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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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House of Commons

Tuesday 9 January 2024

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Parole Board Consideration Mechanism

1. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Parole Board reconsideration mechanism. [900794]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): The reconsideration mechanism introduced in July 2019 is a vital tool for public protection, allowing Ministers to intervene in broad cases where there is concern that the decision to release is irrational or procedurally flawed, or where there has been an error of law. Since 2019, this Government have used the mechanism to have 17 release decisions retaken by the Parole Board. Nine of those resulted in the board reversing its original decision to direct release, including the recent case of Colin Pitchfork.

Dr Evans: The Treasurer of His Majesty's Household, my right hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and I have both raised concerns about the release of Edwin Hopkins, the schoolgirl killer of Naomi Smith. I know that the Secretary of State cannot retrospectively apply the law around parole, but will he assure my constituents and residents in neighbouring Nuneaton that the new laws in the Victims and Prisoners Bill going through Parliament at the moment put public safety at the heart of future Parole Board decisions?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that extremely troubling case. The murder committed by Edwin Hopkins was a truly dreadful crime, and I understand the concern about the release of prisoners who have committed such heinous offences. The reforms in the Victims and Prisoners Bill do ensure that public safety is at the forefront of parole decisions, including by codifying the release test in law and introducing a new power to allow the Secretary of State to direct a second check on the release of some of the most serious offenders.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Lord Chancellor for his response and his clear commitment to ensuring that victims are considered. As the Member of Parliament for Strangford, many people contact me about those getting early parole and decisions that are made. Will he reassure me and the House that victims will be considered and contacted before any person who has carried out an evil crime is actually released?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is one thing being a victim of a crime in the first place but another not being kept updated on progress of the sentence of that individual, or indeed a parole decision. That is why we are absolutely committed through the victims code and other mechanisms to ensuring that victims are kept updated, including during the important parole process.

Child Sexual Exploitation: Historical Cases

2. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the time taken to schedule court hearings for historical cases of child sexual exploitation on survivors and their families. [900795]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): The House should be in no doubt as to how urgently we are working to accelerate justice. We will have recruited 1,000 new judges by the end of this year and extended the use of 24 Nightingale courtrooms, and we funded a record number of sitting days in courts last year. We have transformed how we support victims of sexual violence offences through the criminal justice system, including with the use of nearly 1,000 independent sexual violence advisers—some of those are especially for children—the nationwide roll-out of section 28 evidence procedures and pre-court familiarisation for vulnerable witnesses.

Debbie Abrahams: My constituent had to wait several years before her historical child sexual exploitation case was finally heard. During that time, the court date was cancelled twice, causing her immense distress. There is a backlog of about 65,000 Crown court cases—a third more there than in 2020—and nearly a third are waiting more than one year, compared with 10% in 2020. I appreciate what the Minister said about the additional barristers and judges recruited, but given the sensitive nature of these cases, could she indicate what percentage of the backlog is down to that and what she and her team are doing specifically to address it?

Laura Farris: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has raised this issue before. She will know that listing is a matter for the independent judiciary, but I do not seek to hide behind that. Actually, I would like to meet her to discuss the specific reasons for adjourning the case she talked about, because we might be able to do something to help.

I draw the hon. Lady's attention to two important things. A new police taskforce set up by the Government to support historical child sex abuse investigations has led to a 20% increase in child sex charges in the past year alone. In addition to that, I will say this. Greater Manchester currently has 59 live investigations into child sexual abuse. These are complex cases involving multiple perpetrators and multiple victims. In one case that recently went all the way through the court, the perpetrators did not even know each other—they had never met—so even the decision about how the group is arranged, how the case is allocated and the length of time it will need for listing is particularly complex. I would like to meet her, for the reasons I gave.

Victim Support

3. **Julie Marson** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support victims of crime. [900796]

4. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support victims of crime. [900797]

8. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support victims of crime. [900802]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Supporting victims has broadly three elements. First, it means ensuring harmful behaviour is comprehensively criminalised. That is why we have legislated to create new offences of stalking, coercive and controlling behaviour, upskirting, revenge porn, non-fatal strangulation and cyberflashing. Secondly, it means ensuring that the punishment fits the crime, which is why the average sentence has increased by around 50% since 2010. Thirdly, it means supporting victims before, during and after the court process. That is why we are funding over 1,000 independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic violence advisers by 2024-25, we have set up a 24/7 rape support helpline, and we are quadrupling funding for victims' services in cash terms since 2010.

Julie Marson: Cuckooing is not a victimless crime. The victims whose homes are invaded are frequently extremely vulnerable. Will the Secretary of State consider a separate specific offence of cuckooing in the Criminal Justice Bill to ensure not just that the punishment fits the crime, but that the crime fits the crime?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend has been brilliant in raising this issue time and time again. At least in part because of the pressure she has put on, we held a stakeholder engagement exercise on this issue with the police, criminal justice system partners, local authorities, other Government Departments and so on. The exercise reveals that there are civil orders and criminal offences which are available to disrupt it. It might be, for example, that the underlying offence is the possession of drugs with intent to supply, the possession of firearms or common assault. However, this issue is worthy of further consideration, so I will invite a conversation with her in due course.

Dr Davies: Last week, I was contacted by a constituent who has been named in the local press as a victim of domestic abuse against their expressed wishes. As my right hon. and learned Friend will appreciate, naming has the potential to endanger their safety and harm their recovery. What more can be done to safeguard the confidentiality of victims of domestic abuse?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend raises an absolutely essential point, because giving evidence is a deeply traumatic experience. Powers in section 46 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 allow the court, on application, to make a decision about anonymity and to take account of the circumstances of the alleged offending, the alleged offender, the alleged victim, and so on. That is a matter for the court. The court has to weigh the circumstances of the case against the overarching interests of transparency. That is a matter on which the courts are well placed to decide.

Elliot Colburn: Carshalton and Wallington is supposed to be one of the safest parts of London, but it has been shocked by a number of knife and violent crime incidents recently, including a knife attack in Wallington Sainsbury's on Christmas eve, which was traumatic not only for those involved but for those who witnessed it. Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that victims and witnesses of terrible crimes can get access to help and support while they wait for the police to build a case?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing the attention of the House to that appalling incident. Yes, it is absolutely imperative that both victims and witnesses can access support in the aftermath of such shocking crimes. As I indicated, we are quadrupling funding for victims and witness support by 2024-25 on 2010 levels. This is important. Under the 2006 victims code that we inherited, support was available only for direct victims. We have changed that, so it is now available for witnesses who have suffered mental or emotional harm.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Government left the role of Victims' Commissioner unfilled for over a year and to this day have refused to place any duty on public bodies to co-operate with the postholder. Will the Government and the Secretary of State explain why they have not supported Labour's proposals to give the role the same powers as the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has over public authorities such as the police?

Alex Chalk: The Victims' Commissioner plays an important role and we are delighted that Baroness Newlove is taking it on again. She has an exemplary track record. The role sits within a wider approach that we are taking, which is to ensure, through the Victims and Prisoners Bill and through the revised victims code and so on, that victims go from being spectators of the criminal justice process to participants in it. I know the Victims' Commissioner will help us on that journey.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What is being done to ensure that victims of crime, particularly violent crime, get the necessary mental health support they require, particularly where they can suffer ongoing mental health issues and trauma beyond the period of the crime itself?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman raises an absolutely essential point. As I indicated, we are quadrupling funding for victims' services on 2010 levels. Part of that is directed through police and crime commissioners to procure and commission precisely the kind of support he has indicated. What I am also able to say is that in those tragic cases that result in a fatality, the Homicide Service is now better resourced to provide ongoing support. That may be physical support, but it may also, sadly, be the mental support that is desperately needed.

Rehabilitation of Prisoners: Prison Estate

5. **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the prison estate for the rehabilitation of prisoners. [900798]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): In December last year we completed an estate-wide programme of surveys to assess the condition of each public sector prison, and I look forward to seeing the findings of those surveys. By the end of the current spending review period we will have invested nearly £4 billion towards the delivery of an additional 20,000 modern prison places to ensure that the right conditions are in place for the rehabilitation of prisoners, and in the last full financial year we spent more than £200 million on maintenance and upgrades—alongside, of course, our continued investment in purposeful activity within the prison estate.

Andy Slaughter: I was delighted to receive an invitation from the Minister's colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), to join him on a visit to Wormwood Scrubs Prison in my constituency this Thursday, but less delighted when the invitation was withdrawn yesterday on the basis that it had been "issued in error". Had I been permitted to attend, I would have raised the subject of the letter sent to the Lord Chancellor on 7 December by 10 chairs of independent monitoring boards for London area prisons, including Wormwood Scrubs, which stated that

"prisons are overcrowded, not safe and most of those in prison do not lead a 'useful' life".

In the absence of a reply to that letter, can the Prisons Minister tell us how he intends to make prisons fit for rehabilitation, given that, according to trade union sources, there is a maintenance backlog amounting to £3 billion?

Edward Argar: If the hon. Gentleman would like to visit the Scrubs with me—and I am not issuing this one in error—I shall be happy to accompany him on a visit to his local prison.

As I have said, we continue to invest in our prison estate. We also continue to invest in increasing the number of prison officers—to whom I pay tribute for the work that they do day in, day out; I suspect that those on the Opposition Front Bench would join me in that—and to invest in purposeful activity. The efforts that we have put in across the estate are working, as is shown by the proportion of prison leavers who are in employment six months after their release, which has more than doubled in the two years to March 2023. I look forward to discussing this further with the hon. Gentleman in his local prison.

Mr Speaker: Order. As a Member of Parliament with a prison in his area, I find it disappointing that that invitation was withdrawn from a Member of Parliament with a prison in his own area. That is not how Members of Parliament should be treated, and I hope that the question of why a Member of Parliament has been refused access to a facility in his constituency will be investigated.

Edward Argar: I understand from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State that the invitation was sent in error by the office—it was not meant to be sent—but I am happy to honour that invitation.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the Minister will look into this, because I am concerned about access for Members of Parliament. I now call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I will not go on about how I might have got people into Wormwood Scrubs in the past in one way or another—*[Interruption]*—and, indeed, got some of them out!

I am sure the Minister will know that a key point that comes up time and again in reports from His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons, and when issues are raised by the Justice Committee, is the lack of purposeful activity. The physical estate is part of that problem, but so are issues relating to staffing and access to education and other provision. Is it perhaps time for a strategy for the whole of the Prison Service with rehabilitation at its centre, and might not one solution to the problem be a statutory definition of the purposes of prison, of which rehabilitation—along with protection of the public—would be a key part? Would that not be a way of holding people's feet to the fire in order to deliver rehabilitation in the public interest?

Edward Argar: I shall certainly be happy to have that discussion with my hon. Friend if he feels that it would be useful. He is right to highlight the importance of adequate staff numbers, but I should point out that they have increased by 6.7% in the past year. I am also happy to tell him that this month we are launching the national regime model, which will require prisons to set out ambitious plans for dedicated purposeful activity—time out of cell. That will indeed hold their feet to the fire, because, as we know, such a regime is central to rehabilitation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The latest figures show that the reoffending rate among those leaving prison has increased. That is partly because prison is failing to rehabilitate—which is no surprise, given how overcrowded, understaffed and dangerously unsafe many prisons are. In one case, after heavy rain, prison officers were having to wade through raw sewage while prisoners remained locked in their cells. Does the Minister accept that the appalling state of our prisons is not only failing to reduce crime, but breeding it?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with her assessments. I would highlight that reoffending rates are down on where they were when we inherited them in 2010. I have highlighted to the hon. Lady the investment in new staff and in our buildings. I would also highlight to her, and I hope that we will enjoy her support on this, the success of tough community sentences in reducing reoffending, compared with sentences of fewer than 12 months. I look forward to her support in delivering those changes.

Ruth Cadbury: I am going to remain on the subject of the prison estate. The Minister made a valiant attempt to defend the Conservatives' woeful record on prisons, but they are failing to build the prison spaces we need to reduce this cycle of crime. Just last week it was revealed that the Government had built only 380 of the 1,000 pop-up prison cells that they promised by the end of 2023. Therefore, can the Minister at the very least confirm when the remaining 620 pop-up places will be built?

Edward Argar: I would gently say to the hon. Lady that we will take no lessons on prison building from the Labour party—the party that promised three Titan

prisons, with 7,500 places. How many were built? Zero. This is a Government who are committed to building 20,000 new, state-of-the-art prison places. Two prisons have already been built. One is in construction. One has just received planning permission, and I am hopeful that the other two of the six will receive that in due course.

Access to Legal Advice

6. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase early access to legal advice. [900799]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): Last year we spent £1 billion on civil legal aid to support the most vulnerable, and we recognise the potential benefits of early legal advice in supporting people to resolve their problems earlier. For example, last year we launched a £10 million housing loss prevention advice service. We invested in advice for welfare benefits issues, and early legal advice is also available for victims of domestic abuse in private family law proceedings, subject to the relevant means and evidence requirements. We will continue to invest in legal aid where we can see a benefit.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for that response. Like many Members across this House, I regularly have constituents coming to me with many legal issues needing legal advice and support. Obviously, many Members are not appropriately qualified to offer that legal advice and support. Citizens Advice in Stoke-on-Trent are doing an excellent job trying to support many of my constituents with legal issues, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that members of the public get timely and affordable legal advice when they need it?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend is right to praise the work of voluntary organisations such as Citizens Advice, and as I said in my original answer, we agree that investing has benefits. That is why, since 2015, we have invested more than £25 million to support litigants in person, including our current grant funding of around £10.4 million for improving outcomes to legal support grants. That is supporting 59 organisations across England and Wales, enabling them to provide urgent legal support and advice to help people resolve their legal problems. That is in addition to the investment in providing support on domestic violence, special guardianship orders, housing loss prevention and immigration.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): In its Green Paper published in October 2023, the Law Society set out reforms to legal aid to help more people get early advice. Can the Justice Secretary confirm what discussions he has had with the Treasury, in advance of the Budget in March, regarding potential increases to the legal aid budget, and that Scotland will receive its share through Barnett consequentials?

Mike Freer: I can confirm that, following the Bellamy report and the implementation of what is known as CLAIR—the criminal legal aid independent review—we have invested over £141 million extra in the legal aid system, addressing many of the concerns that legal practitioners, including the Law Society, have raised. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am in constant dialogue with the Law Society on how we can improve legal advice for citizens.

Human Rights Legislation

7. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of human rights legislation. [900801]

9. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of human rights legislation. [900803]

19. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of human rights legislation. [900813]

23. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of human rights legislation. [900817]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): The United Kingdom has a long-standing tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically and of fulfilling our international human rights obligations. We remain committed to a human rights framework that is up to date, fit for purpose and works for the British people. We have taken, and are taking, action to address specific issues with the Human Rights Act, including through the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the Victims and Prisoners Bill and the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021, which address the vexatious claims against veterans and the armed forces.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Rwanda Bill is the second piece of legislation that this Government have introduced that they cannot guarantee will comply with vital convention rights. Does that not illustrate the total inadequacy of UK human rights legislation? Any old Government—even a crumbling Tory Government—can rip up fundamental rights without constraint, doing over the Supreme Court in the process.

Alex Chalk: No, I reject that characterisation. The European convention on human rights, under article 13, provides a right to an effective remedy. We think there is a perfectly respectable argument that our legislation fulfils that. We are committed to human rights, and we think we have a route that safeguards those rights and delivers on the interests of the British people.

Steven Bonnar: The human rights campaign organisation Just Fair has said that a human rights Bill for Scotland would provide a blueprint for how the UK as a whole could enshrine social, economic and cultural rights in domestic law. I am certain that the Scottish Government would be happy to share their experience and expertise in this area, so will the Secretary of State commit to engaging with them, with a view to bringing forward equivalent UK legislation, following their example?

Alex Chalk: I completely agree on the common interest we share across the United Kingdom in wanting to advance social and economic rights—put another way,

ensuring good jobs and good public services. Of course that is right. What is questionable is whether it is sensible to make those rights justiciable, as we would find people pursuing all sorts of actions that clog up the courts, leaving them unable to deal with other matters. The hon. Gentleman is right on the principle we all want to achieve for people in our country. Is he right in wanting more litigation and more legislation? I think we have different views on that.

Hannah Bardell: The Scottish Government will bring forward a human rights Bill for Scotland, which is the right thing to do. Given the Justice Secretary's previous statements in support of human rights and the ECHR, will he confirm his support for the Scottish approach? Surely putting human rights at the heart of Government and the wider public sector is the right thing to do.

Alex Chalk: It is important not to conflate those two things. We are a member of the European convention on human rights—I have already mentioned article 13—but that does not, in and of itself, determine how one should give effect to those rights. We already have the Human Rights Act 1998. It is not at all clear to me that Scotland's proposed human rights Bill would advance human rights across the United Kingdom, but of course we will listen carefully to whatever the Scottish Government decide to introduce.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware that the ECHR and the HRA are integral to the Good Friday/Belfast agreement, setting out a framework for the policing and the very governance of Northern Ireland. Does he agree that any attempt to overhaul the ECHR and the HRA from this place could have serious consequences for the communities of Northern Ireland?

Alex Chalk: We have a human rights framework that we consider to be important. We are mindful of the points that the hon. Gentleman raises. We are satisfied that we can deliver on the priorities of the British people. It is a perfectly reasonable priority to want to ensure that we have warm hearts but an open front door, and we are satisfied that we can do so within our international legal obligations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It was revealed yesterday that, despite the best efforts of the Home Office, an Albanian-speaking migrant who has spent half his life in Serbia, and who has been jailed in this country for 18 months for cannabis farming after having entered the UK illegally, has been allowed to remain in Britain after he successfully claimed that he cannot be deported to Serbia because he no longer speaks Serbian. This is despite Albanian being a recognised minority language in Serbia, and despite him living in this country with his Serbian brother. Does this not demonstrate why we need urgent reform of the asylum system and human rights laws to allow the rapid and effective deportation of such dangerous criminals?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that those who come to our country and betray this nation's trust by acting illegally should not expect a warm welcome. That is why one of the things I am most proud of is signing a further prisoner transfer agreement with the Albanians to ensure that the British people, having suffered the initial crime, do not suffer the double punishment of having to pay £49,000 a year to house them in bed and breakfast accommodation in the United Kingdom. We will send them back, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I take the Justice Secretary back to his interesting observations on the Rwanda Bill? He has said that the whole debate around the ECHR

"has been tainted by a misunderstanding of what the actual rights are, as though they are a foreign import that do not reflect some of the cultural norms in our country…nothing could be further from the truth."—[*Official Report,* 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 376WH.]

When it comes to the Rwanda Bill, why is he failing to uphold the ECHR and the Human Rights Act, which embody so many of the legal principles that the people of these islands hold so dear?

Alex Chalk: Respectfully, I completely reject that characterisation. We are remaining within the four corners of our international legal obligations. Our legislation is novel and contentious, but it remains within the four corners of our international legal obligations and delivers on the proper, insistent requirements of the British people, which are that we protect our borders and ensure fairness for all—for not only the British people, but those who have played by the rules and done the right thing when they have come to the UK. They will always have a warm welcome in our country. Those who act illegally can expect short shrift.

Chris Stephens: Of course, the Government state on the front page of the Rwanda Bill that they cannot guarantee that it complies with the ECHR, as the Justice Secretary well knows. The Bill also makes direct intrusions into devolved areas, because human rights are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. So will he confirm that a legislative consent motion will be sought from the Scottish Parliament on the safety of Rwanda?

Alex Chalk: The first point the hon. Gentleman was referring to is about the section 19(1)(b) statement, and such statements are not unusual—the much-missed Tessa Jowell took one through in the Bill that became the Communications Act 2003. There is nothing unusual about this, which is precisely why this provision was put in the Human Rights Act 1998. As for further LCMs, we will of course proceed in the normal way, and I will give that matter further consideration.

Custodial and Community Sentences

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If he will make a comparative assessment of the effectiveness of short custodial sentences and sentences served in the community. [900804]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): A 2019 Ministry of Justice analysis of a matched cohort of 30,000 offenders shows that those serving sentences of immediate custody of less than 12 months reoffend more often than similar offenders

serving a sentence in the community—55% of those sentenced to less than 12 months' immediate custody were convicted in the following 12 months, which compares with 32% among those serving their sentence in the community.

Sir Desmond Swayne: For years, I was a visitor at the Scrubs and at HMP Wandsworth. Persuade me that community sentences can be really tough.

Gareth Bacon: I suggest that the outcome speaks for itself.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): Many, many more offenders will be serving their sentences in the community as a result of the measures in the upcoming Sentencing Bill. We all know that the Government have had to rush these measures out to deal with the prisons capacity crisis that they have created, but it is essential to recognise that these measures will rely heavily on a functioning probation service. With only one of the 33 probation delivery units inspected being rated as "good", and all others being rated as "requiring improvement" or "inadequate," what additional resources have been put in place to ensure that potentially dangerous criminals are being properly monitored?

Gareth Bacon: We have recently increased the budget for probation by £155 million and ramped up recruitment, with an additional 4,000 staff recruited over the last period of time.

Shabana Mahmood: That is a four-year-old announcement dressed up as something new and, given the extensive changes in the Sentencing Bill, I am afraid that it will just not cut it. Under the Conservatives, our vital probation service has been taken to the brink of collapse, and on current performance it simply cannot handle the additional pressure that these measures will bring and keep the public safe. So will the Minister commit to ensuring that the measures in the Bill will not come into effect until there is not one probation delivery unit still rated as "inadequate"?

Gareth Bacon: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We will keep this under review as the Bill passes through the House, and we will make further announcements on it in due course.

Probate Registry

11. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the effectiveness of the probate registry. [900805]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The past 12 months have seen the largest volume of probate applications received by the service since 2006, and that follows two years of above-average receipts. In response, we have increased staffing levels by more than 100 people and streamlined processes. We have seen some improvement, in that the level of grants issued has been running at about 8,000 more over the past two months than receipts. The average mean length of time for a grant of probate following receipt of all the documents required is now 12 weeks.

John Stevenson: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Back in November 2020, I led a Westminster Hall debate highlighting the failings of the probate service. The service was once excellent, but that is no longer the case—I could give many examples demonstrating its continuing failures. I appreciate the Minister's efforts to improve the service, but enough is enough. If the service has not materially improved in the next three months, will the Minister take the appropriate action and remove those who are clearly underperforming, so that the service can return to the level it once was at?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend and I have had some interesting discussions on this topic over the past few months. Following a recovery plan to address the concerns that he and others have raised, I can reassure him that a new management team is in place and we are now seeing a distinct improvement in recruitment, competency, productivity and call handling, and for the past few months disposals have outstripped receipts. I appreciate that the service is not yet where we would want it to be, but I can reassure him that we are starting to see some impact as a result of the measures we have introduced. I am more than happy to have conversations with him so that we can work together to improve the service further.

