a combat role and will be tasked solely with locating hostages. Only information relating to hostage rescue will be passed to the relevant authorities responsible for hostage rescue.

[HCWS90]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Visiting in Care Homes, Hospitals and Hospices: Government Response to Consultation

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I make this statement on behalf of myself, the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) to announce the conclusion of the Government's consultation on visiting in care homes, hospitals and hospices, and our response.

The covid-19 pandemic taught us valuable lessons about restrictions that had a serious effect on the health and wellbeing of care residents, patients and their families and friends.

Visiting was restricted at the height of the pandemic to prevent the spread of covid and keep people safe, but as restrictions eased the guidance for visiting in hospital and care settings changed accordingly.

The majority of settings adhered to the guidance but there have been reports of people being denied access to family members and loved ones, so the Government have acted to make sure expectations around visits are clear to providers.

On 21 June 2023, the Department of Health and Social Care launched a public consultation on our proposal to ensure that visiting in care homes, hospitals and hospices is protected in legislation.

Under the proposal, the importance of visiting for patients, care home residents and loved ones will become a fundamental standard of care, set out in regulations for the Care Quality Commission (CQC). This means that a visit from a loved one to patients and care home residents will be safeguarded, and Care Quality Commission inspections will monitor whether health and care providers are meeting those obligations.

We received over 1,400 responses to the consultation from a wide range of stakeholders, the majority of which supported the Government's proposal. We therefore plan to bring forward secondary legislation to create a new fundamental standard in CQC regulations.

I would like to thank all those who participated in our consultation and in particular those from John's Campaign and Care Rights UK, the hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden), my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) who have continued to campaign on this issue.

The Government recognise their efforts and those of the many health and care settings which understand the importance of visiting and continue to follow our existing guidance that visiting should be facilitated. We will work closely with the CQC to develop clear guidance so that all settings can be in no doubt as to the standard expected in the provision of care, including supporting visiting.

The Government's response to the consultation has been published on gov.uk and I have deposited copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS96]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Visiting in Care Homes, Hospitals and Hospices: Government Response to Consultation

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today, the Government have published details on the local government finance settlement for the next year, for councils across England. This policy statement comes in advance of the provisional local government finance settlement, and shows the steps this Government are taking to ensure stability of funding for councils.

At this year's settlement, we are on course to provide an above-inflation increase in funding to the sector. We estimate that the settlement will make available approximately £64 billion to the sector, and expect that councils will see, on average, an above inflation increase in their core spending power next year. In cash terms, this is an increase of around £4 billion for the sector, or over 6%. At this time, we also recognise the need to provide stability to the whole sector, and we are therefore providing a sector-wide funding guarantee. This will be on the same terms as last year, ensuring that all local authorities see a minimum 3% increase in their core spending power before taking any local decisions on council tax levels.

The Government manifesto commits to continuing to protect local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases. This is an important local democratic check and balance to avoid the repeat seen under the last Labour Government when council tax more than doubled. The proposed package of referendum principles strikes a fair balance. Local authorities should of course be mindful of cost-of-living pressures when taking any decisions relating to council tax. As previously set out, we will set the core council tax referendum threshold at 3%, and set the adult social care referendum threshold at 2% for all authorities responsible for adult social care services. The council tax referendum provisions are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level. It is for individual local authorities to determine whether to use the flexibilities detailed above, taking into consideration the pressures many households are facing. These actions are to protect hard-working people from excessive tax rises and are in contrast to the Labour Government in Wales which is planning to hike council tax through a council tax revaluation and higher council tax bands.

The Mayor of London has requested flexibility to levy an additional £20 on Band D bills to the Greater London Authority (GLA) precept to provide extra funding for Transport for London (TfL). The Government has expressed ongoing concern about the management of TfL by this Mayor, and it is disappointing that London taxpayers are having to foot the bill for the GLA's poor governance and decision-making. Whilst the Government will not oppose this request, any decision to increase the precept is solely one for the Mayor, who should take into account the pressures that Londoners are currently facing on living costs and his decision to raise his share of council tax by 9.7% last year.

In the final year of the current spending review period, now is the time for stability and continuity, and we will therefore not be pursuing any fundamental

reforms to the system. The Government is pleased to reconfirm the additional funding that we committed to the sector at last year's autumn statement. In total we are providing local government with approximately £1 billion in additional grant funding for social care compared to 2023-24. We are also continuing the approach set out at last year's settlement for other grants such as the rural services delivery grant and new homes bonus, which we know are important to councils.

Despite recent decreases in the rate of inflation, pressures still exist for local authorities. The Government ask authorities to continue to consider how they can use their reserves to maintain services over this and the next financial year, recognising that not all reserves can be reallocated, and that the ability to meet spending pressures from reserves will vary between authorities.

The exceptional financial support framework is available to provide support where a council has a specific and evidenced concern about its ability to set or maintain a balanced budget, including where there has been local financial failure. Where councils need additional support from Government, they should take every possible step to minimise the need for that support to be funded by national taxpayers, while also recognising the cost-of-living pressures on families. As part of that process, the Government will consider representations from councils, including on council tax provision.