Crown Court Case Backlog

12. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the backlog of cases in the Crown court. [900806]

20. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the backlog of cases in the Crown court. [900814]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): We remain committed to reducing the outstanding caseload in the Crown court and have introduced a range of measures to achieve that aim. We funded over 100,000 sitting days in the last financial year and plan to deliver the same this year. Thanks to our investment in judicial recruitment, we expect to recruit more than 1,000 judges across all jurisdictions. We are investing over £220 million over the next two years, not just to improve maintenance but to ensure that the number of courts taken out of action for unplanned maintenance is reduced.

Eddie Hughes: I am reassured by that answer, but can I press the Minister on other delays in the justice system? I have spoken to police officers who are incredibly frustrated by the delay in prosecuting those who they have arrested for multiple offences of shoplifting. What reassurance can the Minister offer to police officers in those circumstances?

Mike Freer: It is a concern to hear that police officers remain concerned. Some of the latest performance statistics suggest that the gap between charge and first listing is falling—the latest data shows it is down two days, to 31 days. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss any local issues he may have identified that are causing delays. Magistrates, who tend to deal with shoplifting cases, are among the most efficient parts of our justice system and list clear cases incredibly rapidly, but I am more than happy to discuss this further.

Giles Watling: In the light of the Post Office scandal, does my hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that we not only clear the backlog as quickly as possible, because there have been deaths involved, but enable the Justice Secretary to strip the Post Office of its powers to independently prosecute?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend raises a good point. It is vital that the delivery of justice is swift. We appreciate that the wait for trial can be extremely difficult for victims, so we are doing all we can to ensure that cases are heard more swiftly. We are urgently working on the detail of how to clear the names of the postmasters as quickly as possible, and further detail will be announced in due course. There should be no disparity between the standard of justice in private and public prosecutions, and we will carefully consider the findings of Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The latest criminal court statistics show a Crown court backlog of 66,547 cases, once again breaking records. The next quarter has just ended, so does the Minister expect the figures to break records again?

Mike Freer: In addition to the measures that we have already taken—unlimited sitting days, recruitment of judges, investment in courts to ensure they are resilient, and extending Nightingale courts—I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are building 58 new court rooms to ensure we have capacity. I have not seen the figures on the backlog, but the latest figures for the number of disposals—*[Interruption.]* Our courts and our judges are working flat out, as are all members of the criminal justice system. I reassure him that the level of disposals being undertaken by our judiciary is up and the work of our judiciary is exemplary.

Reoffending

13. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce reoffending. [900807]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, the overall proven reoffending rate decreased from 31.6% to 24.4%. The Government continue to take action to drive down the reoffending rate even further by investing in initiatives to get more offenders into work, stable accommodation and substance misuse treatment on their release.

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; the key to rehabilitation and ending reoffending is employment and stable accommodation. He has spoken already about purposeful activity today, but may I ask him to look at making the subsistence payment available to all prisoners on release, because that would ensure access to the sort of settled accommodation that is required?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. I am happy to meet him, if that would be helpful, to discuss further his ideas.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which concerns my involvement with organisations related to addiction and recovery.

I acknowledge the positives of rolling out incentivised substance-free living wings, but they do not offer recovery as part of the process. Recovery wings offer a far greater chance of rehabilitation as they get people into recovery while they are in prison and before they are released. Currently, there are only seven planned across the prison estate, and I think that it will take Ministers to challenge civil servants and NHS fundholders to see those rolled out. Will the Minister examine the benefits of expanding recovery wings across the whole of the prison estate?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for both his question and the tone in which he asks it. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of this scheme. As he will be aware, those seven wings are a relatively new step forward. We are seeing how they operate. I think, if I recall, they were initiated by the former Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), when he was in post in the Ministry of Justice. I continue to look at this very carefully, but I am watching to see how those wings operate first, but I do so with an open mind.

Release of Violent Offenders: Victim Safety

14. **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the safety of victims after violent offenders are released. [900808]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk):

Protecting the public is our top priority. Offenders are subject to strict licence conditions on release, which can include tagging and exclusion zones, and they can of course be returned to prison if they breach those conditions. Victims of violent and sexual offenders serving prison sentences of 12 months or more are legally entitled to request protected licence conditions on release, including exclusion zones. The probation service works with partners including the police under the multi-agency public protection arrangements, to closely manage the risk presented by the most serious offenders.

Liz Saville Roberts: Rhianon Bragg's attacker was convicted of stalking, possessing a firearm and making threats to kill. Only two months ago, the Parole Board decided that his probation release plan could not ensure public protection, yet he will be automatically released next month. I have sent numerous letters to Ministers on this matter but have received not a single reply. Given that the victim lives in a remote area, which makes conventional surveillance methods virtually impossible, will the Secretary of State finally provide a credible response to the urgent safety risks faced by victims such as Rhianon?

Alex Chalk: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this case. I do know about the case of Rhianon Bragg—in the interests of complete transparency, I should say that I was at school with her. The Government introduced extended determinate sentences in order to

better protect the public from dangerous offenders by making their early release dependent on the Parole Board. Offenders on extended determinate sentences must be released. As the right hon. Lady knows, there are no legal powers to hold them for longer at the end of that custodial term. However, they face years of strict supervision by the probation service with strict licence conditions, such as exclusion zones and curfews, and they will be returned to prison if they breach them. I am aware of the letter that was sent on the 14th to my right hon. Friend the Minister of State. He will of course be happy to meet the right hon. Lady to discuss those points.

Probation Officer Case Load

15. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the sustainability of probation officer case loads. [900809]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): We have increased funding for the probation service by £155 million a year to recruit more staff, bring down caseloads and deliver better supervision of offenders in the community. We have also accelerated recruitment of trainee probation officers, particularly in areas with the most significant staffing challenges. As a result, more than 4,000 trainees started on training courses between April 2020 and March of last year.

Cat Smith: Probation workloads are too high, which is having a terrible impact on both staff morale and retention as well as public safety. What consideration has the Minister given to the very reasonable proposal agreed between His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and the probation unions to free up staff time by abolishing the post-sentence supervision, which was brought in under privatisation and is seen as simply a waste of time by those probation officers and their employer?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Although, on partial data for this year, caseloads are going down, she is right to highlight that they are still high. She makes a good point about the post-sentence supervision requirement, which I am happy to reflect on carefully. I understand that the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has met representatives to hear their views on the matter.

Safeguarding of Prisoners: Mental Health

16. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he is taking steps to help improve the safeguarding of prisoners with mental health needs. [900810]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): We are committed to improving mental health outcomes for prisoners, including recruiting additional staff, because having adequate staffing in prisons is important; investing £625,000 of funding in the Samaritans each year until March 2025, which includes the delivery of the Listener scheme; and working alongside NHS England, which is responsible for delivering mental health support services in the custodial estate to ensure that they are joined up and effective.

Kate Osamor: I have been working with a constituent whose son sadly took his own life in Pentonville last year. Although it is well established that there is a high rate of mental health problems among prisoners, the provision of support is insufficient and even reliable data on the scale of the issue is lacking. Will the Government commit to a full review of the support and safeguarding for prisoners with mental health problems?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I hope that through her I can pass on my sympathies and condolences to her constituent. I am not aware of the details of that case, but if she wants to write to me, I would be happy to look at that specific case. Sadly, there are too many deaths in custody and every one is a tragedy, so I am always happy to look at ways in which we can better improve the support available to those with mental health conditions or other health conditions that might make them more vulnerable within a custodial environment.

Topical Questions

T1. [900819] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I thank the many His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service staff who continue to work hard over the Christmas period to deliver justice and keep us safe. Since the last Justice questions, the Victims and Prisoners Bill has passed its Third Reading in this House. It will enshrine the overarching principles of the victims code in law. It will establish a permanent independent public advocate for victims of major incidents, and it will enable a second check on Parole Board decisions in the interests of public safety. The Sentencing Bill, which is cracking down on the worst offenders by extending whole-life orders for any murder involving sexual or sadistic conduct, also passed its Second Reading, as did the Criminal Justice Bill, which will ensure, among other things, that criminals face up to the consequences of their appalling actions by requiring them to attend their sentencing hearings.

Finally, in December, I took part in a park run at HMP Onley alongside prison staff and serving prisoners. Congratulations to all who took part, except perhaps my private secretary, who had the audacity to beat me.

Mike Kane: The Minister mentions sexual offences, but it frustrates me beyond belief that my constituents have to wait on average 839 days for their cases to be heard. Is the distress caused taken into account, or is the system too broken?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of victims of serious sexual offences. We take that incredibly seriously, and that is why we have introduced measures such as section 28, which enables evidence to be taken and recorded in advance. We have increased the fees for barristers to make that more straightforward. We have also increased the number of independent sexual violence advisers, who accompany, as it were, those victims on that journey. That is very important to prevent dropout rates. This is an important point: the sentencing levels are much higher—up by 30% compared with 2010.

T2. [900820] **Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in that my wife is an education lawyer. Parents appealing decisions in relation to education, health and care plans and health needs are forced to wait between nine months and 13 months from appeal registration to hearing. That is far too long in terms of a child's development. Does my hon. Friend agree with that? Does he also share my concern that some schools are delaying providing education, health and care plans in the knowledge that it will take a year or more to have an appeal?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): My right hon. Friend is right. Despite special educational needs and disabilities appeals and disposals being up by 24% and 29% respectively, I do share his concerns, and systematic reform is required. That is why through the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, the Department for Education and ourselves will be working hard to ensure that it is improved. I am more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend to go through the details.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Children's Commissioner's report on family contact in the youth estate states that at the weekend, in two young offenders institutes, boys spent only up to one hour outside their cell each day. We can clearly see why that has led to an increase in violence. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Alex Chalk: It is important to note that, since 2010 when we came into power, the number of under-18s in custody has dropped dramatically. The cohort now in young offenders institutes is, to put it politely, highly complex. We take that extremely seriously and want to ensure there are sufficient staff. We do not give up on people, but it is important to recognise that that cohort will have been convicted of extremely serious offences, and we want to ensure there are sufficient resources to try to get the best out of them.

T3. [900821] **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I recently met the senior coroner for my area about concerns over health services in north Wales and to discuss preventable deaths. As part of that work, he pointed me towards the Preventable Deaths Tracker, set up by Dr Georgia Richards in Oxford. Will the Secretary of State commit to meeting Dr Richards and me to discuss the potential benefits of the tracker?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes a great point. My officials have already met Dr Richards to discuss her work on the tracker and, together with the Chief Coroner's office, we are exploring with her team how best to share the tracker on the various websites. However, I am more than happy to meet with my hon. Friend and Dr Richards to discuss how we can work together.

T4. [900822] **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Numerous studies have found that the numbers of minoritised and migrant women being held on remand are disproportionately high. For example, 10% of female black and Asian defendants were remanded in custody by magistrates courts, compared with 7% of white women. What steps are the Government taking to address those clear inequalities in the use of remand?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I am grateful to the hon. Lady; she will be aware of the work being done across the criminal justice system through both the race disparity review and the Lammy review in that context. Decisions on remand are taken by the judiciary, so it would be wrong for me to comment on judicial decisions, but I am happy to meet her to discuss this further if that would be helpful, and so is the Minister for disparity in the justice system, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer).

T5. [900823] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Director of Public Prosecutions could take over a private prosecution and discontinue it?

Mike Freer: The Crown Prosecution Service can take over any criminal prosecution. It may then carry out the prosecution or it may end or discontinue the prosecution if it does not believe it should have been brought in the first place.

T6. [900824] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): I am pleased to say that the latest Scottish crime and justice survey has shown that the volume of crime in Scotland, including incidents not reported to the police, has fallen by 53%. In addition, we have one of the lowest levels of recorded crime in Scotland since 1974—50 years. I add my thanks to all those who work in Police Scotland Tayside for their duty and service on behalf of my constituents in Dundee. Will the Justice Secretary join me in congratulating Police Scotland and all the community safety partners who have contributed to that success?

Alex Chalk: We of course welcome any reduction in crime, and I am happy to congratulate Police Scotland on its work. It is encouraging that across the United Kingdom, and certainly across England and Wales, crime and reoffending are down. However, I urge the hon. Gentleman to ensure that Scotland does not anything that would be regrettable, such as rolling back on jury trials, which are a critical part of maintaining public confidence in the criminal justice system.

T8. [900827] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Having worked in A&E at Christmas over the years, I have seen the outcome of alcohol-related violence and the injuries it causes. I know the Department has been looking at fitting alcohol monitoring tags for offenders during the festive season; what assessment have the Government made of their effectiveness in reducing alcohol-fuelled crime?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. Alcohol tags are hugely valuable and are being used increasingly to tackle alcohol-related offending, including violent crime, successfully. Around 2,800 individuals were wearing an alcohol tag at the end of November 2023, 900 more than in the same period the year before, and alcohol bans imposed in community sentences were complied with for 97.3% of the days monitored since their introduction in October 2020. They are a vital crime-fighting tool.

T9. [900828] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): In May 2022, my constituent Tallulah Cox was diagnosed with brain stem cancer. She was left catatonic from the radiation treatment, a side effect that her parents, Zoe and Richard, were never informed about. They then had to fight constantly for the support and care that she needed from her local council and NHS. That support never came. Little Tallulah passed away on 2 November last year—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions. I have to get everybody else in. If the hon. Lady is going to ask a topical question, it must be short and quick to allow others to ask theirs. Has the Minister been briefed on what is being asked?

Alex Chalk: No.

Mr Speaker: Okay. Very quickly, then—please just ask the question.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Little Tallulah passed away aged two on 2 November last year after those services failed her. How can her parents get some justice?

Alex Chalk: This sounds like an absolutely appalling case and my heart goes out to Tallulah and her family. I am unaware of the details of the case, but if the hon. Lady writes to me, she will get a response.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Dozens of businesses have signed up to Torbay Council's safety of women at night charter, which is being championed by Councillor Hayley Tranter. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that those who pose a threat to women, for example by spiking drinks, get the type of deterrent sentence that such disgraceful behaviour deserves?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): I congratulate Torbay Council and Councillor Tranter on their excellent work to keep women safe in Torbay. Spiking is a disgusting crime that carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison depending on the harm that results. We are changing the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 to define the offence of spiking specifically and comprehensively in law, with a view to encouraging more people to come forward. However, the biggest barrier to conviction remains the fact that toxicology tests are often conducted after the substance has left a woman's body. That is why we are investing in research for rapid drinks testing kits so that spiking will be easier to prove and we get more of the offenders behind bars.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent was the victim of a violent attack, but because the perpetrator got a sentence of less than 12 months, she was not told when he was released from prison. The police say that it is impossible for them to go through the records of everybody who is released in order to advise her, so there is a gap in victim support. Will the Secretary of State commit to resolving that?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady raises an important point. I take that extremely seriously. Certainly, under the victims code, the rights of victims to be kept informed are far tighter than ever they used to be. If we need to go further, that seems to be a sensible conversation and I would be happy to have it.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): For too many years, this House has been witness to wrongful convictions in the Post Office-Fujitsu scandal. There remain 800 Post Office convictions based on bad data. Until those convictions are overturned, the victims cannot claim compensation. We could do something good together if the Justice Secretary brought a simple Bill to quash all 800 convictions immediately.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who, with his customary precision, puts his finger on that appalling injustice. The suggestion that he makes is receiving active consideration. I expect to be able to make further announcements shortly.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I add my support to the comments made by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson). Cuckooing is a terrible activity, and making it a specific crime not only makes sense but would, I suspect, lead to the prosecution of other crimes such as drug dealing.

Alex Chalk: As I indicated, I will have a conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) about that. There is very likely to be a substantive underlying offence, be it handling stolen goods, possession with intent to supply or firearms matters. This has been considered by way of discussions with criminal justice partners, but if there are further matters to consider with my hon. Friend, and indeed with the hon. Gentleman, I would be happy to have those conversations.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): January is often considered family breakdown month. Anybody taking the terrifically difficult decision to separate this year will face not only a divorce costing over £14,000 on average, but months, or potentially more than a year, of resolving child and financial disputes. We need reform of focus in a range of areas. Will the Lord Chancellor kindly agree to meet me and the formidable Baroness Deech and Baroness Shackleton to look at our campaigns?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know that she campaigns tirelessly on this issue. I am more than happy to arrange a meeting with my noble Friend Lord Bellamy, who leads on this issue, to update her and the noble Baroness Deech—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Richard Burgon.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): To reduce reoffending we need a strong, locally focused and stand-alone probation service—similar to how things were before privatisation—so why are the Government moving in the opposite direction with their One HMPPS programme, which has triggered a formal dispute with the probation unions because it subsumes probation still further into prisons?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question; it is nice to answer questions from him again, as I did when he was shadow Secretary of State.

The One HMPPS programme is about different parts of the system working well together to create a system that delivers the outcomes that society wants to see. I take the opportunity, prompted by the hon. Gentleman, to pay tribute to all the staff in the probation service. I had the pleasure of visiting some of them in Southwark recently, and I pay tribute to all the work they are doing.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): In a perfect world, the victims of the Horizon IT scandal would have their cases individually assessed by the Criminal Cases Review Commission and the Court of Appeal, but we are not in a perfect world. The scale of the miscarriage of justice is enormous, and there are hundreds of victims who understandably do not want to come forward because they have lost faith in the process. Will my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor now consider the exceptional and unique step of legislating to quash the convictions?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend, who speaks with such authority. The circumstances are truly exceptional. When I was a Back Bencher, I went on the record as saying that Horizon is the most serious miscarriage of justice since the Guildford Four or the Birmingham Six. But the clue is that there were four in the Guildford case and six in the Birmingham case; we are talking about hundreds of people. The situation is truly exceptional and unprecedented, and it will need an appropriate resolution.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Under the Illegal Migration Act 2023, victims of human trafficking who arrived in the UK via irregular routes would not have legal recourse to receive support under modern slavery provisions. Are Ministers comfortable with that? They do not look like monsters, so I assume not. If they are not, what will they do about it?

Mike Freer: I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman and check exactly what the provisions are for legal aid under the Illegal Migration Act. I am more than happy to provide him with the details and meet him if necessary.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Precisely because legislating to overturn convictions would be so unprecedented, will my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor make sure that before such a step is taken, he is satisfied from conversations with the senior judiciary that the means of triaging and consolidating appeals that currently exist may not be capable of delivering justice within an acceptable timeframe?

Alex Chalk: That is precisely the point, and my hon. Friend has put his finger on it. Of course, we would not want to stray into the normal lane of the judiciary; we have huge respect for our independent judiciary, who do an exceptionally good job of ensuring that there is fairness on the facts before them. As I have said, the case is wholly unprecedented, and we will want to have exhausted all alternatives before taking radical action.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Spending on housing legal aid has fallen by more than half in the past decade, from £44 million to £20 million. Is this a proper response to growing insecurity, overcrowding and poor conditions in the housing market, or might it be a contributing factor?

Mike Freer: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that just last year we invested an extra £10 million in housing legal aid, so I think we are addressing the issue.

Points of Order

12.32 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The *Financial Times* is reporting that Teesworks Ltd—the so-called public-private partnership to redevelop the former steelworks site on Teesside—has reported an exceptional year, tripling its profits to £54 million. Sadly, the public will see very little of that hard cash, as under the Tees Tory Mayor, 90% of shares in the company were handed over to two local businessmen. That means they get £48.6 million, and the public get just £5.4 million. Personally, I think that is scandalous.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and I raised questions about the way that business is done at Teesworks, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities ordered an inquiry, which was expected to have reported by now. Will you please advise me, Mr Speaker, on whether you have heard of any plans by the Secretary of State to come to the House to make a statement about why that report has been delayed and when we can expect it?

Mr Speaker: I have had no indication from the Government that the Secretary of State intends to make a statement on this matter, but I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and I am sure he will pursue it in other ways. No doubt, if nothing is forthcoming, it might need an urgent question—that is a possible suggestion.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For the convenience of the House, it may assist right hon. and hon. Members if I give some advance notice of Thursday's business statement.

The business for the week commencing 15 January will include:

Monday 15 January—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill.

Tuesday 16 January—Committee of the whole House on the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill (day 1).

Wednesday 17 January—Committee of the whole House on the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill (day 2).

I will announce the business statement on Thursday in the usual way.

Mr Speaker: While that was not a point of order for the Chair, I am sure the House will have heard the announcement by the Leader of the House with great interest. I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is this not just another example of this Government making it up as they go along, with no real plan, scrabbling around and trying to make something of this failed, unworkable plan? We have had at least three business statements or questions since the Bill first began to be timetabled. Would you not expect, Mr Speaker, such an announcement to be made in a business statement in the usual way?

Penny Mordaunt: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It may be helpful if I explain to the House that if I had waited to announce this for the first time on Thursday, there would have been very limited time for people to table amendments ahead of the normal tabling deadline. We are making this announcement to facilitate right hon. and hon. Members in tabling amendments, if they wish to do so. We do not wish to bring forward legislation that will not be successful. This is a matter of great importance to the general public, and we wish it to be successful. I hope the House will understand why we have given it a heads-up of the business for next week.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Normally business statements allow Back Benchers as well as Front Benchers to ask questions of the Leader of the House. This is a difficult precedent because it does not give the Back Benchers a voice. Saying that it is just a matter of convenience for amendments is not good enough when the Government are in charge of the business and could have done this in a more organised way to give everybody a say. I think this is a deplorable development.

Mr Speaker: In general, I would expect the House business to be announced via a statement or in response to the business question. It would of course be in order to ask questions about the timetabling of this business during Thursday's business statement, but you have made the point and at least you have got it on the record. Let us move on.

Schools (Mental Health Professionals)

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

12.37 pm

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

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to require every school to have access to a qualified mental health professional; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker,

"He used to be such a lovely happy little boy and now he's so sad. I'm terrified for his future. All I've ever wanted was to help my son and I've failed and fallen at every hurdle."

Those are the anguished words of a constituent of mine who is mother to a nine-year-old. Week in and week out, I speak to parents whose children are struggling with their mental health and struggling to access appropriate support. When I speak to headteachers, they tell me that some of the most pressing challenges facing our education system come from outside the classroom, and mental health is among the biggest. Teachers often feel as though they are the fourth emergency service, filling the gap left by under-resourced services across the country.

Let us be clear: mental health services for young people before the pandemic were inadequate. Since the pandemic, despite the best efforts of everyone working in the sector, services are on their knees. The current generation of children have had to contend not only with rising pressures and judgments brought by social media, but with the huge consequences of a global pandemic. It is unsurprising that such challenges have taken their toll on children's and young people's mental health.

It is estimated that one in five children between the ages of seven and 16 has a probable mental health disorder. If six children in every classroom were diagnosed with a physical condition such as diabetes, there would rightly be a public outcry, and there would be no discussion about urgently putting both proper treatment and preventive measures in place. We would just do it. Mental health is no different and should not be treated any differently.

We must do everything in our power to ensure that every child arrives at school happy, healthy and ready to learn and thrive. My Bill provides one of the tools to help to achieve that. It would place a dedicated qualified mental health practitioner in every school—primary and secondary—giving every child in school access to care and support from the moment they start to need it.

Early intervention is crucial. Research tells us that half of all lifetime mental health disorders start before the age of 14. Stepping in as soon as warning signs start to show can often help to prevent conditions from becoming more severe. When Nicole, now aged 19, was struggling with her mental health, she had to wait a very long time before she could access any support. Describing that time, she said:

"Waiting for suitable mental health support meant that my whole life felt like it was paused and erased…I was left without suitable support and my mental health left to deteriorate."

This story is not unique, nor is it unusual. I know that colleagues across the Chamber are aware of many similar stories in their own constituencies.

The state of our children and young people's mental health is a significant and urgent challenge facing our country and, frankly, this Government are not taking it seriously enough. In December 2021, the Health and Social Care Committee warned that the combination of unmet need before the pandemic and additional needs created by the pandemic were significant. It said that the Government's plans

"are simply not sufficient for the task at hand."

In the two years since, there is no indication that their approach has improved. Last month, when I asked the mental health Minister, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), in a written question what proportion of mental health funding had been allocated to children and young people, I received an answer that such funds are not "separately identifiable." How can a Government begin to take a problem seriously when they do not even know how much money they are spending on it?

Sadly, in the eyes of the Treasury children and young people are too often seen as a financial burden and a drain on Government resources, and that is just wrong. Spending on education and services to support our children is an investment in their future and our country's future, and it is time that the Government recognised that.

The introduction of mental health support teams has been an encouraging step forward, but they are under-resourced and overstretched. Last year, I visited Carshalton Boys Sports College. I met MHST staff as well as some of the pupils they were supporting. The boys talked about how the team had helped them to learn coping techniques for anxiety and how to identify the techniques that work for them. The staff mentioned how important it was that they could intervene early before things escalate and children need other services, such as child and adolescent mental health services, but what struck me was that the team was stretched thinly across many local primary and secondary schools, which meant that their valuable skills and service were available only for half a day to one day per week in each school.

Furthermore, research by the Liberal Democrats revealed that by the end of this year half of secondary schools and three quarters of all primary schools in England will still have no access at all to mental health support teams. Instead, the role of supporting children's mental ill health falls on teachers, who are already managing a heavy workload at the same time as contending with extremely overstretched budgets. With many schools struggling to afford the basics, sadly some of those that have found their own money for mental health support are being forced to cut back, which is why schools must not have to fund the provision themselves.

My Bill makes it clear that funding needs to be made available for the proposed statutory duty for all state schools. Using the "polluter pays" principle, Liberal Democrats have proposed funding mental health practitioners through tripling the digital services tax on our big social media companies, given the harm that they have contributed to our children's mental health.

A big challenge currently facing schools is persistent absence, with the most recent Government data revealing that a fifth of children missed on average a day of school every fortnight last term. One of the most significant causal factors of absence is mental ill health. According to new data from YoungMinds, more than one in five children waiting for mental health support has missed more than six months of school.

[Munira Wilson]

Absence has a huge impact on a child's education and ultimately their prospects. Three quarters of these children said that they had stopped exercising, doing hobbies and even seeing friends. These children should be carefree, enjoying themselves and spending time with loved ones; instead, their lives are being put on hold and their life chances being diminished because they cannot access the support they have so bravely asked for.

Just last week I heard of a pupil at a school in my constituency who is stuck in exactly that limbo. Despite desperately needing mental health support, they are stuck on a long CAMHS waiting list. In the meantime, not only has the child stopped attending school, but their mother said that they have not left the house in more than four months. A teacher at the school told me that they strongly believe that had there been the possibility of seeing a mental health professional at school on a regular basis, that pupil would still be attending school. Instead, their mental health is rapidly deteriorating, leaving those around them worried sick. Sadly, this is not uncommon—alarmingly, the headteacher of this pupil told me that it was just one example of many.

There is a tidal wave of mental ill health among our children and young people, which is jeopardising their wellbeing, education, prospects, and long-term health. A report commissioned by the Local Government Association, and undertaken by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, asserted that there is

"a missed opportunity to significantly ease pressure on the system by increasing the availability of preventative and early intervention support."

That is exactly what putting a mental health practitioner in every school would do. It would make mental health support accessible to every pupil, regardless of their age, where they live or their background. It would save our NHS money in the long term by tackling issues before they become more severe, and it would ensure that children's mental health is supported early on, giving them the tools they need to be resilient and thrive into adulthood.

The Bill is an investment in our future and one that we must make, not just because it is sensible but because we owe it to this generation of children and young people—a generation that so often feels let down and neglected. I would like to end by thanking the young people, parents and teachers who have shared their stories with me, as well as the organisations that have supported me with the Bill, including YoungMinds, the Centre for Mental Health, Barnardo's, Place2Be, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and the Sutton Trust. They are all dedicated to ensuring that every child has the right support in their time of need. The Bill would be a significant step towards achieving that.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Munira Wilson, Ed Davey, Daisy Cooper, Helen Morgan, Layla Moran, Sarah Dyke, Richard Foord, Sarah Green, Sarah Olney, Tim Farron and Wera Hobhouse present the Bill.

Munira Wilson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 75).

Opposition Day

2nd Allotted Day

NHS Dentistry

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

I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.48 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that NHS dentistry is in crisis, with eight in 10 dentists in England not taking on new NHS patients and vast parts of the country considered so-called dental deserts, where no dentists are available; regrets that this has led to people resorting to DIY dentistry or attending A&E to access urgent care; is concerned that tooth decay is the most common reason children aged six to 10 are admitted to hospital; and therefore calls on the Government to provide an extra 700,000 urgent appointments a year, introduce an incentive scheme to recruit new dentists to the areas most in need and a targeted supervised toothbrushing scheme for three to five year-olds to promote good oral health and reform the dental contract to rebuild the service in the long-run.

Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

After 14 years of Conservative neglect and mismanagement,

"NHS dentistry in England is at its most perilous point in its 75-year history."

That is the conclusion of the Nuffield Trust think-thank, and who can blame it? Eight in 10 NHS dentists no longer take new patients. According to the NHS, no dentist is taking on new adult patients in entire constituencies such as Broxtowe, Bolsover, Stoke-on-Trent South and Stroud. Five million patients tried but failed to get an appointment in the past two years. Millions more needed dental care but did not bother trying to book an appointment because they knew it would be impossible. Tooth decay is now the No. 1 reason why children aged six to 10 end up in hospital. We face the moral outrage of one in 10 Brits saying that they have been forced to attempt dentistry themselves because the NHS was not there for them when they needed it. This is Dickensian—DIY dentistry in 21st-century Britain. Is there any greater example of the decline that this country has been subjected to under the Conservatives?

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): May I add Rotherham to the list that my hon. Friend is quoting? To give an example, one of my constituents has been trying for more than a year to register with an NHS dentist. He has now had to go private for the consultation, which said:

"Your teeth are in a very poor condition with most of your remaining teeth decayed and unsaveable. All your teeth except 2 …need extracting."

He has been living for more than a year on painkillers and soup. I have raised this with the Minister and got no satisfaction. This is what Tory Britain is doing to dentistry.

Wes Streeting: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We have heard so many heartbreaking stories like the one she mentions from her constituency. A service that once was there for all of us when we needed it is almost gone for good.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wes Streeting: I will, so that the hon. Gentleman can explain why that is the case.

Anthony Mangnall: Is there any greater landmine of a Labour legacy than the 2006 contract that it designed, which is pulling us down? Labour Members need look no further than their own designs on the NHS. We are sorting out their mess.

Wes Streeting: The sound you can hear, Mr Speaker, is the scraping of the barrel. How has the hon. Gentleman got the brass neck to stand up, after 14 years of his party in government, and say that a contract agreed in 2006 is the problem? If only the Conservatives had been in government for 14 years to sort it out.

Here is the other rub: we do not pretend that everything was perfect under the last Labour Government. In fact, reform of the NHS dentistry contract was in Labour's 2010 manifesto, because we recognised that it needed to change. Had we been elected in 2010, we would have delivered. It was also in the Conservatives' 2010 manifesto and 2015 manifesto. It was probably in the 2017 and 2019 manifestos, too, and they have not delivered. We have 14 years of Conservative failure. How dare the hon. Gentleman have the brass neck to stand up and blame someone else.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is of great interest, is it not, that there is not one Member from the governing party in Scotland present for this debate? I can tell the House that dental services in my constituency in remote Scotland have gone backwards in a big way, and I am shocked that none of them are here to hear this.

Wes Streeting: It is deeply disappointing. Let me assure the hon. Gentleman that as with the last Labour Government—13 years that created a rising tide that lifted all ships across the country, when we had an NHS with the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history—the next Labour Government will deliver a rising tide to benefit people across the country.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The British Dental Association highlights that:

"Hormonal changes during pregnancy can make gums more vulnerable to plaque",

and:

"Changes to dietary habits, and morning sickness"

can also impact on oral health. After being told of the importance of seeing a dentist after suffering multiple miscarriages, a constituent tells me that she has been struggling for three years to see a dentist within a 50-mile radius of her home. Dentists say that they are going private and are helping only with emergencies. Surely that is evidence of a colossal failure of Tory Government dental policy, and even the most vulnerable are suffering.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, he has the ability, as the Labour MP for Stockton North, to speak for his residents. If only other people across the country had MPs standing up for them. Chris Webb, Labour's candidate in Blackpool South, reported to me that pregnant mothers have been telling him they cannot get an NHS dentist, despite being entitled to free NHS check-ups and treatment. Alice Macdonald, Labour's candidate in Norwich North, reported similar conversations to me. Expectant mothers have told her that they have been travelling hundreds of miles to see a dentist when we know that pregnant women probably need that support more than many others. What an indictment of 14 years of Conservative Government.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Did my hon. Friend see the report in today's *Times* that showed that NHS dentists are performing only 75% of the procedures they are contracted to do? In Devon and Somerset, where the situation is the worst in the country, it is only 26.5% and 30%. Not only have this Government delivered an NHS desert in Devon and Somerset, but they are wasting masses of public money. What is my hon. Friend going to do about it when he is Health Secretary?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend. Things are so desperate. He mentioned the south-west in particular, and Devon and Cornwall have been particularly poorly served. Jayne Kirkham, Labour's candidate in Truro and Falmouth for this year's general election, reported to me that a local dentist handed their contract back before Christmas, meaning that 3,000 people lost their NHS dentist overnight. There are currently no dentists in Truro and Falmouth taking on adult NHS patients. Contract reform is urgent, so where is it? They have had 14 years, so where is the recovery plan that the Health Secretary mentions in her amendment?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Wes Streeting: I must make some progress.

Turning to other parts of the country, Keir Cozens, Labour's candidate in Great Yarmouth, has been running a campaign on the state of dentistry in Great Yarmouth. He has heard heartbreaking stories of broken teeth left for months with people in pain, of children unable to be seen, of at least one person a day going to accident and emergency with dental issues, and of people performing DIY dentistry at home after buying kits from Amazon. No one should be doing that, but people are desperate. DIY dentistry does not work, and before you know it, people are back in A&E waiting for expensive emergency dental treatment. I have heard similar stories from Kevin Bonavia, Labour's candidate in Stevenage. He tells me that people turning to DIY is shockingly common.

No one voted for this. None of the five Conservative Prime Ministers, the seven Conservative Chancellors or the eight Conservative Health Secretaries told the public that this was what the future held, but this is what they have done to dentistry. It is the way all our public services are going, and it is why the Conservative party cannot be allowed five more years to finish the job.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for bringing this debate forward. The stats from the British Dental Association cannot be ignored. In its survey, 41% of practice owners and 38% of associate dentists said that they would like to leave NHS dentistry as soon as possible. This debate will resonate with many people out there. Does he agree with the chair of the Northern Ireland Dental Practice

[Jim Shannon]

Committee that now is the time for the funding allocation to pay for a better contract and for training more dedicated dentists who will commit to the NHS, rather than private practice?

Wes Streeting: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the urgency of the situation. There is a different path available to us. We can revive our public services and give our country back what we used to take for granted. Labour's plan would take immediate steps to rescue NHS dentistry, with 700,000 more urgent appointments and the recruitment of new dentists in the areas most in need. We would also take the necessary steps to rebuild NHS dentistry over the long term, including reforming the dental contract and introducing supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds in primary schools, so that poor oral health is prevented and demands on the service reduced.

In fact, some of my Labour colleagues are not even waiting for the general election to start making a difference. Labour's candidate in Stroud, Simon Opher—himself a GP—has spearheaded a campaign working with local dentists and the integrated care board. From opposition, he has more than trebled the number of emergency appointments available each day across Gloucestershire, pioneered a new dental stabilisation scheme for people not known to a local practice, opening up more than 130 appointments a week, and introduced supervised toothbrushing in 14 local primary schools. If that is the difference Simon is making in opposition, imagine what he will be able to do as a Labour MP working with a Labour Government. That Government cannot come soon enough.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree with me and my constituent in Crouch End who has not had a check-up since 2019 that the link between poor oral health and oral cancer is serious? That could be contributing to the terrible problem we have with cancer waiting times.

Wes Streeting: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Prevention is better than cure. It is a truism, and it is also the foundation pillar of what would be Labour's 10-year plan for reform and modernisation of our national health service. A part of that plan is before the House today, and Government Members will have to explain to their constituents, only months, if not weeks away from a general election, why they are refusing to support it.

The Government's amendment to the motion promises that the dental recovery plan is coming soon, but it was due last summer; now, they cannot put a date on when the plan will arrive, when it will be implemented or even say what it is. Conservative Ministers have taken a look at the state of NHS dentistry, at the millions of people across the country who cannot get an appointment to see a dentist and at children in their own constituencies whose teeth are rotting, and their conclusion is: what is the rush? Let me tell them why they should get their skates on.

A 17-year-old boy in Plymouth had to undergo emergency surgery on an abscess in his mouth last year. He spent two months trying to book an NHS dentist—he said that he was on hold for about three hours per day. According to figures on the NHS website, no dentists are taking on new NHS patients in the Plymouth, Moor View constituency. It was left too late, and when he finally got the healthcare he needed, he required emergency surgery, which has left him scarred for life.

In Worthing West, Labour's candidate Dr Beccy Cooper told me of an 82-year-old great-grandfather on pension credit who told her that he will not be going back to an NHS dentist before he dies. He tried to get an NHS dentist in Worthing, but no one will take him on the NHS to receive low-cost treatment. Dr Beccy Cooper also tells me that residents who cannot get a dentist are being told to look for one in Hampshire, more than 60 miles away from where they live.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): On that important point, a couple who moved into new housing in my constituency tried to get an NHS dentist for over a year without any success whatsoever. They have got two options: they either go private or use their previous dentist, who is 20 miles away. That is wholly unacceptable. Will my hon. Friend simply explain how Labour's plan will eradicate this unacceptable issue?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will have: 700,000 appointments, making a difference straightaway; supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds to reduce future demand on NHS services; and reform of the NHS dentistry contract so that we can rebuild an NHS dentistry service worthy of the name. That change cannot come soon enough.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My constituent Amy has been in contact with me about the difficulties that she and her five children have had getting NHS dentist appointments. She explained that her husband was in the military and therefore they had to move home frequently, and each time they moved they found it harder to get an NHS dentist. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a shameful way to treat people who have served and given so much to our country?

Wes Streeting: I agree. I am afraid that when it comes to serving personnel and veterans, there is a gulf between what the Government say and promise and what they do; that is not the only example.

One thing not in the Government's amendment to Labour's motion is a pledge to protect the NHS dentistry budget. That is odd, because the Prime Minister promised to do exactly that 18 months ago. The truth is that the Prime Minister broke that pledge in November when he gave the go-ahead for dentistry underspends to be raided, effectively waving the white flag on the future of the service. Can you believe it? Despite everything we have heard, there are dentistry underspends, and the Prime Minister thinks that other things are greater priorities than this crisis. The consequences of that decision are now being felt. The budget in some areas of the country is running out and dentists are having to stop NHS work for the remainder of the year. It is so deeply frustrating.

NHS dentists want to do more NHS work; it is the Government who are standing in their way. The Nuffield Trust's stark report into the crisis suggested that NHS

dentistry may have to be scaled back and made available only to the least well-off. Such an approach would be the end of NHS dentistry as a universal public service, yet that is exactly the approach that the Government are piloting in Cornwall. Children, the over-80s and those with specific health needs are given treatment; everyone else has to go private or go without. They will not admit it, but this is the future under the Tories: further neglect, decline and patients made to go without.

Worse still, NHS dentistry is the ghost of Christmas yet to come under the Tories. That is not partisan overreaction on our part; that is according to the lead author of the Nuffield Trust's report. He wrote:

"For the wider health system, the lessons are troubling: without political honesty and a clear strategy, the same long-term slide from aspiration to reality could happen in other areas of primary care too."

What has happened to NHS dentistry under the Tories is coming to the rest of the NHS if they are given another five years. That is not the continuity that the country is looking for—it is looking for change with Labour.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): My Bath constituency is also described as an NHS dental desert. The only option for people is to go private. The hon. Member has already said that it is Dickensian. Does he agree that it is not just a health problem but an equalities issue that the Government fail to recognise?

Wes Streeting: I totally agree. In fact, Claire Hazelgrove, Labour's candidate in Filton and Bradley Stoke—next-door to the forthcoming by-election—was telling me about problems in her constituency and that exact challenge of people being left without or having to go private. One patient told her that her dental practice was now only seeing private patients. That same patient cares for her 84-year-old dad with dementia, who needed a tooth removal to allow him to eat. His appointment was also cancelled. That is what is happening before our eyes.

What of those who cannot afford it? Anna Dixon, Labour's candidate in Shipley, told me of a woman in her town who had been turned away as an NHS patient and could not afford to go private. She was struggling with pain, it was affecting her eating, and she was at her wits' end. With the Tories, if you have not got the money, you have not got the care.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As a neighbouring MP, I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Claire Hazelgrove, our candidate in Filton and Bradley Stoke, who is doing tremendous work on this. I have done a survey of my constituency and have found that about 98% of Bristol NHS practices are not taking on new patients. One issue I have also come across is that, even when people do have access to an NHS dentist, they cannot afford even those lower fees, and as a result they are being removed from the active patient list and losing access to that. We can understand how, during the cost of living crisis, people might delay a check-up for a few months because there are so many other pressing demands on their budgets.

Wes Streeting: I totally agree, and I do not think we should be complacent about this as a country. The NHS is already becoming a two-tier healthcare system, where those who can afford to go private are paying and the rest are left with an increasingly poor service for poor people. Government Members protest now, but they admit their goals once they leave the Department for Health and Social Care. The Health Secretary's predecessors may not have said it when they were in her place at the Dispatch Box, but, as soon as they were out the door of the Department, the right hon. Members for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) and for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid) said what they really believe: patients should be charged for GP appointments. Well, why stop there with this Conservative philosophy? Why not go further? That is the future for the health service if the Conservative party is given another five years. That is the risk facing patients across the country, and that is the choice facing voters at the next general election: further neglect, mismanagement and decline under the Conservatives or change with Labour and a decade of national renewal.

On NHS dentistry, the need for change could not be clearer. By the Conservative party's own admission, it does not have a plan—just the vague promise of one coming in the future. All it does have is a record of 14 years of failure. If we stick to the current path, full universal access to NHS dentistry may be gone for good. The Conservatives may be happy to wave goodbye to this vital public service, but that is not the Labour way. With Labour, there is a clear plan, with immediate steps to tackle the crisis and long-term reform to rebuild dentistry. There will be more appointments, more dentists, more support for children and long-term reform to put the service on a sustainable footing, paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax status. That is because Labour believes that people who live and work in Britain should pay their taxes here, too. It does not matter whether they live on Downing Street or any other street: if they make their money here in Britain, they should pay their taxes here, too.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Abby Lane, in my constituency, has contacted over 30 dental practices. Not one is accepting her and her one-year-old child, who desperately needs dental treatment. Is it not the case that we now need to reform the system so that local commissioners can ensure that dental commissioning is happening in local areas where there is need, and not just have this patchwork system where dentists are fleeing because it is not paying well enough?

Wes Streeting: I totally agree. The tragedy is that if we look at the system as a whole and think about the pressure the whole system is under, and if we got NHS dentistry right, we would not only be saving patients untold pain, but saving the NHS money. As Lucy Rigby, Labour's candidate in Northampton North, reported to me, in 2022 tooth decay forced 625 of her local patients to A&E—worse for them and more expensive for the taxpayer.

If Tory Members disagree with charging non-doms their fair share, maybe they could explain in their own contributions why they disagree. I am sure that their constituents would love to hear their defence of the non-doms, and we would be happy to give them space on Labour leaflets to quote their arguments back at them and let the public decide. I would particularly like to know why the Prime Minister is so wedded to this tax break for the wealthiest.

[Wes Streeting]

While Tory Members are set to oppose Labour's rescue motion today, I understand that our plan on supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds has received an endorsement from an unlikely source. On his podcast, former Conservative Chancellor George Osborne said:

"That really is the nanny-state in action."

Coming from the Chancellor who introduced a sugar tax, I am sure George meant that as a compliment. Of course, Conservative Members may not see it the same way, just as they do not agree with Labour's proposal to phase out smoking for children. Don't worry, we have the Prime Minister's back on that one; it is, after all, our proposal. But I ask those who attack our plan as nanny-state, what is the alternative? If a child cannot see a dentist and their parents will not do the responsible thing and make sure they clean their teeth, then should we just shrug our shoulders and do nothing while children's teeth rot?

The problem for the small-statists on the Conservative Benches is this. Too many children today are not cleaning their teeth. Their teeth are rotting and they end up having them pulled out in hospital, which is worse for them and more expensive for the taxpayer. Last year, the NHS spent £80 million on tooth extraction. Toothbrushing in schools would cost a fraction of that, yet the Conservatives choose to waste taxpayers' money, burning through taxpayers' cash on the altar of ideological dogma and putting children through unnecessary misery, because it fits their confused ideology.

That is the irony of the Conservative party. Tories say that they believe in a small state and low taxes, yet they have left our country with the highest tax burden since the 1950s. The NHS receives £169 billion a year, yet it is going through the biggest crisis in its history. Because they do not understand that prevention is better than cure. Because they have refused to undertake meaningful reform. Because they treat taxpayers' money with utter carelessness and contempt. And so they have left us with an NHS that gets to people too late, delivering worse care for patients at greater cost to the taxpayer. We are paying more and getting less. That is Tory Britain. No wonder Tory candidates are so worried.

Before this debate, I happened on a letter on Facebook from the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) who is, happily, in his place. First he talks about the state of dentistry in his constituency—we obviously agree with him there—and then he says:

"I was shocked to learn at the end of last year that little to no progress has been made by the Health Board in our region who are responsible for commissioning this service to you."

Let us assume it was in anticipation of Labour's motion, which he is going to vote against because the Whip has been cracked. He goes on to say:

"I have today written to the Chief Executive following on from the meetings I had last year, and will be raising this issue in today's dentistry debate in the House of Commons."