We have made it clear that any attempt from a local authority to implement a "four-day week" is contrary to the interests of local taxpayers, and that this working practice does not represent good value for taxpayers' money, nor places the sector in a good light with the public. We are continuing to work on measures to discourage the use of this practice. Those councils which are considering or operating a four-day working week pattern should stop this practice immediately.

All of the proposals set out in the policy statement will be subject to the usual consultation process within the local government finance settlement. This written ministerial statement covers England only. The policy statement will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses, and has been published on gov.uk:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-government-finance-policy-statement-2024-to-2025>

[HCWS95]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reporting Commission: Sixth Substantive Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I have received the sixth substantive report from the Independent Reporting Commission.

The Commission was established following the fresh start agreement of November 2015 to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity. That agreement set out the Northern Ireland Executive's commitments around tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality, and led to a programme of work to deliver a Northern Ireland executive action plan. In the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement in January 2020, a commitment was made to ongoing work to tackle paramilitarism, and this work continues, including

through a second phase of the NI Executive's tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime programme.

In their sixth report, the Commissioners note there is increasing evidence that the programme is bearing real fruit, by fostering a partnership approach and helping to shape and inform the development of public policy and practice through the priority given to evidence and data. The Commissioners note the cumulative impact that collective law enforcement effort is having on paramilitary groups and their leaderships, and that good work continues to build resilience and strengthen protective factors of communities and individuals affected by paramilitarism.

Yet the report also reminds us that the problem of paramilitarism is enduring. We have seen on a number of occasions over the past year the disregard that paramilitary groups and those who claim affiliation with them have for public safety, and the harm and disruption they continue to cause through criminal activity and coercive control to the communities they often claim to represent.

The Commissioners have set out a number of recommendations on how the effort to tackle paramilitarism can be enhanced. We will consider recommendations for the UK Government through engagement with representatives of NI political parties, the NI Executive, the Irish Government, with civic society and community representatives in Northern Ireland, and with the Independent Reporting Commission.

Paramilitarism was never justified in the past, and cannot be justified today. The UK Government remain committed to delivering our vision of a safer Northern Ireland and to working with partners to support efforts against the enduring threat and harms posed to communities by terrorist and paramilitary groups.

Political leadership from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland is essential to ensure it remains clear there is no place for paramilitarism. A functioning Northern Ireland Executive is the most effective mechanism for ensuring a strategic, cross-cutting approach to tackling paramilitarism in partnership with the PSNI and the wider public sector.

I would like to express my thanks to the Commissioners and the secretariat for their continued work reporting on progress towards ending paramilitarism.

[HCWS94]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Engineering Biology

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (Andrew Griffith): Since its creation, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has been working to cement the UK as a science superpower by creating the most innovative economy in the world. At the centre of this mission are five critical technologies that will deliver prosperity and security for the UK and deliver benefits to global society: engineering biology, quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, semiconductors and future telecommunications.

We are today publishing the “National Vision for Engineering Biology”, which outlines how engineering, or synthetic, biology will contribute to the UK’s growth, security, resilience and preparedness.

This vision responds to the Government’s recent call for evidence on engineering biology. It reflects what we heard about the UK’s strengths, challenges and opportunities. It defines the Government’s collective ambition for engineering biology, and sets the directions in which Government investment, policy and regulatory reform will deliver through the strands of the science and technology framework.

The Government define engineering biology as the design, scaling and commercialisation of biology-derived products and services that can create whole new categories of product or produce existing products more sustainably. It draws on the tools of synthetic biology to create the next wave of innovation in the bioeconomy. In addition to its economic benefits, engineering biology supports policy objectives across Government, including contributing to improvements in health, food security, environmental protection and the transition to a lower-carbon economy. This is a pivotal moment for engineering biology. Global leading nations are ramping up efforts to grow their sovereign bioeconomy capabilities and capture the economic benefits. The US and China have made ambitious statements of intent, and our international peers are investing significant sums to carve out strategic positions in the emerging global bioeconomy. At the same time, there is increasing recognition that countries need to apply engineering biology predictably, safely and responsibly to capture its full economic and societal potential for their populations. Engineering biology is a dual-use technology, and all Governments will need to adopt sensible, proportionate precautions.

The Government’s vision is for the UK to have a broad, rich engineering biology ecosystem that can safely develop and commercialise the many opportunities to come from the technology and the underlying science. We aim to gain as much economic value, security, resilience and preparedness as possible from our hard-won strengths and ensure that these create real benefits for the public. We will also move further and faster to put the UK right at the very forefront of global efforts to drive responsible and trustworthy innovation across the world. By addressing the social and ethical questions that may be raised by certain applications, we will ensure that we earn the trust of the public and consumers as we unlock the opportunities of this technology. At the same time, there is increasing recognition that countries need to apply engineering biology predictably, safely and responsibly, gripping this technology’s risks in order to capture its full economic and societal potential for their populations.

The Government will focus on six priorities to achieve this vision: world-leading research and development; infrastructure; talent and skills; regulations and standards; adoption by the broader economy; and responsible and trustworthy innovation. For each of these areas, DSIT has already started convening partners across Government and our research funding councils to understand the challenges and opportunities and to identify the support that the Government should provide.

Following publication of this vision, the Government will develop a clear plan of action for delivering the vision. Copies of the “National Vision for Engineering Biology” and the technical annex will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS91]

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