What that is, and what voters will see it for, is just one of what will no doubt be countless examples of Tory MPs and Tory Ministers, after 14 years of their failure and mismanagement, pointing the finger of blame at someone else, hoping that voters in Darlington and elsewhere will blame local NHS managers and local NHS commissioners for 14 years of failure. If it is really the case that his integrated care board is to blame for why people in Darlington cannot get a dentist, why are people struggling in Newcastle-under-Lyme? Why are they struggling in Northampton North? Why are they struggling in Shipley? Why are they struggling in Filton and Bradley Stoke? Why are they struggling in Worthing West, Stroud, Stevenage, Great Yarmouth, Truro and Falmouth, Blackpool South, Stockton South and every other constituency in the country? Stop blaming other people for your Government's failures.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I appreciate that he gave me notice that he was going to mention my constituency. What he failed to do in his contribution was read out the letter in full. He has also not anticipated the full content of my speech, which highlights all the work I have been doing in my constituency to tackle the failure by the ICB to deliver the missing contract.

Wes Streeting: I could quote the full letter, but it does not help the hon. Gentleman. He misses the fundamental point. This is not just a failure in Darlington. This is not just a problem in the north-east of England. It is the south-west of England, it is the south-east of England, it is the west midlands, it is the east midlands, it is the north-west, it is Cumbria—it is right across the country. In fact, even in London, my city, which has the best NHS dentistry provision in the country—so much for levelling up—dentistry is still in a poor condition. That is why people in Darlington are looking to Labour and, I hope, Lola McEvoy, to take responsibility, show some leadership, back good Labour policies and rescue NHS dentistry in Darlington. The general election cannot come soon enough.

The choice is clear. Under the Tories, NHS dentistry is dying a slow death. The only chance for survival is change with Labour. Labour's plan will deliver: 700,000 more dental appointments a year for those most in need; new dentists recruited to dental deserts where there is not a single dentist taking on new patients; toothbrushing in primary school for three to five year-olds to promote good health and prevent demand on the NHS; and reform of the dental contract after 14 years of failure, so that once again every patient who needs a dentist can get one. Politics is about choices. Labour chooses to rescue NHS dentistry, not give the wealthiest a tax break. Labour's plan is fully costed, fully funded, and will make a real difference to people across the country. The Tories have left our country toothless. Labour will give our country its smile back and give its NHS back, too.

1.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

"recognises the impact of a once-in-a-generation pandemic on NHS dental services, with 7 million fewer patients seen in England across 2020 and 2021; notes these challenges were reflected in both Scotland and Wales; acknowledges the steps already taken to recover services in England including the introduction of a minimum rate and increased payments for complex dental activity to better reward dentists for their work; welcomes the publication of the Long Term Workforce Plan which committed to expanding dental training places by 40 per cent; and supports the upcoming publication of the Government's plan to further recover and reform NHS dentistry and promote good oral health throughout life."

It is a pleasure to update the House on the work the Government are doing to strengthen NHS dentistry across the country. We are reforming our NHS and social care system to make it faster, simpler and fairer. Dentistry is a vital part of our NHS and improving dentistry is one of my top priorities. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) represents a deeply urban seat, so I am pleased that he has presented me with an excuse to boast about the fact that I represent, and am very proud to represent, a rural and coastal constituency. That is why fairness is one of my three priorities for our NHS. I know the challenges that rural and coastal communities face when it comes to accessing an NHS dentist appointment, and the disparities in health that we see between rural and coastal communities and city centres. I will come to some statistics in a moment.

I am determined to fix these issues, and the other problems facing NHS dentistry, so that anyone who needs to can always see an NHS dentist, no matter where they live. Indeed, one of my very first acts as Secretary of State was to respond to the Health and Social Care Committee's recommendations on dentistry. We agreed to the majority of those recommendations, and we stand firmly behind the ambition that NHS dentistry should be accessible and available to all who need it.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD) *rose—*

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD) *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I am going to make a little progress, but I promise to give way later.

The whole House understands that the pandemic placed a long-lasting and heavy burden on NHS dentistry. *[Interruption.]* I hear groans from Opposition Members, but they cannot ignore the fact that some 7 million people did not come forward for appointments during that long period of the pandemic because dentists had to shut, and we were unable to accommodate those needs within the system because of the severe strictures under which we were all placed as a society. We shepherded the sector through the pandemic with £1.7 billion of direct support to compensate for NHS activity that could not be delivered. As we recover from the pandemic there are no quick fixes, but our recovery is well under way. Let me give the latest statistics, because the hon. Member for Ilford North missed them out in his speech. The Government delivered 6 million more courses of NHS dental treatment in 2022-23 than in the previous year. *[Interruption.]* In the two years to June 2023, the number of adults seeing a dentist increased by 1.7 million compared to the number in the previous year, and 800,000 more children saw a dentist in the year to June 2023.

Opposition Members cannot have it both ways. While I was reading out those statistics they were saying, "You cannot make those comparisons because of the pandemic", but that is the point: people did not come forward during the pandemic, so, as we must all know from experience in our own constituencies, there is a backlog that dentists around the country are having to work through—and they are making progress.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: In fairness, I will give way to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) first, because she rose earlier.

Helen Morgan: Like the Secretary of State, I represent a rural community, and the reason dentists are handing back their NHS contracts where I live is that they cannot recruit another dentist to come and help them. They have not had a day off, they cannot meet their commitments under their contracts, and they cannot recruit. They have offered golden hellos of 25%, but they have not been able to get anyone to come and work with them. What will the Secretary of State do to recruit the dentists whom we need to see the people in dental deserts such as North Shropshire?

Victoria Atkins: As I have explained, in relation to dentistry but also in relation to wider healthcare, the long-term workforce plan, which was requested by NHS England and by clinicians, is the means of laying those foundations for the future of the NHS. I will now give way to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle).

Dame Angela Eagle: I thank the Secretary of State. I wanted to intervene earlier when she was talking about the pandemic. In my constituency many people were thrown off their dentists' lists during the pandemic, often with no notice, and then found that they could not register anywhere else. That is what happened, I believe, all over the country. Can the Minister explain what she is going to do about it? It was not that people were not visiting their dentists; they were denied access.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has raised an interesting and important point, because, of course, dentists are independent contractors to the NHS, and I have to work with the levers that are available to me. As I have said, we have already invested £1.7 billion to try to help with the recovery, and the House will, I hope, look forward to our dentistry recovery plan when it comes to other ways in which we can improve that. The important point, however, is that because those dentists are independent contractors, we must work with the profession to encourage them back to the NHS to offer the services that we all want to see.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Is not the root of the problem the contracts that the NHS has with dentists? The roots of that, of course, lie with the previous Government, a Labour Government, rather as they do with the GP contracts. Does my right hon. Friend not need to revisit the genesis of this problem, as well as training more dentists here in the UK?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend, and indeed my friend, my Lincolnshire neighbour, who knows as well as I do the pressures that we face in ensuring that our constituents receive the same quality of care that we expect across England. He was right to draw attention to the—I would argue—badly drafted contract of 2006, but he also touched on the complexity involved in finding systems that would work better.

Wes Streeting *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I cannot wait to reach the part of my speech that will deal with the hon. Gentleman's suggestions, but first I will allow him to intervene, because I enjoy this back and forth.

Wes Streeting: So do I. The Secretary of State is far more entertaining than her predecessor. Given that she is painting a picture of improvement, how does she explain the story in *The Times* which revealed that NHS dentistry activity is now falling in 2023-24 compared with 2022-23? Is it not the case that things are going backwards rather than forwards? How does the Secretary of State explain that, and when are we going to see her plan?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, because according to the latest statistics available to me, 18.1 million adults were seen by an NHS dentist in the 24 months up to 30 June 2023. That is an increase of 10%, and what does it mean in reality? It means that over 1.7 million more adults were seen than in the previous year. I know that we are all concerned about the health of children; some 6.4 million children were seen by an NHS dentist in the 12 months up to 30 June 2023, an increase of 14%, which means, in real terms, an increase of 800,000 on the previous year.

I accept, of course, that there is more to do, and we will be setting that out in our dental recovery plan shortly, but this is not just about big numbers. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman asks when "shortly" will be. As he knows full well, "shortly" is a little shorter than "in due course" and a little longer than "imminently".

We have introduced several simple and effective measures to improve the nation's dental health. The Health and Care Act 2022 made it simpler to expand water fluoridation schemes, because raising the fluoride level to 1 mg per litre is a straightforward way to prevent tooth decay. It has proved effective in parts of England as well as Canada, the United States, Ireland and Australia, and the chief medical officer has concluded that there is "strong scientific evidence" that water fluoridation can drive down the "prevalence of tooth decay".

Anthony Mangnall: I congratulate the Secretary of State on the progress that has been made, while, obviously, recognising that there is more to be done. I wonder if she will help me to ask the shadow Minister to correct the record. He said that in 2010 and 2015 Labour had a plan for dental practice, but there is no mention of that in the Labour manifestos. I will come back and correct that if necessary, but the hon. Gentleman is out there stating that Labour has had a plan for dental recovery since 2010, and that is not in those manifestos.

Victoria Atkins: My goodness me! My hon. Friend has identified a "cavity" in the shadow Minister's so-called plans.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I am going to make some progress.

I am very pleased that, subject to a public consultation which will be published shortly, we have secured funding to expand water fluoridation schemes across the north-east of England. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ilford North may be interested to know why we have identified the north-east, given that he read out so many constituency names in his speech. The north-east was chosen because natural fluoride levels there are among the lowest in the country, and the proportion of five-year-olds with teeth extracted because of tooth decay is among the highest. We have wanted to address that very real health inequality to ensure that more than 1.6 million people in the area can benefit from this expansion, subject, as I have said, to a public consultation.

Supervised tooth brushing has been raised. That has indeed been proven to drive down oral health inequalities, which is why we have already introduced a toolkit that local authorities are using to introduce supervised tooth brushing across schools, nurseries and family hubs. We have been clear that we want to see that happening in more areas. I would encourage any colleague who is concerned about that, rather than waiting for some mythical date in the future, to ask our local authorities whether they are using these toolkits, because they are freely available, and they can and should put them in place.

Catherine West: The Secretary of State rightly talks about prevention, but what about the opposite, where rates of oral cancer have gone up because prevention has not been in place? What assessment has she made? If she does not have the data to hand, will she write to me with the assessment that the Department of Health and Social Care has made of the link between failure on prevention and cancer?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady, and particularly for the constructive tone of her intervention, because she is right. This is not simply about teeth health; it is also about the conditions that dentists check for—probably without anyone quite realising that they are doing so. I will take the hon. Lady up on her invitation to write to her on the figures, but that is why we are looking at health inequalities across the country and, importantly, focusing on encouraging dentists to re-register with the NHS if they have left, because it is vital for tackling much wider health conditions in addition to the pain and discomfort that tooth decay can bring.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Victoria Atkins: No, I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and then I will make some progress.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned levers. One issue facing recruitment in North West Norfolk is the time involved in getting on to the NHS performers list. Newly in post, will she look at that issue and bring forward proposals as part of the plan to speed up that process and boost recruitment?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. His intervention shows the level of detail that colleagues on the Conservative Benches have gone into in trying to address the understandable concerns that local NHS providers are voicing. I will look into that. I am very keen on my three words: faster, simpler, fairer. I want to make it as simple as possible for dentists to rejoin and join the NHS. I will say more on that later.

The choice of whether patients are offered NHS exams and treatment lies with the dentists, who are independent contractors to the NHS. As well as making simple, common-sense changes, in July 2022 we announced

a package of far-reaching reforms to make NHS work more attractive to dentists. We have created more bands for units of dental activity, so that dentists are properly rewarded for taking on more complex care, and the best-performing practices can see more NHS patients.

Previously, regardless of the amount of time the dentist took on each patient, they received the same payment for every individual treatment package in band 2, which covers fillings and tooth extraction. Perversely, that meant they received the same payment for doing one filling as for three. That left many dentists unable to afford to take on patients who had not seen a dentist for some time and therefore needed extensive treatment. That needed to be put right for the sake of both patients and dentists. Thanks to our reforms, dentists now receive five units of dental activity when they treat three or more teeth, which is a significant increase from the old maximum of three. Root canal treatment on molar teeth is now rewarded with seven units of dental activity, as opposed to three, meeting one of the British Dental Association's key demands.

We also recognise the barriers that too many communities have faced when accessing NHS dentistry, with people left phoning around practices to see who was taking on NHS patients. That is why we have made it a contractual requirement for dentists to update the NHS website regularly, making it clear whether their practices are taking on new patients, as well as explaining the services that they offer, thus making it easier for patients to find a dentist that can deliver the care they need. These reforms have improved access to dentistry and ensured that the system better supports dentists and their teams, so they were well received by dentists, their representatives and patient groups across England, with Healthwatch's national director recognising that these reforms show that the Government are listening to patients and taking action, and these reforms can help ensure that dental care is accessible and affordable to everyone who needs it.

Wera Hobhouse: I am pleased to hear about some of the reforms that we have raised in this Chamber many times, particularly on changing the dental contracts and units of dental activity, but may I raise another point? In official workplace data, dentists who do just one NHS check-up a year are counted the same as an NHS full-timer. Does the Secretary of State recognise that that is a problem, because that workplace data hides the scale of the problem?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, who makes a fair point about measuring within the system how much work NHS dentists are doing. As I say, we are looking at all of this in the work that we are doing on the dentistry recovery plan. I repeat that I want to make it as simple as possible for dentists to register with the NHS, to continue offering the care that we all want them to, so I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I am going to plough on, I am afraid.

Earlier, Labour Front Benchers—perhaps not understanding that they were doing so—set out the philosophical difference between our two parties on how to grow the economy. As our economy grows, we on the Conservative side of the House want to attract the best and the brightest from around the world to work in our NHS, in our tech sector, in our life sciences industry, in our movie industry—hon. Members may know that it filmed "Barbie" this year—and in many other thriving industries. Labour, however, apparently wants to shut the door by taxing such people on earnings they make outside the UK. I speak, of course, of non-domiciled tax status.

If I may correct the hon. Member for Ilford North, because I appreciate that he has not spent any time on the Front Bench, last year alone non-domiciled taxpayers paid £8 billion in UK taxes on their UK earnings. That is equivalent to more than 230,000 nurses. Labour wants to put that at risk and put the UK at a disadvantage in the highly paid, highly competitive, highly mobile international labour market. This really is yet another branch of the magic money tree that Labour has always been looking for, to which they apparently want to add £28 billion a year of taxes or increased borrowing and increased inflation.

How they want to spend this money is interesting as well, because in 2022 Labour promised that their non-domiciled taxation would fund a workforce plan. Last September, it became breakfast club meals. Then, by October, it had morphed into 2 million hospital appointments and MRI and CT scanners. Now, apparently, it is funding a dentistry plan. One wonders how all these magic branches on the magic money tree will add up to all the promises made so far.

Wes Streeting: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will resist, but only because I am going to ask the hon. Gentleman to intervene in a moment—he should be careful what he wishes for. I also notice that he talked about reform of the dental contract but did not give any detail. Government is not as easy as selling a book. It cannot be cut and pasted from Wikipedia, as some on the Labour Front Bench seem to like to do. It is about being clear on what you would do differently. Now, Labour in Wales is of course running the Welsh NHS. They do like to do things differently. People there are almost twice as likely to be waiting for health treatment as in England.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition states that the Labour Government in Wales is a blueprint for what Labour can do in the UK. Given that 97% of high street dentists in Wales state that Labour's reforms are not working, does the Secretary of State agree that NHS dentistry is being destroyed by Labour in Wales, and that if Wales is their blueprint for UK dentistry, we should all be very afraid?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who represents a Welsh constituency. The chair of the British Dental Association wrote to the Labour Welsh Government to complain about their plan and, I understand, used words such as "toxic mix of underinvestment" and "untested targets." The picture in Wales, if it is the Leader of the Opposition's blueprint, is perhaps not as convincing as the shadow Health Secretary would have us believe.

[Victoria Atkins]

The fundamental difference between the current systems in England and Labour-run Wales is that Wales has a capitated list system for dentistry. I am willing to give way so that the shadow Health Secretary can clarify whether he wants to bring in that system.

Wes Streeting: I cannot believe that is meant to be the right hon. Lady's big "Gotcha." She cannot even tell us when she will bring forward her plan, let alone what is in it. They have had 14 years to come up with a plan. This is absolutely astonishing. As much as I enjoy these partisan knockabouts at the Dispatch Box, the sight of the Health Secretary giggling and laughing at her own jokes will be of small comfort to people who are literally pulling out their own teeth.

Victoria Atkins: Just to cut through all the froth, the hon. Gentleman has not, in fact, answered my invitation. Does he wish to have a capitated list system, as they have in Wales, or does he have other plans? Could he please answer?

Wes Streeting: Like any responsible Government, we would consult the dentistry profession, the BDA, and come up with a serious programme for dentistry reform. If the right hon. Lady wants to ask me questions and have me answer them, the Government should call a general election and I will happily oblige.

Victoria Atkins: Again, cutting through the froth, the hon. Gentleman called this debate and has not set out his plan. He knows full well that this is an Opposition day debate and I am responding to Labour's motion by moving an amendment. He has no plan on dentistry. When I asked him to clarify whether he will follow the capitated system in Wales, he declined to answer. I assume that is because he knows we tested a prototype system based on the Welsh capitation approach here in England, and the results were clear. It worsened access and widened oral health inequalities.

The hon. Gentleman quoted the Nuffield Trust, placing great emphasis on it, in his opening speech. As he agrees so much with the Nuffield Trust's report, does he also agree with its former chief executive who said that his ideas on general practice represent

"an out of date view"

and "will cost a fortune"?

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Labour party's approach to our NHS is empty words about reform followed by the phrase "funded by non-doms." We are very lucky in this country—on this side of the House we consider ourselves blessed—to have incredible dentists working across the NHS.

Here are some facts for Opposition Members. There are now 1,352 more dentists working in the NHS than 14 years ago, thanks to the stewardship of this Conservative Government. I thank them and their colleagues for everything they do, and we are backing them to build a brighter future for NHS dentistry by taking concrete steps to improve recruitment and retention. That is why our long-term workforce plan, the first in NHS history, will expand dentistry training places by 40%, providing more than 1,100 places by 2031, which will be the highest level on record under any Government.

Over the same period, this Government's plan will also increase training places for dental therapists and hygiene professionals to more than 500. The importance of the long-term workforce plan to dentistry's future was recognised across the sector, and Professor Kirsty Hill, who chairs the Dental Schools Council, backed our plan:

"Expansion is a significant and positive development, and we commend the government for recognising the importance of increasing dental hygiene and dental therapist positions. These roles play a vital role in enhancing capacity and improving care."

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I find it absolutely extraordinary that the Health Secretary lectured the shadow Health Secretary on calling a debate to hold this Government to account. Twelve million people are not able to access dental care, including thousands in my Oldham constituency.

James Wild: What's your plan?

Debbie Abrahams: You are the Government, unless you want to call a general election.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady knows that she must not refer directly to other Members.

Victoria Atkins: I think the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) was raising her voice at me, but it was not me who heckled her. I recognise the passion she brings to her intervention, and I simply made the point that this is an Opposition day debate. The hon. Member for Ilford North understandably set out some of his plans, which is his job, and I was merely questioning him on the detail of those plans. Sadly, he was not able to provide that detail.

The long-term workforce plan is about not just training more staff but delivering value for hard-working taxpayers. Currently, around a third of dentists do not carry out any NHS work. This simply is not fair on the taxpayers who fund their training, which is why, through the long-term workforce plan, we are exploring the introduction of a tie-in period that encourages dentists, after they graduate, to spend a minimum proportion of their time delivering NHS care. We have also made it easier for experienced dentists from around the world to come to the UK to ply their trade, which is apparently something with which Labour Members do not agree.

Last year, we brought forward legislation to give the General Dental Council greater flexibility in administering the overseas registration exam. The Government welcome its decision to triple the capacity of the next three sittings of part one of the ORE, from August last year, and to increase the number of sittings of the second part of the exam from three to four, creating an additional 1,300 places. Ministers will continue to meet the GDC to discuss how we can make these flexibilities as effective as possible, to get more dentists into the NHS workforce delivering care for patients.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. It is worth repeating that the Nuffield Trust has warned that NHS dentistry is at its most perilous point in its 75-year history. That goes alongside recent Healthwatch polling suggesting that one in 10 people in England have ended up paying for private dental treatment

in the last 12 months because they could not find an NHS dentist. It has been the same in my constituency, where the majority of dental surgeries are not taking on new patients. Can the Secretary of State explain how on earth things have got this bad?

Victoria Atkins: I trust that the hon. Lady has been listening to the whole debate, because I set this out in some detail at the beginning of my speech. I will not repeat the impact of the pandemic, but I hope she has taken on board the £1.7 billion of investment that has already seen a sizeable increase in the number of adults and children being treated by NHS dentistry.

I do not pretend that this is the full stop at the end of the sentence. We have a plan and I look forward to our debate when that plan is published, because I suspect it will be welcomed across the House.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her powerful speech. The plan will improve financial incentives for NHS dentists and support practices to take on new patients, but to what extent will she and the plan take on board high operating costs and, indeed, the high cost of living in areas where there is high demand for NHS dentistry?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I can imagine that the concerns he outlines are very pressing in his constituency, and one important priority behind the dental recovery plan work is addressing health inequalities. Although I have spoken about rural and coastal areas from a constituency perspective, we also understand, of course, that there are differing cost of living pressures in different parts of the country. He makes an important point about the costs for NHS dentists operating in very expensive parts of the country, such as his constituency, and I thank him for doing so.

Our workforce is not just made up of dentists; dental care in England could not function without the vital contribution of dental and orthodontic therapists, dental hygienists, dental nurses and clinical dental technicians. We recognise the importance of harnessing the skills and knowledge of all those professionals. They can support dentists to carry out first-class care, and we must empower them to take on more responsibility and to work at the top of their licences. That is why last year we issued guidance to NHS practices, supporting them to make the most of everyone in the dental team and make a difference to patient care. Since then, NHS England has made it clear that dental therapists and dental hygienists can provide patients with direct care, provided they are appropriately qualified, competent and indemnified. We have also run a consultation to enable dental therapists and hygienists to deliver more treatments. That will boost access to care for patients and support dentists, and we will be setting out our next steps shortly.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: I am conscious that Opposition Members will want time today, so I am going to bring my remarks to a close. It is my mission, as Health and Social Care Secretary, to build an NHS that is faster, simpler and fairer, and of course I include dentistry in that work. We have taken the long-term decisions that will improve access to dental care. Delivering 6 million more courses of treatment, expanding dentistry training places by 40% and making it easier for patients to find a dentist to deliver the care they need are just some of the ways in which we are going to achieve that. Of course, we must make sure that dentists are properly rewarded for all the work they do. Through our soon-to-be-published dentistry recovery plan, we will go further, to make NHS dentistry accessible and available for everyone who needs it, no matter where they call home in this great country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, this is a very well-subscribed debate, so I am going to impose an immediate time limit of six minutes, which I hope will allow everybody to have roughly the same amount of time. I have been able to tell the first two speakers that I am doing that.

1.52 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The crisis in NHS dentistry is plain to see and it is affecting so many of my constituents. I am therefore grateful for this opportunity to shed light on this emergency and to support Labour's plan to rebuild our broken dentistry. People are finding it impossible to find an NHS dentist for themselves and their children, which is leading to serious consequences for public health. It is also exacerbating health inequalities, and creating a divide between those who can afford private dentistry and those who cannot. The proportion of children with dental decay in the most deprived areas is more than two and a half times greater than it is in the least deprived areas, and the gap is widening. That has led to a public health crisis: 169 children each day are undergoing tooth extraction; rotting teeth is, shockingly, the No. 1 cause of hospital admissions among six to 10-year-olds; and one in 10 people have even attempted their own do-it-yourself dentistry, which just does damage and puts even more pressure on the NHS. That reads like a Charles Dickens novel, but it is the harsh reality of 14 years of Conservative government. Nowhere is that more apparent than in my constituency, where not one of the seven dental surgeries that recently provided an update was accepting new adult patients and only one was accepting new child patients.

Although those figures are appalling, they are not surprising. I am regularly contacted by constituents who cannot find an NHS dentist and cannot afford to go private. They ask me, "What am I supposed to do?". Without radical reform, there is no answer I can give them. We often talk about crumbling dental services, but in my constituency they have already crumbled; the services simply are not there for the people who need them most. One constituent has contacted more than 25 dentists in Sheffield, with each telling her the same thing: they are not accepting new NHS patients at this time. The best she has been offered is to be put on a waiting list, which could last years. She cannot afford to go private, so she and her young child are stuck without any access to a dentist. We have also seen the provision of community dental services grind to a halt. Those services are a vital safety net, providing specialised treatment when other dentists cannot accommodate the needs of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions. That safety net is no longer there for all too many people. Research shows that, nationally, more than 12,000 children were on a waiting list for

[Gill Furniss]

community dental services at the start of 2023, and they could face waits of up to 80 weeks for tooth extractions. Healthwatch has heard from many people and their carers who cannot access community dentistry, leaving them without treatment.

The basic provision of NHS dentistry has been worn away on this Government's watch. The warning signs of this crisis have been stark for years, but Ministers have continued to bury their heads in the sand. Funding has been cut in real terms, meaning that dentists are leaving the NHS in droves and areas such as mine have become dental deserts. It is clear that this Government are not willing to provide the radical changes needed to bring NHS dentistry back from the brink. In April last year, Ministers promised a new dental recovery plan; but we are still waiting for it to see the light of day. I urge the Minister to tell us when that will happen and not just say "soon". Labour has formulated a fully costed plan that will get NHS dentistry back up and running. The best treatment is prevention, which is why Labour will introduce a targeted, supervised toothbrushing scheme for three to five-year-olds, encouraging lifelong good dental hygiene. Labour will also provide an extra 700,000 urgent appointments per year to help the most vulnerable access the services they need and introduce an incentive scheme to bring more dentists to dental deserts. I am proud to say that all of that will be paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax status. Those tangible steps will bring NHS dentistry back to constituencies such as mine, where services have disappeared. Where this Government have failed, Labour will step in and help all our constituents to access the NHS dentistry they need. I will be proud to support Labour's plan in today's vote, and I urge all colleagues, including Conservative Members, to vote with us.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care.

1.58 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Last July, the Health and Social Care Committee, which I chair, published an important report on NHS dentistry, and I urge colleagues to read it if they have not already done so—it has been mentioned a few times. That inquiry was more necessary than ever, and I would argue that the issues our constituents face in accessing an NHS dentist now are a greater challenge for my Front-Bench colleagues than the much higher-profile health promise to "cut the waiting list" that features in the Prime Minister's five pledges. I say that because every Member faces this challenge. The Secretary of State's amendment rightly references the pandemic and the massive impact it has had on dentistry; to ignore that is to ignore basic facts. Our Committee concluded that NHS dentistry is facing a crisis of access—no understatement—resulting in a decline in oral health.

Our report was described by the British Dental Association as

"an instruction manual to save NHS dentistry."

Based on the evidence—I stress the word evidence—received by the cross-party Committee, it sets out what the Government should do to address the crisis. I thank the Secretary of State for coming before the Committee just before Christmas and for ensuring that we received a formal response to our report, albeit a few weeks later than I would have liked.

The motion proposed by the Labour party today contains some reasonable parts: it is obvious that some people are resorting to DIY dentistry and it is a fact that some people are attending A&E because of dental challenges. The Opposition talk about the provision of 700,000 urgent appointments a year, but I cannot support the motion because I hear no detail or explanation about how that will be done, who the dentists are who will fulfil all those appointments or where they will happen. The Opposition talk about recruiting new dentists to the areas that are most in need but, as the Secretary of State said in her opening remarks, we are increasing dentistry training places by 40% as part of the NHS long-term workforce plan, which is the biggest expansion of places on record. That is important and should be recognised, as it was from the Government Dispatch Box.

When giving evidence to the Select Committee's inquiry, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), described the Government's ambition for NHS dentistry, saying:

"We do want everyone who needs one to be able to access an NHS dentist—absolutely"

The Committee welcomed that ambition but, if I am honest, we were surprised by it. In their most optimistic reading of the reality on the ground, what leads the new ministerial team to believe that that is deliverable? When she sums up, will the Minister repeat that ambition, as her predecessor did?

Do not get me wrong, Madam Deputy Speaker: I absolutely believe that everyone should be able to access an NHS dentist when they need one, wherever they live, but given the reality of where we are now, I question whether that is possible. In our report, we asked the Government to set out how they intend to realise that ambition and the timeline for delivery as a matter of urgency. They accepted the recommendation, but the detail, as we have heard, is still lacking. Now is the time, please.

Let me touch on the dental contract. It is right to recognise that action has been taken. Some initial changes were made to the dental contract in July 2022, and we had assurances of fundamental reform from the then Minister, and again from his successor as Minister responsible for dentistry, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who is on the Treasury Bench.

My Committee believes that a fundamentally reformed contract must be implemented at the earliest possible stage. It has to represent a full move away from the current system of units of dental activity—UDAs—in favour of a weighted capitation-based system that provides financial incentives for seeing new patients and those with greater dental need, and in turn prioritises prevention and person-centred care. Failure to do so risks more dentists stopping NHS work, or not starting it, and exacerbating the issues that my constituents are experiencing with accessing care.

As I have said in the House before, my dentist recently gave up NHS work, which was a big, emotional decision for her. Any reform to the contracts now is too late for her. The Opposition and the Government have to work

out how they are going to get people to come back to NHS dentistry, and reform the contract to stop more people accessing the exit door.

It is not just about contract reform: workplace reform is greatly important. We did not get significant acknowledgement of the lack of accurate data about the dental workforce in our report, so will Ministers revisit that? There were many other recommendations that I do not have time to go into today, but the report is available, as is the Government's response.

The Secretary of State has made a good start and said she has begun to lay the foundations of change. I am encouraged by that but, to my Committee's continued frustration, there is still no date for the publication of the dental recovery plan. If we do not solve this crisis, we will continue to hear about it in the House and from constituents. The crisis places additional pressures on already stretched services. Today is too late for dentists who are thinking of leaving and for patients who have run out of options. We need a short-term set of actions for constituents who are suffering pain today, and we need a fully reformed dental recovery plan hot on its heels. There cannot be any further delay.

2.4 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Nuffield Trust recently announced that without radical action universal NHS dentistry was "gone for good". Some 90% of practices across the UK no longer accept new NHS patients. For 14 years this Conservative Government have brought about the decay of our vital NHS dental healthcare services, so now is the time for a clear strategy, a recommitment to the future of a universal NHS dental service, and a Government who are determined to provide the care that people across this country, and their children, deserve.

The crisis of NHS dentistry has been entirely predictable. In fact, I have been at the forefront of these predictions over many years. Just last year, in a debate that I led in this place, I described the path of NHS dentistry as a "slow-motion car crash". In 2016, I warned of a mounting crisis and drew the Government's attention to a report warning that half of dentists were thinking of leaving the NHS. In the following years, I again warned that the number of dentists intending to leave the NHS was rising even further and, in 2020, after years of repeated warnings, I once again informed the Government that of those remaining, some 58% of the UK's dentists were planning to move away from NHS dentistry within five years.

Last year, the then Minister assured the House that he was planning to publish a plan to reform dentistry, but the limited reforms proposed in July did little but paper over the growing cracks. More than 1,000 dentists have left the NHS since the pandemic, and the number of treatments completed each year is now 6 million lower than it was before the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, access was poor, with only enough dentistry commissioned for around half the population in England. As it stands, the future is bleak. A BDA survey shows that 75% of dentists are thinking of reducing their NHS commitments this year.

In Bradford, a shocking 445 people had to be treated in hospital for dental-related issues between 2022 and 2023. This cannot be the future of NHS dentistry: extractions and emergency care, but only for those who cannot afford private dental care. One dentist in my constituency said:

"I've been saying it for years: the NHS dental contract needs fundamental reform. Without immediate action, there will be no Universal NHS Dentistry."

But NHS dentistry is not yet "gone for good". That claim would leave swathes of people in this country destined for a future of rotting teeth and poor dental health. We cannot stand by and let the principle of NHS dentistry in this country be eroded. The decline is not irreversible or inevitable—it is a political choice.

I know that targeted investment is possible. In 2017, I worked on a project in Bradford with the then Health Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is now Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. The project invested £250,000 of unused contract clawback in my Bradford South constituency, and ensured that patients were able to access roughly 3,000 new NHS dental appointments in an area of proven high dental deprivation. Although that provided a short-term solution, it did not address the wider long-term issue of access to NHS dental care. We can still save NHS dentistry, but we need a Government who are committed to reform and to the NHS.

It right that the Labour party puts NHS dentistry front and centre alongside plans to build an NHS fit for the future. Labour has committed to provide an extra 700,000 urgent dental appointments and to real reform of the NHS dental contract. As the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), has made clear on many occasions, healthcare must be as much about prevention as it is about cure.

In 2021-2022, tooth decay was, shamefully, the most common reason for hospital admission for children between six and 10 years old. This country once had a strong school dental service, and with such shocking rates of child tooth decay, it is time to look again at that policy, and at the role of dental therapists in the NHS. It is the right thing to do to catch up on a generation of lost dental health. NHS dentistry is not "gone for good", but it stands on the edge of a new era. There is one clear solution: the Government must recommit to a universal NHS dental service that will care for every person, from the cradle to the grave.

2.9 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I listened carefully and with interest to what the shadow Secretary of State said in his opening remarks. I like the man, but he clearly sees this matter as a potential political football, which comes as no surprise to me. As for me, my interest is in the constituents I represent. They do not care so much about the bickering between us, but they do care about their oral health.

I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. As we have heard, every constituent will need access to dental activity during the course of their lives. I have taken a great interest in this matter and spoken about it to hundreds of constituents and several dentists. In fact, over the weekend I spoke to some dentists who do not support Labour's plans and want to see the Government advance their reforms—I was glad to hear more about those reforms today. I have raised the

[Derek Thomas]

matter of NHS dentistry several times in the House with two separate Prime Ministers, including in January 2022, June 2022, April 2023 and September 2023, and also with several Ministers, including the one on the Front Bench, and the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State's predecessor said it was a priority to increase the number of dentists in specific parts of the country, and mentioned the south-west in particular. We are seeing some early green shoots appear. None the less, people in the south-west and Cornwall are struggling to get access to a dentist. I still receive weekly emails from constituents who are not getting the treatment that they need, or who are spending their time and money travelling to NHS practices in Manchester or London, or even abroad, to pay for private care. I have witnessed dental practices giving up NHS contracts, or vastly reducing NHS treatment, forcing some people to fully fund their own care and others, who cannot afford that, to go without treatment. I have raised this issue with the Health Secretary in the Chamber quite recently.

When I spoke to people in dental practices, they said they were as frustrated as I am. They have a contract with the NHS to provide thousands of units of dental activity, but the funding allocation is clawed back by the NHS if they cannot deliver those units. They cannot deliver the units, as we have heard already, because the value is too low to attract the staff that they need. Last year, a practice that I was working with paid more than £132,000 in clawbacks to our integrated care board. That is enough funding to treat 1,600 patients.

Nationally, underspend in the NHS dental budget could reach £500 million. We know that the NHS dental contract needs reform: it does not work for dentists and it certainly does not work for our patients. None the less, I am pleased that integrated care boards are taking ownership of dentistry and driving the delivery of dental care in our regions. In Cornwall, the ICB has already gripped the issue, using what resources it has to increase capacity. I was disappointed by the shadow Secretary of State's reference to the work going on in Cornwall. The ICB does not see the work that it is doing as restricting NHS dentistry just to children, the elderly and vulnerable people. That is absolutely not the case. What it is doing is looking at where the shortages are and seeking to address them with the resources it has. The truth is that one third of adults in Cornwall are still accessing NHS dentistry. We have seen new NHS dental provision in Helston and in St Ives—two of my major towns—and there is a real ambition among dentists to take on more once they are allowed to do so.

The workforce plan needs to set out not just the number of dentists, dental nurses and other dental professions, but where they are located. We have a brilliant dental suite in Truro, but graduates rarely stay in the south-west once they have been trained. We are seeing a slight improvement, with dental practices offering foundation placements for graduates in Cornwall, including in St Ives, where the potential is greater.

I recognise that the Minister is just as keen as I am to empower the entire dental team to work to their full potential for NHS patients, but there remain barriers to fully implementing direct access in NHS-funded dental care. As I understand it, medicines can be administered by dental care professionals when they provide care to patients who pay privately, but this does not apply to NHS dental patients. On a recent visit to a practice in St Ives, the owner explained to me the impact of this disparity.

We have therapists in most locations in the south-west ready to increase NHS access, especially for young children, as most of the work for that patient cohort is within their scope of practice. It is disappointing that we cannot use those therapists fully. Dentists are reluctant to sign off prescriptions because of time issues and because of not understanding the process. Our therapists are doing only hygiene work, and some of them are leaving because of the lack of work.

My understanding is that a statutory instrument is required, which is in the gift of the Minister. This simple piece of legislation would provide the opportunity for NHS dental practices to use the full skillset and competencies of their dental staff to increase the delivery of desperately needed dental care. Will the Minister indicate today whether she is able to bring such an SI to the House and unleash an army of dental professionals to do what they believe they are trained to do?

Finally, in 2021-22, £4.5 million of unmet dental care was returned from Cornwall to the NHS. It is now lost in the NHS system. Will the Minister assure me that never again will that kind of money be grabbed or stolen from Cornwall's dental patients, returned to the NHS and not used to deliver the dental care that they need?

2.15 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I receive a large amount of correspondence on dentistry. Since my election just over four years ago, I have had several people come to see me, I have visited practices in Stockport, and I have often received communications from people on the issue. I thank the British Dental Association for all the work that it has done on NHS dentistry over the years, and the Nuffield Trust for providing excellent briefings for this debate, and for its commitment to highlight the issues with NHS dentistry across England.

It is shocking that 12 million people were unable to access NHS dental care last year. That is more than one in four adults in England. The crisis in NHS dentistry is having a disproportionate impact on low-income people and vulnerable groups. This is a class issue. If a person is on a low income, they are much less likely to have access to NHS dentistry than if they lived in a more affluent area.

As has been mentioned, oral cancer is one of the fastest-rising cancers. The reality is that people from deprived communities are significantly more likely to develop it and die from it. It is shameful and unacceptable that the Government are not doing enough to tackle this issue. Dentists are often the first health professional to spot symptoms of oral cancer. This dentistry crisis means that fewer cases of oral cancer will be detected early, adding even more pressure on to the NHS, and, more importantly, detrimentally impacting people's health.

As I said, this is a significant issue in my constituency. A few months ago, I wrote to every single dental practice in my constituency and included a small survey that they could fill out. The responses that I received from dentists and dental workers did not make for positive reading. I will quote from one of the contributions that I received. The dentist in question wrote:

"The whole service has been underfunded for years. I receive a very low UDA rate compared to other practices in the area. In 2006, I was paid £22 UDA and now it is £27. Patients need to know that we are not just greedy dentists. There is a shortage of dental nurses so they are demanding more money. Where am I supposed to find that extra funding?"

That is just one of the contributions that I received back following my survey. It is a significant issue. People on lower incomes and people with complex health issues often tend to miss out on NHS dentistry. I am glad that the shadow Health and Social Care team has secured this debate today and that the shadow Secretary of State highlighted just some of the key things that Labour will deliver in government, including significantly more appointments, significantly more dentists in the NHS service, and supervised toothbrushing in primary schools.

In April last year, the Government pledged to provide a recovery plan for NHS dentistry. The plan has yet to be published. May I ask the Minister, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, when it will be published? Why are the Government being so shifty about this? Why will they not address this issue and tell us whether and when it will be published? It seems that, in Stockport and across England, the Government are failing patients badly not just when it comes to dentistry, but with record waiting lists for the NHS. Sadly, the reality is that people's lives in Stockport and England are being held back by this Government.

Richard Foord: The hon. Member mentions the so-called NHS dentistry recovery plan cited by the Government. I am playing a game of NHS dentistry bingo, provided to me by the BDA. One of the 16 things that we were to listen out for today was:

"Our Recovery Plan will be published shortly".

I have checked that off several times this afternoon. Does he agree that it is dishonest for the Government to claim that NHS dentistry is some sort of universal service?

Navendu Mishra: I agree with the hon. Member and thank him for his contribution. I think the BDA tagged me on Twitter in its dentistry bingo. I have not managed to play yet but will definitely be checking it out. He makes the point that the Government are being dishonest. The Government are being more than dishonest; they will not tell us if and when the plan will be published. They clearly do not have a plan to address the backlog in NHS waiting lists or the crisis in NHS dentistry in England. The next Labour Government will tackle the issues of NHS dentistry and the millions of people rotting on the NHS waiting list. They will also improve people's quality of life in Stockport and across Britain.

2.20 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to raise the issues that so many people face across the south-west and south Devon, many of whom are in immense pain. I will start by responding to some of the remarks made earlier in the debate. It is acceptable to make the point that the NHS contract from 2006 does not work and has not worked. It is acceptable to say that we tried to make it work, and we hit an enormous roadblock in the form of the pandemic, which has shown the system to be wanting. None of those are controversial statements to make.

Labour should not be outraged when we ask for their plans. Time and again, Labour Members go in front of the cameras and say they have a plan for this and that and everything we might possibly imagine, so we therefore should be able to ask them, given that this is their debate. They can laugh, as they are doing now, or smile about this, but it is a serious and legitimate question. If they are a Government in waiting, they should come up with proposals for a short-term solution to this issue.

The shadow Health Secretary, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), decided to tell me that he and the Labour party have been talking about this issue since 2010. Indeed, he said it was in their manifestos in 2010 and 2015. I cannot find any record of it being in their manifestos. In fact, it is hard to actually see when the shadow Health Secretary even cared about this issue before his appointment, but I will leave that to others to make clear in the course of the debate.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made perfectly clear the challenges we face. She made the point clearly that there have been some improvements, but no Conservative Member is complacent. We are all aware of this, because we speak to our constituents and look at our email inboxes. We are aware of the size of the trouble and problems being faced. It should be welcome that we are now pushing taxpayer-funded dentists who have been in training to work within the NHS at the end of their training. It should be welcome that there are 40% more dental training places and that we are looking at ways in which we can bring dentists from abroad, as well as creating training places right across the country. I welcome the report and comments by the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine).

All of that boils down to what we think the priorities of NHS dentistry should be. Simply put, having spoken to many dentists in my constituency, the priorities boil down to three areas: prevention, education and pain relief. *[Interruption.]* I do not think many people are looking to disagree on that point, but if the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) wants to disagree with me, she can. The point is that the pandemic has blown two of those priorities off course. The focus for the short term must be how we address pain relief. That is the issue we face today, and children and those of an older age are suffering from it across the country.

What are the short-term actions that we can take today? They have been mentioned by many Conservative Members. We can look at dental access centres and mobile units that can move across the country. We might think those are fantasy, but they are already in practice in some places in the country. Indeed, they have been raised by a number of dentists in my area of south Devon, who suggest that they are not just feasible but incredibly possible with the underspend that has not been utilised. We must unlock the money that has not been spent through NHS contracts. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) will correct me if I am wrong, but I understand that some £50 million of underspend on NHS dentist contracts could be made available to help those on waiting lists.

As a number of Labour Members have said, we must allow dental therapists to play a larger role in helping treat people within the process and address their needs.

[Anthony Mangnall]

As I have said, we must focus on pain relief as the priority. Reform of UDAs has to happen as quickly as possible. The time and geographical disparity means the system has been found wanting, and it is clear right across the country—whether in urban, rural or coastal community settings—that there are huge disparities in remuneration for a UDA. Rather than standing here and speaking about parliamentary candidates, it is probably more appropriate to think about the solutions that we can find to help those who are suffering so much.

I will give examples of what is going on in Devon. We have 17,000 more UDAs, which is welcome. We have a dental care stabilisation system. We have 406 extra appointments per week, which can be found through contacting 111. We have one of the finest dental training schools in the form of the Peninsula Dental School, located just outside Plymouth. It is working to help address the need and to support the Government in helping areas across the country. It is looking to help ensure that its trainees remain within the area after their training, to make the NHS as flexible as possible to the needs of those who need to use it.

We must have reform. Many of us on the Conservative Back Benches agree that we must have the reforms that have been promised before, because they are the hook that we can hang our hat on, and they will be the solution. If the Minister could look at the short-term solutions I have proposed and give a response, that would be welcome not just in my part of the country, but all across the country.

2.26 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Surely in this day and age everybody should have the right to receive dental treatment when they need it. That was the fundamental principle of the national health service that we, the Labour party, founded all those glorious years ago. Unfortunately, as Labour Members know—it has been well documented throughout the debate so far—the principle behind national health service dentistry has been severely undermined and eroded in each one of the 14 years of this Tory Government. Today, quite astoundingly, I think the Secretary of State mentioned that at some stage, shortly, they will publish a long-term plan. Fourteen years on, they will publish some kind of long-term plan shortly, with no date. That is the state of chaos that this country is governed by at the moment. Meanwhile, 12 million people cannot get the dental treatment they need and deserve.

We all know a bit too well that 90% of dental practices in England are closed to NHS routine patients. That is essentially creating dental deserts all across the country, including, of course, in my constituency. It is something I see all too often in the Halton and the Cheshire West and Chester parts of my constituency. I see only too clearly how bleak and extreme the dentistry desert landscape has become.

I was recently contacted by my constituent Allan from Northwich, who had been registered with the local dentist for over 10 years. After a visit to a private hygienist, he was advised to book a dental check-up. When he tried to do so, he was told that he had been de-registered as an NHS patient because he had not had a check-up in over two years. That happened during the pandemic, and he was one of many people who could not have a check-up in that period. Again, that has been documented in the debate. He was told that the dentist was not taking any new NHS patients due to a lack of capacity, yet he could be offered a fully private paid check-up in just a few weeks' time. Of course, if people do not have the money in their pocket and do not have the ability to pay, that is not possible, and that is the case for far too many of our constituents up and down the country. Why should Allan, and millions like him, not be able to get access to the NHS dental services they need if they cannot afford private care—unlike some in this country, and even some Members on the rather sparse Government Benches that I see at the moment?

Across Britain, too many people face the stark choice of having to pay for expensive payment plans in the private sector or going without dental treatment. The cases of people resorting to DIY treatment have been well documented, as has the additional strain on our NHS hospital services when people go for emergency dental treatment. The problem extends to all parts of my community. In a recent meeting with the joint headteachers of Leftwich Community Primary School, they raised the desperate attempts they have made to try to get NHS dental appointments for some of their primary schoolchildren. Of course that is not the teachers' bread-and-butter issue, but they are going the extra mile to help some of the children most in need in my constituency—and again to no avail.

What have the Government done to ensure increased access to dentists across England, including in my patch in Cheshire and Merseyside? The short answer is not a lot, and the situation is getting worse. I and other Members of Parliament who represent Cheshire and Merseyside constituencies recently met the chief executive and chair of the integrated care board, who told us that they have been informed by the Department of Health and Social Care that the underspend that they had inherited to spend on local dentistry, which amounted to some £10 million, must now be de-ringfenced and used for what they classed "inflationary cost pressures", not for NHS dentistry. That has come from the Department itself. I would be interested to hear a response from the Minister on that, because it is incredible that NHS England previously said that that money was ringfenced, yet now we have evidence from the integrated care board of direction from the Department of Health and Social Care saying, "No, you will spend it on other things."

With my neighbouring MPs across Cheshire and Merseyside, we made strong representations to the chair and chief executive of the integrated care board, but, as outlined by my good colleague the shadow Secretary of State, this is happening up and down the country. It is happening everywhere, almost by design: running down NHS dentistry, making it a thing of the past so that the default position is private dentistry.

2.33 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): One of the most important steps the Government can take to improve access to NHS dental care is to boost our workforce and train more dentists and dental professionals, in line with the Government's NHS long-term workforce plan,

which has a clear reference to dental training as a priority. I will focus in particular on the importance of training dental professionals, who support dentists in many important ways. The workforce plan recognises that we must ensure that the skills of our whole dental workforce are utilised, by supporting dental hygienists, dental therapists, dental nurses and others to provide additional care, freeing up more time for dentists and increasing overall dental care and provision. I will focus on the importance of that and what the Government are doing to prioritise it.

I digress briefly by saying that in my own professional background as a solicitor—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I know how vital it is that our support staff are there to help the qualified solicitors do our job. We could not work without them and without their expertise, often honed over many years and in particular specialised areas. The same applies to the dental profession.

I applaud and commend all those who work in the profession and support dentists. I welcome the Secretary of State's statement that we must empower them to take on even more responsibility—not because it is a burden, but because I can see how those working in professional environments find their work increasingly fulfilling the more responsibility they are trained to take on. I support her statement that we should do that and ensure that those staff are qualified, competent and indemnified.

Turning to the NHS long-term workforce plan in particular, while it is commendable that dentistry training places have a target and the Government are working to expand places by 24% by 2028-29, I particularly applaud the focus on increasing training places for dental therapy and hygiene professionals by 28% in the same period, adding hundreds more professionals to our dental workforce. That work is not just looking to the future, but is happening now: in the past year, NHS England has made an investment in postgraduate dental specialty training, focused on areas currently underserviced by existing provision, which will improve access to specialist dental services.

As the plan states:

"We recognise the important contribution to dental care that the wider dental workforce makes, including dental nurses. While training of dental nurses is largely the responsibility of dental practices, we will work with dental practices and other stakeholders to support the wider dental workforce to meet NHS service delivery plans for dentistry."

It is heartening to note that

"the Plan aims to deliver 15% of dental activity through dental therapists and dental hygienists, as opposed to the current estimate of 5%."

That has to be a positive target to work to. In addition, the plan focuses on the

"national Return to Therapy programme…being developed to enable dental therapists working as hygienists to fulfil their full scope of practice",

and states that

"NHS England is reforming contractual arrangements to encourage more dentists back into NHS practice and to make it easier for therapists and hygienists to provide NHS care".

I will move on to the consultation that the Government held on making better use of the whole dental workforce, supporting dental hygienists and therapists to provide additional care to patients. I know the Secretary of State has said that the Government will shortly set out the outcome of the consultation. I urge them to do so and to take particular note of any contributions to that consultation from dental hygienists, therapists or nurses. They have so much to offer through their work at the coalface on the challenges that we all recognise in ensuring that everyone can see a dentist quickly and receive the treatment they need to keep themselves healthy and well. Dental care is an essential part of the NHS and should continue to be so for the future.

2.38 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I sit on the Health and Social Care Committee and was shocked at what I heard during the inquiry, but it lined up with what residents in my constituency are facing. There are more than 100,000 people living in my constituency and only seven dental surgeries, at least three of which are not accepting any new adult patients. That issue is not unique to Erdington. Across the west midlands, 73% of dentists are not accepting any new adult patients.

A constituent contacted me after her dentist's practice closed down, as she had spent four hours trawling through websites and ringing practices, and she was not getting anywhere. She cannot afford private dental care, and her son has a serious health condition that means he requires regular dental check-ups. She explained that to every practice she could, but without success. Another constituent's daughter was referred for braces in 2021. Two years later, after being referred to three separate orthodontists, she was told that there is a waiting list of more than 1,500 children, and it continues to rise. The response that I received from NHS England advised my constituents to call 111 for any urgent care services, and said that it is

"working to address the challenges facing the service right now."

The list of challenges is long. The record of the Conservative Government means that NHS dentistry has completely collapsed. Over the past two years, 6 million adults tried and failed to get an appointment, and 4.4 million did not even try because they knew that there was no hope. Rotting teeth is the No. 1 reason that children aged six to 10 are admitted to hospital. Despite that, seven in 10 UK dentists are not accepting any new child patients. Shamefully, one in 10 people in the UK have attempted their own dental work out of pure desperation. That is how my constituents are experiencing the shocking record of the Conservative Government: getting them to properly fund our NHS is quite literally like pulling teeth.

In April last year, Ministers promised a dental recovery plan. In December, the Secretary of State promised in the Government's response to the Health and Social Care Committee's report—I was there—that the plan would be "published shortly," so where is it?

Unlike the Government, Labour does have a plan that would help people in our communities to access the NHS dentistry that they so desperately need. Labour would fund NHS practices to provide 700,000 more urgent appointments. Our plan would create incentives for new dentists to work in the dental deserts that the Tories have created. And, rather than offering sticking-plaster solutions, we would reform the dental contract to rebuild the service in the long term.

[Mrs Paulette Hamilton]

It is becoming more and more obvious, everywhere we look in Britain, that nothing works, and our NHS dentistry is no exception. My constituents, and people across the UK, cannot go on without basic healthcare while we watch our NHS crumble around us. Only the Labour party has a plan for NHS dentistry. Like a decaying tooth, it is time for this Government's extraction.

2.43 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I wish to put on the record at the outset my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for his work on dentistry. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), for her early engagement with colleagues on this topic just days into her new role.

My constituency office has received enquiries from almost 200 residents who have been unable to access NHS dentistry services, despite the fact that there are many dentists in our town. The current NHS contract for dentistry stems from Labour's reforms of 2006, and has increasingly shown itself to be lacking. The regime of payments based on units of dental activity has been unfair to dentists from the start, and, due to insufficient commissioning in areas of greatest need, it has been unfair to patients too.

Last year, a practice based at Firthmoor community centre in Darlington handed back its NHS contract as it was unable to be economically viable while being paid a mere £23.50 for a UDA. After struggling to recruit a new dentist, the owner of the practice, who also operates in other parts of the north-east and is paid almost £40 for a UDA in leafy parts of Newcastle, took the very sad but entirely understandable decision to close their Darlington branch. No business can recruit and employ staff when the money coming in does not cover the operating costs, never mind make a profit. NHS England, which did the commissioning prior to April 2023, offered to increase the UDA rate to nearly £30, but frankly, that was too little, too late.

When the North East and North Cumbria integrated care board took over responsibility for dentistry in April last year, I was filled with fresh hope that a resolution for the situation in Darlington would be found. I was assured that emergency provision would be expanded and additional commissioning would be provided at a higher UDA to further expand provision in Darlington. Imagine my dismay and disappointment when, in late November, I learned that little, if anything, had been done—literally nothing. There then followed numerous meetings, conversations and communications as I became increasingly angry that I had effectively been misled and my constituents were still being under-provided for. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for kindly highlighting my work on this topic as a constituency MP, in contrast to his time prior to his current role, when he mentioned dentistry not once.

Our ICBs do not even have to have a dentist on their boards. It has become clear to me that only by our lobbying, pushing and raising this in the media will our ICBs actually turn their attention away from their own internal bureaucracy and focus on the job of providing the services that they have an obligation to commission. I welcome that the Government will bring forward a dental recovery plan, which really cannot come soon enough. In the meantime, I urge the Minister to give our ICBs a boot up the backside and get them to pull their finger out. When things are as bad as they are, their underspend on dentistry is utterly shocking.

While I am on my feet, I have a few suggestions for the Minister. I have shared them directly with her before, but it would be good to get them on the record. We need more dental training. Will she consider the addition of a dental school to Teesside University, alongside its excellent dental technician training facilities? I welcome that we will oblige our new dentists, whose training comes at massive public cost, to spend a period of time providing public services before they go fully private. Dentists should be required to publish their fees and charges for NHS, private and insurance-backed work, so that patients can make clear and informed choices. We also need to see greater provision of mobile dentists visiting schools, particularly in areas of higher deprivation.

We need to see much more progress on this issue. We need to go further and faster, and I am quite sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister is the right person to do just that.

2.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I need hardly say that dentistry is not the only part of the national health service that the Conservative Government have allowed to fall into crisis while shamelessly seeking to shift the blame on to others. However, it is welcome that we have the chance to focus today on dentistry and on the millions of people in this country, including many thousands in Westmorland, who are being so badly let down.

For communities in Westmorland and Lonsdale, the heart of this crisis is a basic difficulty in securing an NHS appointment. Many people in our area know that they cannot afford to have their teeth or their children's teeth checked. They feel a crushing financial burden, and a burden of guilt, because they cannot access an NHS dentist for themselves or their family, and they know that they cannot afford to go private.

This crisis has very real, very personal, very expensive and very painful consequences for people in our communities in Cumbria and nationwide. Healthwatch found that one in 10 people in England had resorted to paying for private dental care because they could not find an NHS dentist. However, most people I speak to cannot afford to go private, so what do those families do? Well, YouGov found that one in 10 adults had tried some form of DIY dentistry, the difficulty of accessing a dentist forcing them to resort to medieval practices. This country—proud of our prosperity and proud of our NHS—is in the shameful situation of its people's teeth and, most shamefully of all, its children's teeth, getting worse.

In 2022, the BDA found that one in four five-year-olds in my community in Cumbria had tooth decay, and that tooth decay was the No. 1 reason for hospital admissions among young people. Regular dental appointments are vital for preventing tooth decay, and even more so for children, whose teeth tend to decay more quickly. However, fewer and fewer children are able to access those

appointments because of the negligence of this Government. In Cumbria, the proportion of children seen by a dentist in the NHS each year went from 64% in 2018 to just 50% last year, a drop of 14% in five years. Half of our children in our communities—from Grasmere to Grange, Appleby to Ambleside, Kendal to Kirkby Stephen and Windermere to Warcop—do not have access to an NHS dentist. That is a disgrace.

I have heard at first hand from my constituents about the shocking scale of the difficulty of getting access to appointments for children. One attendance officer at one of our primary schools wrote to me earlier last year after she found that families in her school were going abroad for dental appointments. She said:

"Tim, I felt compelled to email you to tell you… We have a high number of children who are regularly missing out on education due to being unable to register with a local NHS dentist. A large number of our children have Polish, Romanian, Latvian and Ukrainian parents and therefore will find it easier to travel back to their parents' original home country rather than wait for a local NHS dentist who is accepting patients."

Wow! Let us be clear: she is saying that some children in Cumbria find it easier to get dental treatment travelling to a war zone than to access the NHS dental care that their parents have already paid for through their taxes.

For adults in Cumbria, the picture is also awful. The number of adults seen by a dentist in the past two years is also down by 14%, to only 36.5%. Almost two thirds of adults in our communities in Cumbria cannot access the NHS dentists that—as I said—they have already paid for through their taxes. This is not only a crisis, but a colossal act of fraud and an injustice. People who work hard, pay their way, and rightly expect the Government to be competent enough to provide the services they have paid for are being let down, taken for a ride, and forced into either intense and painful physical suffering or paying again to get the treatment they were entitled to receive from the state. This is more than just a health issue; it is a moral issue, a fairness issue and a justice issue. A quick search of the NHS website shows that the nearest dental practice to Kendal that is taking on NHS patients is in Accrington, an 80-mile round trip, and that the nearest NHS practice to Kirkby Stephen is in Newton Aycliffe in County Durham, a round trip of two hours.

Let us remember that, as others have said, we are also facing a cancer care crisis in the UK, and part of the problem is a failure to diagnose cancers early so that they can be treated and cured. Dentists play a crucial role in identifying oral cancers, but if two thirds of Cumbria's adults are not seeing an NHS dentist, we can be certain that cancers will be missed. They will therefore be untreatable and people will die unnecessarily. Core to our identity as Liberal Democrats is our belief that everyone in the UK should be able to access a dental health check-up on the NHS, with an emphasis on preventative oral health. We would reform the dental contract to ensure that those things take place, and fund it properly.

I am so often told by our local NHS ICB that, when all is said and done, the Government give them the money for only about half the people in our area to have access to an NHS dentist. Outrageously, that means that the only time they will contract a new NHS provider is when a previous provider has shut its doors, such as when the Avondale practice in Grange went private, leaving 5,000 people in limbo. People with a family of four faced a yearly fee of £1,000 just to stay on that practice's books. I have proactively gone out to persuade private dentists to accept NHS work, and although I know it is only a sticking plaster, I reckon I could find more. However, the ICB will not take those dentists on because this Government will not let them. The dentistry crisis is an outrage—an injustice meted out to people and families across our area. It seems to us in Westmorland that the best way we will defeat that injustice is to defeat the Government who are responsible for it.

2.53 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I rise for the 15th time during my time in this place to raise my concerns about the state of dentistry in my constituency. On being elected, the first letter I wrote was about dentistry, and although I fully accept the Government's position that things have got worse following the pandemic, they were pretty bad in North Devon before. When I moved to Devon six and a half years ago, it took me two years to find an NHS dentist, and then I had to travel 45 minutes to get there.

One of my concerns about the statistics used is that they compare dentists per 100,000 of population. As a very sparsely populated rural location, we might not look like as much of a dental desert as some other places, but at present the nearest dentist taking NHS patients is over 100 miles away. A constituent contacted me before Christmas to say

"with regards to the extremely limited dental care in North Devon. My partner, who suffers from mental health issues which limits him from performing daily tasks and travelling, was in need of dental treatment this weekend. However, after being on hold for almost an hour I was told that there were no appointments in the whole of North Devon and the nearest appointment was in Exeter. Travelling that distance is just not possible for someone who has mental health issues, and due to the nature of his illnesses, he cannot drive and I don't either at present."

Exeter, which is the nearest city to my constituency, is over 50 miles away for most North Devon residents. Even private practices in North Devon are unable to take on the volume of patients in some parts of my constituency. I have parents writing weekly to ask what to do when their appointments are cancelled because dentists are handing back their NHS contracts. And because residents in North Devon are unable to get check-ups, by the time they are seen they have extensive dental needs costing hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds. Calling us a dental desert is no help at all. Given the structure of dentistry, dentists are not going to want to deal with the oral backlog each unseen mouth potentially holds.

I welcome the new dentistry Minister to her role, and thank her for her immediate engagement on this issue. I very much hope that her experience will ensure that the Government's plan to further recover and reform NHS dentistry is expedited because, frankly, the good people of North Devon have waited long enough to see a dentist.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way, and I recognise what she is describing in North Devon. A 75-year-old and his wife who live in Tiverton told me that they were contacted by their dentist, who said that they were not seeing NHS patients any more. They called a further 20 dental practices and

[Richard Foord]

were told by several receptionists that no NHS appointments were available in Devon at all. Does she recognise the experience of my constituents?

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. While I recognise some of those concerns, I will come on to the response that the Minister has given to my petition in this place.

The waiting list for dentistry is reportedly over 100,000 in Devon, and there are reports of children having all their teeth extracted. While that is horrific, we need to encourage children and adults alike to practise good dental hygiene, as schools and nurseries have more than enough to do to educate their children without also brushing their pupils' teeth every day. When I visit schools in my constituency, they raise concerns about why dental hygienists with plaque-disclosing tablets no longer visit schools at least to highlight where poor brushing at home might be an issue. When I visited the Marines based in my constituency, they raised the issue of dentistry. On every social media post I put out, whatever topic it is on, someone raises dentists. Can the Minister please confirm when we will see a catch-up plan, since the last one apparently got stuck at the Treasury? As I have said before, I understand that money does not grow on trees, but neither do teeth.

I have presented a petition in this place about dentistry in North Devon, and I thank the Minister for her response, which details some improvements such as the Access Dental helpline in Devon. However, we know that even the post-covid schemes to help dentistry catch up did not reach places that needed it most, with the majority of the funds not actually being spent on dentistry. I have listened to my ICB's plans for catching up, but I am not sure that anything I have heard fully reflects the issues around rurality and dentistry. Delivering most healthcare solutions in a rural environment is different from delivering them in an urban one: in rural constituencies, the closure of one dentist can leave patients travelling an additional 50 miles. As I have explained, popping to Exeter for treatment is not an option for many, and far too many of our health treatments involve that 120-mile round trip. We need the dentists to come to us, not us to the dentists, please.

I warmly welcome the steps that this Government are taking to train more dentists, but as even the Prime Minister conceded when he spoke to local press on his recent trip to the North Devon District Hospital, those steps will not help in the short term. The Opposition clearly have no plan in this area, and they have very little grasp of what rural life is like, given that most Opposition Members represent urban seats. I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State commit to fairness in rural and coastal areas, but I ask the Minister to see whether it is possible to get some dentists on to buses and into rural areas, and especially into our schools. Over 50% of children in North Devon have never seen a dentist. Dentists come to see our fishermen; why can we not similarly arrange for them to see our servicemen's families, our schoolchildren, and those who simply cannot travel to an NHS dentist or afford to see one locally?

I do fear that the magnitude of the issue is not well understood by those living in London. People who call an NHS dentist in London will likely be seen almost immediately, and probably quicker than someone back home would have their phone call answered. Ideally, we would have regular dentist check-ups prior to getting toothache, but as even the bard said,

"there was never yet philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently".

My patience and that of my constituents is running thin with the ongoing delay in hearing that the dentist will "see you now".

3 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In a landscape where health conditions have become a barrier to opportunity, dental health has unfortunately joined this growing list. The state of NHS dentistry after 13 years of Conservative Government is nothing short of a national tragedy. However, I rise not just to address this dire state of affairs, but to give hope that there is a path towards real solutions and lasting change—a path that can only be available under a future Labour Government.

The national surveys by the NHS Business Services Authority and the British Dental Association evidence the stark reality of our dental health crisis. Children in parts of England endure waits of up to 18 months for dental procedures and our dental workforce has fallen to the lowest levels since 2013, with morale at an all-time low. In Hull and the east riding, the situation is even more alarming, with over half of adults in Hull not having attended a dentist's for two or more years, which is double the number in 2015.

My Facebook post asking people to share their experiences got nearly 300 comments, mostly on the same issues: the limited access to dentistry for children and adults; long waiting periods for critical interventions, such as tooth extractions, leading to prolonged pain and suffering for those in need; the inadequate availability of emergency care that forced individuals, as has been heard in this debate, to resort to DIY dentistry and unnecessary visits to A&E; and the impact on children's health, with alarming waiting times for crucial procedures under general anaesthetic.

Angie told tell me about problems with special educational needs dentists. She said that they

"have had to start outsourcing to other dentists in and around Hull who are willing to work with those with SEN. Still waiting on an appointment for my son to be seen by the dentist we chose over 6 months and he's supposed to be seen every 6 months".

Sarah told me:

"I needed a dentist during 2021 due to having chemotherapy…so I go to my local NHS dentist which I had been with for years!...they had struck us off with no notice…so I ended up ringing over 40 dentists with no response other than a waiting list. 2 years later after treatment I went private, in debt of over 2,000 pounds and having lost 1 tooth. I'm lucky to being back to OK health."

Stephen told me:

"Yeah our dentist closed at East Hull...and it's taken me 2 years to try and get my kids a dentist. I actually called 37 dental surgeries and even had to try York, Leeds, Scarborough, Lincoln. My Polish dentist could not resit the English dental exam after we came out of the EU in time due to Covid delays so she went back to Poland. Such a shame, she was an amazing dentist... She was fully qualified but there was an exam you had to resit…it was all delayed at the time so I think we lost quite a lot because of that."

Despite getting moulded for a new veneer for a tooth, he had

"to superglue an Amazon £9 tooth on my front tooth for over a year".

Locally, people are trying to make a difference, and I pay tribute to Chris Groombridge and the Teeth Team charity, which goes out talking to children—nursery age and primary age children—about oral health and hygiene. However, we need to train more dentists, and we need to do more to keep the dentists we already have. I really welcome the reform of the dental contract.

On dentist training, I presented a petition calling for a Hull York dental school based on the Hull York Medical School that the Labour Government set up in 2003. Unfortunately, the Government rejected that idea. However, there have been positive conversations with the integrated care board about a centre for dental development being set up in Hull, so some dentists could be trained in the city, albeit not in the dental school that we would like to see. If that does happen, and I do hope it does, we will still be waiting five years for dentists to be trained. The emergency is here and now.

That is why I so wholeheartedly support Labour's plan to get 700,000 more urgent appointments annually, reforming the dental contract to keep the NHS dentists we have, introducing supervised toothbrushing as a strong preventative measure, and funding improvements. The plan will cost money of course, but it will be funded, as we have explained, by abolishing the non-dom tax status, because people in Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle need healthcare more than the ultra-wealthy need a tax break.

Under the Conservatives, NHS dentistry faces a slow demise, with dentists leaving vast areas as dental deserts. Unlike the Tories, the Labour party believes in accessible healthcare for all. We pledge immediate action for those in urgent need and long-term reforms to restore NHS dentistry for everyone. The motion I am voting for today is not merely a formality; it is a reflection of the urgency and gravity of the situation. This Government's legacy is one of stagnant growth, soaring prices and a crumbling public service. It is a legacy of failure, and it is time for the positive change that only a future Labour Government can bring.

3.5 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It was music to my ears when my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) announced that a Labour Government will introduce 700,000 extra appointments each year, get more dentists into the communities such as mine that need them the most and ensure that everybody who needs an NHS dentist can get one, because I am fed up with the state of NHS dentistry. I am fed up that my constituents cannot get an appointment, fed up that people in Durham have resorted to DIY dentistry and fed up that Tory Governments have sat on their hands for over 13 years.

To be clear, NHS dentists are not to blame for the crisis. We know they are trying their best. It is Ministers on the Benches opposite who are to blame, and they cannot say they have not been told. I have raised this important issue for the last two years and other Members have done so for so much longer. Last May, I raised, as a point of order, that the Prime Minister may have made several inaccurate statements regarding the number of NHS dentists. For instance, in Prime Minister's questions on 3 May, he stated that

"there are more than 500 more dentists working in the NHS this year than last year."—[*Official Report*, 3 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 111.]

However, a freedom of information request obtained by the British Dental Association threw the Prime Minister's comments into doubt. According to the FOI response, the number of dentists is in fact down by 695 compared with the previous year, and there were fewer dentists undertaking NHS work than before the pandemic, bringing the workforce down to levels not seen since 2012-13. Unsurprisingly, the Government did not correct the record, and that says it all.

Everyone knows that NHS dentistry is in crisis—our constituents tell us regularly—but the Government continue with their "It's all fine" attempt at message discipline. Why do they not just accept that vast areas of our country are now described as dental deserts and do something about it? I hoped that the Chancellor would have offered something—just anything—for NHS dentistry in the autumn statement, but dentistry was not mentioned in the Chancellor's speech or the policy report. Not a penny was put forward, even though the Government announced a recovery plan in April last year. That recovery plan, as we have heard, still has not been published. Even worse, perhaps, was the sinister announcement, confirmed in the answer to a written question I tabled in November, that the Government would withdraw free dental care for the long-term sick.

Last year, I led an Adjournment debate on one such dental desert—my constituency, City of Durham—and I want to repeat what my constituents shared with me so that Ministers know what people are going through. One constituent told me that they had moved to Durham four and a half years ago, but could not find an NHS dentist. They were told that, after a kidney transplant, it was vital they had regular dental check-ups to monitor their health, but then they broke their tooth and could not afford to fix it. Another constituent told me she had to borrow money to afford a private appointment; after becoming pregnant, the exemption she got from dental charges was worthless because there were no appointments available. A young girl from my constituency tripped over and shattered her teeth, and her family could not find a dentist to help her. It was only after I reported the case on social media that a local dentist kindly offered their assistance. Another was unable to find an NHS dental appointment, so out of frustration decided to go private. Following that, they were diagnosed with oral cancer.

Why is this happening? A visit to a dental practice in my constituency provided some answers. The practice had just one dentist working two days a week seeing NHS patients and it had 10,000 patients on its books. In the north-east, almost 97% of surgeries are not accepting new adult patients. It does not take a genius to work out why my constituents cannot see a dentist.

The situation nationally is diabolical. Rotten teeth is the No. 1 reason why children aged between six and 10 are admitted to hospital, with an average of 169 children undergoing tooth extractions every working day. It is clear that a preventive approach to healthcare has eroded in Britain. Fundamentally, this is because of austerity. For over 13 years, the Government have hollowed out our welfare state.

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady and I share the same integrated care board. If this is to do with austerity, why has she not engaged with our local ICB to ask it about the underspend and the provision in her constituency?

Mary Kelly Foy: I do speak to the ICB whenever I need to and it has told me, as I am about to say, that our welfare state, of which the NHS is a part, has been hollowed out. The system is wrong. Austerity has caused these problems: it is not the pandemic; it happened many years before then.

Supporters of austerity often say they do not want to burden future generations with debt, but austerity and preventive healthcare are incompatible; we cannot have both. The healthcare problems this Government have caused our constituents—issues that could have been prevented with funding and investment—will now be more expensive to resolve down the line. Conservative Members have saddled future generations with poorer health, poorer opportunities and ultimately a poorer country, and it is time for them to go.

3.12 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my good friend my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy). I also raise an issue related to the integrated care board, which may be of interest.

I am sure you are far too young, Madam Deputy Speaker, to remember the school dentistry service but some of us of more senior years will recall the annual visits from the school dentist. Each year, the dentist and dental nurse would attend school assembly, class after class would line up, and every child would have their teeth inspected. At home time, anyone requiring further treatment would receive the dreaded letter asking parents to make a follow-up appointment. This was a simple, efficient, and productive process. The system allowed thousands of children to receive annual dental check-ups. The day was also an opportunity for children to be educated on the importance of dental hygiene—the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) mentioned the special tablets that highlighted plaque on teeth—and how to avoid the dreaded follow-up letter the following year.

I recently asked the integrated care board about reintroducing this scheme, but despite the NHS North East and North Cumbria integrated care board taking over responsibility for commissioning dental services, it passed the buck on this question to the local authority, stating in its reply:

> "Commissioning responsibility for dental public health falls under the remit of Public Health, which is hosted by the Local Authority. As such, the ICB is unable to comment on the school dental screening programme and this would need to be raised directly with Durham County Council."

This silo mentality is a disgrace. I will mention some statistics on opportunity cost in a moment. Although annual school screening would not necessarily be popular with the children, it would ensure they are all seen by a dentist, and it would free up space in dental practices.

Currently, our children are paying the price. Data from NHS Digital shows that 44% of children have not received an annual check-up with an NHS dentist. I looked on the NHS "Find a dentist" website today and there is not a single dentist accepting children aged 17 or under in my Easington constituency. Ministers should be ashamed that after they have been in power for 14 years, NHS dentistry is catastrophically failing our children.

I say to my constituents watching this debate that there are dentists accepting children in neighbouring constituencies—in Wheatley Hill, Easington Lane and Houghton-le-Spring. However, those dependent on public transport will find accessing these services almost impossible due to the appalling state and unreliability of our bus services. That is another story and another catastrophic failure of Tory neglect and mismanagement.

The situation for adult patients in Easington is also dire. There are no dental practices accepting adult patients within a 10-mile radius of my constituency. Within a 15-mile radius, there are only three. Again, that is completely inaccessible for those who are dependent on our unreliable and infrequent local bus services.

The Prime Minister says he is proud of his record on dentistry and has boasted that there are now more NHS dentists across the UK, but he must inhabit a parallel universe. In the real world, data shows that there were 24,151 dentists performing NHS work in 2022-23—more than 500 down on pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, as colleagues have pointed out, the headcount does not show the level of NHS treatment, because a dentist working in the private sector and doing a single NHS check-up in a year counts just the same as a full-time NHS dentist.

There are some scary statistics. One in 10 people have attempted their own dental work, with Healthwatch, the patients' voice, reporting patients pulling their own teeth out with pliers. That might seem ridiculous but my mother is 87 and very frail, and she did this out of desperation. It is appalling. Here is another terrible statistic—every day is a school day, Minister: tooth decay is the most common reason for hospital admission for children aged between six and 10. Oral cancer is one of the fastest rising types of cancer and kills more people than car accidents in the United Kingdom. Limited access to dental services means that fewer oral cancer cases will be detected early, which will lower the survival rate and further widen health inequalities.

It is time for the Government to get control of this problem and to deliver for the British public, who are being let down time and again by the dysfunction at the heart of the Conservative party.

3.18 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is clear that under this Government our NHS dentistry is in crisis. Across Lewisham East a number of dental surgeries are no longer accepting new adult patients. Recent Healthwatch polling shows that one in 10 people in England are paying for private dental treatment because they cannot find an NHS dentist, yet many others cannot afford to do this and instead are suffering. The Government promised to publish their dental recovery plan by the summer of 2023; it is now 2024 and the Government still do not have a plan.

I will focus my remarks on a specific issue facing dental patients, as well as practitioners, that is making this crisis even worse. A constituent of mine contacted me about her father who was driven to suicide after

more than a decade of seeking compensation for dental work that left him in severe agony. Despite being awarded a record compensation sum, he never received a penny. The dentist who carried out the surgery was registered with the General Dental Council, which requires all dentists, both NHS and private, to have professional indemnity to be a member. However, it turned out that the dentist did not have full cover. Instead, she was covered only via her membership of the Dental Defence Union. Such organisations are not insurance companies but offer professional indemnity on a discretionary basis against the risk of dental neglect claims and professional conduct proceedings. That means that successful compensation claims by patients are not guaranteed to be paid out. The General Dental Council currently accepts that as appropriate, but in my view it is not, and neither is it in my constituent's view, especially when it led to such a horrific experience for her late father.

The Paterson inquiry recommended that the Government should, as a matter of urgency, reform the current regulation of indemnity products for healthcare professionals. In 2018, the Government launched a consultation on indemnity cover for healthcare professionals including dentists, but little progress has come from it, despite the majority of stakeholders arguing against discretionary indemnity. I have written to the Secretary of State highlighting calls for the Government to outlaw discretionary indemnity options for what is considered appropriate cover for practising dentists, but I am yet to see a response. Therefore, I would welcome it if the Minister met me and my constituent to discuss this matter and the response to the consultation.

I am sure we all know that the Horizon scandal was a terrifying injustice, but in its own way the situation I am speaking about is also a scandal. Through no fault of their own, people are being denied huge amounts of compensation that they are legally entitled to. There is nothing in place to stop what is happening to my constituent's father happening to many more people—I hope that it does not, but that is the reality. The Government have a duty to address safeguarding for patients and dentists. To exacerbate the problem, most patients and professionals do not know that their discretionary indemnity arrangement could still leave them out of pocket. When will the Government bring about change, or are they just incapable?

3.22 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, 11 dentists have updated their data. Seven are not accepting adults and nine are not accepting anyone, but the reality is that if I phoned around, I would find that none of them on that list are accepting people.

The situation is so bad in Sussex that the ICB has taken matters into its own hands, ignoring the NHS portal, which it says does not work, and producing a list every month of dentists that will do drop-ins. For the whole of Sussex, we have two in Hastings—hopefully soon to be Labour, with our fantastic candidate Helena there—two in Hove and one in Brighton Pavilion. There are none in Worthing—Worthing West and East Worthing and Shoreham are hopefully soon to get Labour MPs—or in Crawley, Bexhill and Battle, Lewes, Eastbourne, Mid Sussex or Chichester, all of which are marginal constituencies in the next election. I would have thought the Government would be more on it to ensure that constituencies that they are about to lose have dentists that patients can see, but they are not.

The ICB says that it cannot find dentists to volunteer—that is what they do. All the ICB can do is beg and plead with dentists to voluntarily take extra patients, because the contracts do not work. Also, many dentists say that they cannot update the online system because other dentists do not update it, so if they do, they are flooded and all their places get taken. So dentists do not update the system properly. When asked why they do not, they also say that the system does not provide enough granularity. They can say whether they accept children and adults—yes or no—but they cannot say whether they take local people or prioritise other requirements.

Dentists prefer to operate a system in which patients have to ring around. That is no good for my constituent Carolynn Bain, who rang around all the lists in Worthing and Eastbourne, and in the end had to go to London for her dental treatment. She was told that dentists do not want to update the system because they are afraid of the effect. When I have asked the CCB—sorry, the ICB; they change the names of these darned things so often that no one can remember—it says that that inhibits the information to constituents. We need a system, like we have for doctors, of proper planning in catchment areas. We need the ICB to be able to say, "This is the population in this area. This is what is needed." Just like with doctors, patients should be able to choose dentists out of area or dentists they have a connection with, perhaps because they work in an area but do not live there. There needs to be proper planning, and there is none at the moment. That is why Labour's plans for more urgent appointments and better and more NHS training are welcome.

I hope the Government will also look at dental schools. At the moment there is no dental school in Sussex, Hampshire, Surrey or Kent—none in the south-east. There are London dental schools. That makes a huge difference to the ability to train and recruit dentists, because many will end up staying in the area in which they have trained. I urge the Minister to look at establishing a new dental school in the south-east—we would love to have it in Brighton, but Hastings is also a good option. Our Hastings candidate will be pushing very hard for that. After the closure of the University of Brighton in Hastings, there is a need for a new university or medical school there, and that would be very welcome.

We have heard a lot of pledges from the Government to increase the number of dental hygienists, but this is a huge smokescreen. Under the NHS, patients can only access a dental hygienist if they have been referred by a dentist. If they go private, they can pay to go directly. Actually, we should encourage people to go to directly to dental hygienists once a year, and once a year to a dentist. There is no need for a six-monthly check-up with a dentist if a patient also goes to a hygienist. But at the moment, patients cannot go to a hygienist unless they are referred as a tier 2 form of treatment, so they cannot do it on the initial check-up. That needs to change to make dental hygienists relevant; otherwise, the Government are talking about recruiting into the private sector a load of dental hygienists no NHS patient will be able to see.

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

The same goes for the list system. It is absolute madness that if a patient has not seen a dentist for six months or a year, they can be thrown off the dentist's list. That would never happen with a doctor. We need to change the funding model so that dentists are encouraged to keep patients on their list if they have not seen them. They should get a bonus for seeing them, and some reward for preventive treatment. That preventive treatment might not always involve seeing a patient, but may involve educational resources or sending them to a hygienist, with the hygienist reporting that no further action is needed.

All those things could be done. The start of an education and preventive approach should be in our schools. That is why Labour is pledging to take action. That is why this country has been so let down by the Government.

3.28 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate on such an important topic. Last year, I launched my "Save Wakefield's Smiles" campaign to highlight the horrifying state of dentistry access across my constituency. I have had an avalanche of constituents contact me to share their heartbreaking experiences of trying to get an appointment in Wakefield.

With permission, I will briefly share two of those testimonials with the House. Anne is a 71-year-old pensioner entitled to free dental treatment, and she has been trying to get a dentist appointment for five years. She told me that she feels let down by this country. She says that she has worked all her life since she was 15 and paid into the system for her entire career, and now has to decide whether to heat her home or get her teeth seen to.

Steve says he has been waiting two years for an NHS dentist because he cannot afford the estimated £5,000 it would cost to fix his teeth privately. He says that the anguish he has experienced while waiting has severely impacted his mental health. Steve told me:

"I barely leave the house. I am too scared to change job because I worry no one wants to hire someone in desperate need of healthcare."

Like Anne, Steve feels frustrated. He says that he does not think it is too much to ask to receive the care he pays his contributions towards.

Those are a handful of cases from my constituency, but I know that up and down the country, the story is the same. Nine out of 10 clinics in England do not have the capacity to take on new patients. Millions of our constituents simply cannot get an appointment, and this Tory Government have failed every single one of them. Perhaps most shockingly of all, one in 10 of our constituents now feel that they have no choice but to resort to their own DIY dentistry. What kind of country have we become? What sort of grim Dickensian dystopia have this shambolic Tory Government presided over, where people are pulling out their own teeth with pliers over a sink?

Colleagues will recall, I hope, my first ever question in Prime Minister's questions last year. I pressed the Prime Minister on the national dental emergency. I looked him in the eye and told him how 25% of five-year-olds in Wakefield already have visible tooth decay. I told him how less than half of Wakefield's children managed to get an NHS dentist appointment in 2022, and I told him how a constituent of mine had desperately telephoned every single dentist in Wakefield to find an appointment while his daughter cried in pain from her teeth, black with decay.

From the Prime Minister's reply and follow-up letter to my question, you would honestly think he was living on a different planet. He boasted of the funding he is putting into NHS dentistry, boasted of the number of NHS dentists and boasted that he had made reforms to the NHS dental contract. In fact, the British Dental Association has stated that the Prime Minister's boastful claims may have been inaccurate. I fear he may have inadvertently misled the House as a result. Indeed, the British Dental Association has been clear that it believes the Prime Minister "offered a grotesque misinterpretation" of his work to address the crisis. The Prime Minister may have promised a dentistry recovery plan last year, but months later nothing has been published and he has nothing to show for it.

The Prime Minister may have admitted last week that he is running scared of a May election, but we on the Opposition Benches could not be more ready to take our dentistry rescue plan to the British people. Labour will address the immediate crisis head-on by providing 700,000 more urgent dental appointments and recruiting new dentists to the areas most in need. To treat the long-term challenges, Labour will reform the dentistry contract, which is no longer fit for purpose in its current form. With a vital focus on prevention, Labour will introduce supervised toothbrushing in primary schools.

Unlike Government Members, who had a soft spot for announcing economy-crashing, uncosted policies under the previous Prime Minister, Labour has a dentistry rescue plan that would be fully funded by abolishing the non-dom tax status. We have an incredible, ambitious plan ready to go from day one of a desperately needed Labour Government. The Prime Minister may be scared of an election, but when I speak to my constituents and hear how badly we need to fix our public services, I know where I stand—bring it on.

3.33 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood), who made a superb speech. I have childhood memories of much older relatives who grew up before the NHS was created having no teeth left at all—they had had them all extracted because it was cheaper. I never thought that might start to happen again, but I fear that in some cases we are getting far too close to it with the current situation in our dental service. As many hon. and right hon. Members have pointed out in today's debate, this is not only serious for oral health but has other health connotations. New medical insights link oral hygiene with heart and lung health. If we neglect oral hygiene to the extent that we are—we have heard about that in the debate—that will have huge implications for the health of future generations.

As Labour's motion sets out, NHS dentistry is in crisis and is approaching breaking point, if it has not already passed it. The people of the UK are paying the price, and the poorest are paying a much heavier price. The Nuffield Trust says that NHS dentistry

"is at its most perilous point in its 75-year history."

In Wallasey, my constituents are living with the reality of that day to day. As we have heard, a seven-year-old is more likely to be hospitalised for rotting teeth than for any other medical issue. That is an astonishing statistic. Many people—including my constituents—are growing up in places where they simply cannot get access to dental care. In Wallasey, only two dental surgeries will take a child as a new patient, and not a single one is taking any new adult patients on to its books.

In Wallasey, we have seen people kicked off existing lists without notice. That happened often during the pandemic, with the excuse that they had not visited the dentist in two years—they could not, as the dentists were closed because of the pandemic—and they cannot get access to another provider. There are care homes in my constituency where there is no access to dental treatment for those living in them. I have had email after email from constituents writing to me in despair, disbelief and often pain, all unable to get an appointment. NHS workers, an expectant mother, a retired firefighter, concerned parents and disabled people with declining health are all unable to see a dentist because of the terrible 14 years of Tory neglect.

Last summer, Sarah wrote to me when she was at her wits' end. She had moved into my constituency from Liverpool a few years ago with her partner, pleased to be closer to family as they prepared to welcome a baby. Despite their home being close to four different dentists, Sarah was unable to register with any surgery. Each one was not accepting new patients. None even had a waiting list that she could join. She has now lost one molar and broken three. She has tried and failed to get an emergency appointment numerous times, and she has had to call 111 in desperation. She is in constant pain and still has no access. Her little boy, who is now four years old, has never seen a dentist, despite his parents' best efforts.

Dentists, too, are outraged. Last year, Annette, a local dentist who has a superb surgery and has worked for the NHS her whole life, wrote to me in total despair. Her surgery has being working overtime to see NHS patients and to try to meet the unmet need—it has even overperformed on its targets to get the NHS to care for local people who desperately need it. She was doing that, but it got to the stage where her surgery was not being paid for NHS work due to errors and unexplained hold-ups in money. Just before Christmas, she said:

> "At the end of next year I will have been a dentist for 50 years, always working on the NHS. I don't think I have ever known it in such a bad state, nor for the Government to have so little care of its state."

She is over-worked, under-compensated, exhausted and unable to keep up with demand, and she is not being paid for the work that she is doing. It is a terrible state of affairs.

We see a picture of underspent ICB dental budgets and massive unmet need. It is obvious that those things demonstrate a system that simply is not working. The Government know about this as well as we do and announced last April that there was going to be a plan, but we still have not seen one. If they care, where is their sense of urgency? They cannot say that our plan to put NHS dentistry in working order will not work when they will not bring forward their own plan. They must get on with it now. My Wallasey constituents are in pain, and I expect it to be alleviated.

3.39 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Most of us get two sets of teeth in our lifetime. We learn with our milk teeth how to take care of them, and then, as adults, we must take care of the teeth that should see us through to the end of our days. Often overlooked, sadly, is that it is getting harder and harder to take care of our teeth. In my constituency, seven dental surgeries responded to a survey and revealed that five were not accepting any new adult patients. In 2022, the Local Government Association found that Tamworth was one of the most difficult places in the country to register for a dentist, with a striking ratio of 0.065 dentists per 1,000 people. Tamworth is growing. Many new houses are being built in the constituency, and it is consistently raised with me that there are no services to match the growth in population. That refers not only to schools and GP surgeries, but to NHS dentistry. Tamworth's population has grown by nearly 3% between 2011 and 2021.

We also know that tooth decay is now the most common reason that children aged between the ages of six and 10 are admitted to hospital. It is therefore no surprise that the Health and Social Care Committee report in 2023 branded the current contract "not fit for purpose" and described the state of the service as

> "unacceptable in the 21st century".

The current contract prioritises Government aims over patient care. The Government also did not fundamentally reform the contract when advised to by the Health and Social Care Committee, so patients are left with inadequate provision and a lottery in access to care. Last year, over 12 million people were unable to access dental care. That is more than one in four adults in England and three times as many as before the pandemic. In times of crisis, more and more people are picking up the pliers and turning to do-it-yourself dentistry, with a poll from YouGov indicating that one in 10 adults attempted some form of the dangerous practice last year.

Free healthcare at the point of access is a cornerstone of this country pioneered by a Labour Government, yet recent Healthwatch polling shows that one in 10 people in England paid for private dental treatment in the last 12 months because they could not find an NHS dentist. This is having adverse effects on the detection of oral cancer. I campaigned against the privatisation of cancer care services in Staffordshire and I am dismayed that one of the detection and diagnosis avenues is becoming privatised by stealth. Millions who cannot afford to go down that route are left without the help they need. I share concerns raised by my colleagues that the Government are rolling out a pilot in Cornwall in which only children and the most vulnerable patients will be eligible for NHS treatment.

The Government have been ignoring all the symptoms of decay, and now NHS dentistry is in need of a root canal. It is not enough to wait for the tooth fairy to fix these problems. I support my Labour colleagues in calling for urgent reform. Like a cavity, we must repair the damage caused by this Government. We need Labour's plan to create 700,000 more appointments a year. We need targeted recruitment schemes to fill the voids of decay left by a lack of strategy. We need reform to the dental contract. It is time to rescue NHS dentistry from this crisis, and get patients seen on time and smiling again.

3.43 pm

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): As a man with a great fondness and enthusiasm for Irn-Bru and a habit of throwing my body on the line on the football pitch to make up for a lack of skill, it is fair to say that over the years I have had to rely quite a few times on fantastic NHS dental care. But, like for far too many of my constituents, those positive past experiences of NHS dentistry are exactly that—a thing of the past.

We have all heard today stories of constituents who have struggled to access dentist care when they needed it and struggled to pay for private care in the absence of NHS provision in their area. Whether they have been struck off as a patient over time or their NHS practice has gone completely private, our constituents are repeatedly paying the price for the continued failure to stop the rot in dentist provision. Just in the last week, I have had constituents contacting me to express their frustration and challenge in accessing routine dental appointments, with NHS dentists telling them they can only have emergency care. People are forced to wait for things to get worse just so they can afford to be seen. Another told me about the incredible cost they are now having to pay to drive to see an NHS dentist, having been pushed further and further afield as more and more practices near them have withdrawn eligibility. This should not be acceptable, but shamefully it is far too common. Last year nearly 800 people across Bedfordshire were admitted to accident and emergency units for tooth-related reasons. In the year before, 165 children in central Bedfordshire presented at hospitals requiring a tooth extraction: 165 young people had to go to hospital to receive treatment for conditions that should have been picked up months earlier. Across the country, nearly 5 million people were told when they last inquired that no appointment was available, either because the practice was not taking more patients or because it was fully booked.

Sadly, under the present Government this situation has become endemic, and what is so heartbreaking is that it is not a new issue. For some time, Members on both sides of the House have been sounding the alarm bell, but rather than working with professionals to bring about the changes that are needed, the Government have ignored them and just tweaked around the edges. The effect has been the continued decay of dental provision throughout the country. We are nearly a year on from the promise of a dental recovery plan which is yet to be published, but our NHS dentists need immediate support to alleviate the pressures they are facing and the pain their patients are suffering.

Shamefully, as we have already heard today, integrated care boards throughout the country—including mine—are struggling to make use of the money available to them because of the challenges posed by the current funding and contract structure for bringing dentists into the NHS fold. That cannot be acceptable to anyone in the Chamber who recognises the existence of a crisis that requires emergency action to put it right, and certainly requires a plan that involves a fixed date rather than some unspecified point in the future.

We need a Government who will finally prioritise this issue, take the necessary action to ensure that dentists are available to those who need them, and return the service to a better footing for all our constituents. We need incentives for new dentists to work in areas where there is the greatest need, we need 700,000 more urgent appointments for patients requiring, for instance, fillings and root canal treatment, and yes—we need supervised toothbrushing in schools for three to five-year-olds to target the root of some of these challenges. If Conservative Members have a problem with that, I dread to think what they will make of some of the things that are already happening in schools which are now teaching cooking, physical education and hygiene. All those subjects play an important part in our school system. When we are facing such a clear issue as the current state of dental care for young people, it is shocking to think that we could sit on our hands and not do our bit to try and support them.

As well as all that, we need the fundamental reform of the NHS dentists' contract that will put the service back on to a good footing. Together, Labour Members have a plan to put dentistry back on track, but I hope all Members will agree that my constituents have already had to wait long enough just to have an MP who wants to do this job. As the Government drag out and drag out the date of the next general election, my constituents should not be having to wait for an election to see national change on this issue. Please, let us stop pushing that strategy further and further away. Let us stop turning to infighting and being obsessed with who our next leader will be, and agree together today to put something right. Labour has a plan to get NHS dentistry back on track, and I hope that Members in all parts of the House will back it today.

3.48 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, because inability to gain access to an NHS dentist is an issue plaguing my constituents.

In 2024 Tory Britain, the opening of additional NHS dentistry practices is national news, with reports of people queuing on high streets just for the chance to be seen by a dentist. This is a Britain where a call to an NHS dentist to inquire about registering as a new patient is met with laughter down the phone. That is not hyperbole or hearsay: it is what I heard when I tried to register my 88-year-old mother and myself with a new NHS dentist. My dad does not need one: he had his teeth taken out for his 21st birthday, because—my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) made this point—it was cheaper and easier. It is shocking that we seem to be back in that situation today. In 2024, it is easier to get your hands on Taylor Swift tickets than to get an NHS dental appointment.

For the benefit of the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), who is no longer in her place, my constituency is a rural one, and it is a beauty. However, for many of my constituents, living in a rural constituency makes accessing vital services nothing short of stress-inducing. The presence of the new Labour Members, my hon. Friends the Members for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) and for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern), would point to the idea that people in rural communities do believe that Labour has got a grip on what rural communities need; and our colleagues the candidate in Hexham, Joe Morris, and the candidate in Carlisle, Julie Minns, are also telling me that their local people, and hopefully future constituents, believe that Labour has a grip on what is needed in rural communities.

When services are not available in Burscough, in my constituency, it is not as simple as phoning the next practice down the road, or the one just over from that. It means travelling to Skelmersdale, to Southport, to Liverpool. One of my constituents has contacted every practice in our constituency and beyond, from Ormskirk to Blackpool, and is unable to register anywhere as an NHS patient—and Blackpool is 50 miles away, a four-hour round trip by public transport. Another parent in my constituency has been unable to register either of their children, both of whom have additional needs, with an NHS practice.

Another recent arrival to Skem cannot register any of his family members as an NHS patient. I took up his case with the ICB—I am sure that the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), who is still in his place, would approve. The ICB told me the shocking truth that Government funding of NHS dentistry is only sufficient to enable around 50% of the population to access routine dental care. So where is the funding for the other half? What are the other 50% of our constituents meant to do?

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady is obviously in a different ICB area from mine and I am not privy to the detail in respect of her ICB's underspend, but it would be wonderful to know whether her ICB does in fact have an underspend.

Ashley Dalton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for leading up conveniently to my next point. The issue is that the ICB is actually bringing back more money than ever before from our dentists, and the local NHS dentist in Burscough is telling me that that is because they cannot recruit dentists or hygienists or other dental professionals in order to meet their target. They would love to do it; they cannot. The hon. Member for Darlington also talked about choice, but it is no choice when the only choice is private or nowt—and that is what my constituents are looking at.

If only the problem stopped at dentistry. The inability to access a dentist and regular check-ups leads to people having to visit their GP for knock-on health issues, or they are in so much pain that they are forced to end up at an already stretched A&E. Under this Government, the state of NHS dentistry services has ended up as dismal. A member of the public who contacted Healthwatch Lancashire recently, reported that they were in so much pain that they were feeling suicidal.

The public know that they cannot trust the Tories with NHS dentistry, and the alternative with Labour is clear. Prevention is by far the most effective way to improve patient outcomes across the NHS, and there is no better way to prevent than to educate. We have heard that a Labour Government will introduce supervised toothbrushing in schools for three to five-year-olds, giving children the best chance to avoid tooth decay altogether; 700,000 more urgent appointments for the most serious treatments such as fillings and root canals; and will incentivise dentists to work in areas where they are needed most. That is music to the ears of residents in rural areas such as mine. Even better than that, it is all paid for, by ensuring that the people who make Britain their home pay their taxes here, abolishing the non-dom tax status once and for all.

Toothache is nothing compared with the hurt of another five years of this Government's inaction on dentistry. It is time they called a general election to make way for a Government with a plan to fix our nation's teeth.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes for the last four speakers, so that we get the Division as close to half-past 4 as possible.

3.54 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The British Dental Association recently said that NHS dentistry is facing access problems "on an unprecedented scale". Those of us who live in rural areas such as Somerton and Frome will recognise the cavity of dental provision across rural Somerset. There simply are not enough dentists, as there is only one dentist delivering NHS services for every 1,773 people.

I have been in touch with dental surgeries across my constituency and none could provide, nor could they tell me of any NHS dentists in the area who are taking on new adult patients. Dentists cannot signpost patients to an alternative service because they simply do not exist, causing residents anxiety and frustration.

This Conservative Government have recognised that our NHS dental services are rotting, but they do not know how to fix them. They are the ones who have underfunded our services and failed to reform NHS dental contracts. The Government pledged to create an NHS dentistry recovery plan back in April 2023, but it has not yet been published. And while they delay and allow problems to fester, my constituents in Somerton and Frome are suffering in dental agony.

A constituent got in touch with me recently. They are 60 years old, and they work hard in their community. However, they have not been able to see a dentist for years. They told me that they feel hopeless. They are in constant pain and no longer have the confidence to smile, to socialise, to work or even to go shopping. They are left isolated by this lack of provision and, unfortunately, it is becoming way too common, especially in rural areas. The shortage of dentists is a major issue that limits access to oral healthcare, especially for elderly residents who are at higher risk of dental decay and social isolation. There are specific challenges to rural dentistry provision, recruitment and retention. These need to be recognised because gaps in provision lead to gaps in teeth.

This issue is prevalent in South Cambridgeshire, where there is a 100% refusal rate for new NHS dental patients. The lack of dental provision in rural areas is exacerbated by the fact that the east of England is one of the few regions of the country with no dental school to train new dentists.

I specifically want to see policies that address the lack of dentists in rural areas. Our communities are spread across a large geographical area, and if the one remaining dental surgery in a town such as Somerton or Castle Cary in my constituency cannot take on new patients, residents are faced with major obstacles to accessing a dentist. I want to see mobile dentistry hubs established to cater for rural communities that do not have dental provision.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that we require reform to NHS dental service contracts to provide an incentive for dentists to continue to provide these services, and to ensure they are able to take on new patients.

[Sarah Dyke]

A more holistic approach to dental services is needed, one that emphasises preventive care and that understands that dental health is intrinsically linked to general health.

It is possible to improve access to dental health in rural communities and to bridge the gap to dental care, but we must provide dentists with the respect and funding they need and deserve.

3.59 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): Before I begin my remarks, let me just say how disheartened I am to see the Government Benches deserted in this crucial debate on the state of NHS dentistry; nowhere could the picture of the dereliction of duty that the Government have shown to our NHS dentistry be made clearer. However, it is a pleasure to join so many Labour colleagues to speak in favour of the Leader of the Opposition's motion on dentistry, a part of our healthcare system that is in rapid decline and that has been left to rot by the absent leadership of those on the Conservative Benches—they were there until very recently.

The number of active NHS dentists in England is at its lowest in a decade. In my maiden speech, I mentioned that one of my constituents, too, had resorted to pulling out one of her daughter's teeth because dental provision is so poor in my constituency. Another constituent, a veteran, has been left without a dentist because armed forces personnel are removed from their home dentist upon joining up and cannot find a practice that will let them register when they return. How do the Government find it acceptable that people who take the bold and brave decision to serve our country are left abandoned by an NHS dental system that is supposed to be there for them?

It has been documented that our country is now plagued with dental deserts. According to a report published last year by the Association of Dental Groups, only a third of adults and less than half of English children have access to an NHS dentist. Some 90% of dental practices no longer accept NHS patients, leaving 4 million people without access to NHS dental care. In Selby and Ainsty, we have been left with just nine dental practices offering NHS services; we have just nine for a vast rural constituency that stretches from Doncaster in the south to Harrogate in the north, and suffers fundamentally with issues such as a lack of public transport in our rural areas—it is simply not good enough.

We did not get into this situation overnight; we have had 13 years—almost 14 now—of mismanagement by the Conservative party, which has shown a complete dereliction of its duty to protect the health of the British people. The Government's chronic underfunding of dental practices, with funding cut by a third in the past decade, has meant that patients are being failed on an unprecedented scale. The Government and the Minister have been quick to blame the dental contract, as well as the covid-19 pandemic, for the crisis that dentistry faces, but the Government have had 13 years to revise that contract, stabilise dentistry and make it fit for the future. Instead, they have chosen to rest on their laurels and have pursued muddled plans, allowing dentistry to crumble.

The crisis in our dental system can be traced back to one fundamental cause: challenges to our workforce. Over the past decade, there has been a complete failure to forward plan about the workforce needs of our dentistry system in the future. We must be aware that any hope of recovery must be catalysed and underpinned by a comprehensive workforce plan that sets the NHS and dentistry up for a long-term, stable and productive future that serves the citizens of our country. That brings me on to Labour's plan to revive NHS dentistry. It was Labour's plan 75 years ago that brought NHS dentistry into existence and it will be Labour's plan that will save NHS dentistry from the perilous position that the Conservative party has created. Our plan will give patients the care they need and deserve. Our plan will fund 700,000 more urgent appointments, for things such as fillings and root canals. We will incentivise new dentists to work in areas with the greatest need, tackling those dental deserts that are now so rife across our country. We will implement supervised toothbrushing in schools, so we can directly tackle these issues at source, and in the long run we will reform the dental contract so that we can rebuild the service and that NHS dentistry is truly there for all who need it. This powerful and comprehensive plan will give dentistry the staff, equipment and modern technology it needs to get patients seen on time, and help thousands of people across my constituency who are in such desperate need of the dental care that, fundamentally, they deserve as British citizens.

4.3 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Access to dental care in West Yorkshire is a problem that cannot be ignored. Dental care is a fundamental right and its absence has far-reaching consequences for the health of our whole community. Currently, no dentists are accepting new NHS patients in the whole of Leeds, with waiting lists lasting years. Only recently, a dentist in my constituency, in the rural market town of Otley, withdrew from the NHS scheme citing a "chronic lack of investment"; Manor Square has been a reliable provider of NHS dentistry to the local community for many years—intergenerational communities and families have been receiving NHS care at that practice for many decades—but now they cannot receive it there.

The practice's withdrawal from the scheme has affected 15,000 patients and raises serious questions about the future availability of affordable dental care in the whole area. One constituent was paying around £45 for two annual check-ups at the practice, with their children receiving free dental care. Under the practice's new private dental plan, the cost will be £640, which is clearly unaffordable for many families in Otley. Such costs are set against rising costs for families across the board.

The decision appears to be yet another symptom of the chronic underfunding and neglect faced by the NHS. Oral health is an integral part of our overall wellbeing and neglecting it can lead to serious health issues down the line. The withdrawal of NHS dental care not only affects individuals, but has a broader impact on the health infrastructure of our communities. The consequences are felt not just by those who currently need dental services, but by all of us who value a robust and comprehensive healthcare system.

We need an urgent reform of dental care. We need to recognise its critical role in maintaining overall health. Our communities deserve access to quality and affordable dental services. The Government have no clear plan, but Labour does. Labour plans to provide 700,000 additional appointments and education on basic life skills in areas where children's dental health is most affected, through supervised toothbrushing, and to reform the dental contract, which the Government have failed to do over the last 14 years. As many colleagues have said, there are major issues facing the workforce as many NHS dentists have left to practise privately, or have left the UK for countries where dentistry is more highly valued than it is by our Government.

To conclude, the lack of dental care in West Yorkshire is a serious concern that demands immediate attention. It is not just a matter of oral health but a reflection of broader challenges across the NHS. That is why we should support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Members who have taken part in the debate should make their way to the Chamber now, as the wind-ups will begin after Mr Western finishes his speech.

4.7 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): After 14 long years of Conservative Government, our country is going backwards. Nothing demonstrates that better than the dire condition of NHS dentistry. What kind of country has this Government allowed us to become when people are forced to pull out their own teeth with pliers, because locating a dentist taking new patients is almost impossible? Talk about going backwards: the Conservatives are dragging us back to Victorian times.

The lack of access to NHS dentistry is one of the most common issues raised with me by constituents in Stretford and Urmston. The most recent data available shows that only 4% of dental practices in my local authority area of Trafford are accepting new adult patients on the NHS. Moreover, the current NHS "find a dentist" website is badly out of date. Despite claims to the contrary, a search using a postcode from Old Trafford in my constituency reveals that none of the top five results is accepting new patients. My constituents tell me they waste time they do not have calling around surgeries because of the results they have been given, only to be disappointed.

For the lucky few who can find a dentist, the wait times for treatment are simply unacceptable. As of September last year, there were almost 2,000 patients waiting for oral surgery in my local authority area of Trafford, with the majority waiting far longer than the NHS 18-week target for treatment. Behind these numbers are people enduring months of pain, distress and misery. In many cases, their ability to work or learn is affected. They cannot sleep. They cannot enjoy the basics of life, like food and drink, and do not feel confident enough to go out with friends and family socially. That is the impact. That is the devastation that this crisis is causing up and down the country.

Although no one doubts the challenges that the pandemic has caused NHS dentistry, the truth is that a lack of funding and a failure to reform in the preceding decade left NHS dentistry uniquely exposed to the impact of the virus. Between 2010-11 and 2021-22, total funding for dental services in England fell by 8%, leaving budgets that have been unable to keep up with inflation or population growth. Although today many Conservative Members have been quick to complain about the dental contract, their party has been somewhat slower to do anything about it, taking 12 years to make what have widely been acknowledged as minor tweaks—tweaks that were criticised at the time by the BDA, which said that their implementation would make "little meaningful difference".

The Prime Minister pledged to restore NHS dentistry during his leadership campaign, but, over a year later, we know that a pledge from this Prime Minister is the kiss of death for whatever service he is highlighting. Lo and behold, his dental recovery plan, which was promised last April, is still nowhere to be seen. In contrast, Labour has a plan and it will not take us 14 years to deliver it. We will take immediate action to provide: 700,000 more urgent appointments; new incentives for new dentists to work in areas with the greatest need; supervised toothbrushing in schools for three to five-year-olds; and reform of the dental contract to rebuild the service in the long run. That is the type of ambition needed to address the scale of this enormous crisis, and it is an ambition that will have the funding it needs to become reality.

Politics is about choices. We on the Labour Benches choose NHS dentistry, ending the misery, the wait and the pain for so many, over tax breaks for the super-rich. There should be no contest. I urge all Members, including those on the Conservative Benches, to support the substantive motion.

4.12 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I start by expressing my thanks to Members across the House for their many powerful contributions this afternoon. They include my hon. Friends the Members for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood), for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather), for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards), for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern), and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). They all spoke forcefully about the struggles of their constituents to find an NHS dentist. That is far too common, as we have heard today. Recently I was contacted by a constituent whose daughter was told she would have to wait four years for an appointment to get braces. She is 13 now and will be 18 by the time that she is seen. That is not acceptable.

Let me also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for raising the issue of DIY dentistry. Recent polling has found that around one in 10 adults has attempted some form of DIY dentistry. No one should be forced to pull out their own teeth with pliers. That is Victorian healthcare in Britain in 2024. The British Dental Association survey found that more than half of dentists in England have reduced their NHS commitment in the past few years, and almost half are considering either a change of career, early retirement

[Preet Kaur Gill]

or turning fully private. I hope that this is a wake-up call for Ministers. All of this paints a bleak picture, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Nuffield Trust described it as a "widespread crisis", bringing NHS dentistry to its "most perilous point" in its 75-year history. That is why we are debating this motion today. Without urgent action, we are looking at the end of NHS dentistry as we know it.

Seventeen months ago, while he was losing a leadership election to the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), the Prime Minister pledged to "restore" NHS dentistry. I thought the Prime Minister might have learned his lesson about five-point pledge cards by now, but I remind the House what he promised: ringfenced funding; frontline retention; strengthened prevention; and contract reform. Yet hardly any of that has been delivered. There are fewer NHS dentists now than when he took charge, and they are doing less NHS work. There has been no national roll-out of a supervised toothbrushing scheme to promote healthy habits among children, despite cavities being the top reason they are admitted to hospital. As the Health and Social Care Committee has said, changes to the dental contract

"constitute tweaks rather than anything close to 'reform'."

The recovery plan, promised last April, is nowhere to be seen. The Government's one big idea so far has been to tweak the dental activity contract to allow practices to deliver 10% more NHS work but, having listened to today's debate, I do not think that a fraction of practices upping their workload by 10% will actually cut it—talk about toothless—and it certainly will not without the money to fund it. We have heard some laboured explanations from the Secretary of State about how local dentistry budgets can be ringfenced, yet simultaneously ICBs have been told that they can raid those same budgets to balance their bottom lines.

Let me raise a specific example. Last week, it was reported that one integrated care board in the west midlands has instructed practices that they will no longer receive funding to deliver the extra 10% of NHS work that was promised. Labour's candidate in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Adam Jogee, told me that people were already struggling to access basic dentistry as many dentists are not accepting new patients. ICBs are supposed to improve access locally, better integrate services and address inequalities. For one practice in Birmingham, the decision means that from next month the money for it to see NHS patients will run out for the rest of the financial year. The U-turn means that dentists who want to do more NHS work simply cannot. That is bonkers!

It is not just happening in the west midlands: throughout the country there are more examples of care boards cutting back funding for dentistry. Eight out of 10 practices are not taking on new NHS patients, and people are pulling out not just their hair but their own teeth, because they cannot get an appointment. One local dentist in Birmingham said:

"The system is on the verge of collapse—and the only stakeholder that will eventually lose out is the patient."

That is not restoring NHS dentistry; that is another broken promise. Does the Minister know how many other ICBs are withdrawing funding? Have the Government even made an assessment of the U-turn's impact on thousands of people who cannot get an appointment with an NHS dentist? Do they know how much scheduled dental activity will be lost under the revised financial plans of ICBs?

As we have heard today, the consequences for patients are shocking, particularly for children and the most vulnerable. Tooth decay is the No. 1 reason for hospital admissions among children aged six to 10. Tens of thousands of children are left in pain for months, if not years, waiting for procedures. They face difficulties learning, eating and sleeping. It is particularly grim when we consider that children from the most deprived areas are three times more likely to have hospital extractions than their peers.

How can the Government hope to level up opportunity for every child in Britain when some are in too much pain even to concentrate at school? Sixty thousand school days were lost to this problem last year. That is why our plan includes rolling out a national supervised toothbrushing scheme that targets the most deprived 20% of children, embedding good habits. It is recognition that prevention is better than cure. It will cost £9 million per year, which is dwarfed by the estimated £51 million that it cost for child tooth extractions in hospital in the latest year. Labour actually understands good economics—that dealing with issues early saves cases worsening and ending up in secondary care, which puts pressure on hospitals and costs the taxpayer far more.

While the Government have been rolling back their ambitions, Labour will ramp ours up. Our motion proposes giving dental practices extra money to run urgent care programmes to give people access to timely acute care, which they simply cannot get right now. We will fund an extra 700,000 urgent appointments a year from revenues generated by abolishing the non-doms tax status. Not only is that costed, but it is deliverable and doable, because dental practices have the capacity to deliver; the issue is that they do not have a Government with a plan that gives them the certainty they need. Our constituents need dental appointments far more than the wealthy need tax breaks.

I am grateful to colleagues who have raised the issue of the dental activity contract. They are right that it is no longer fit for purpose, and I think that Ministers know that—despite having pledged to reform it 14 years ago, which they have clearly failed to do. Do they share my concern that without wider reform to tackle retention issues in NHS dentistry, recruitment alone will be like trying to fill a leaky bucket?

In the meantime, NHS dentistry is dying a slow death. I was shocked to read about a pilot scheme in Cornwall in which only children and the most vulnerable are being seen on the NHS. At one practice, 4,500 patients were kicked off the books and told either to go private or to find another dentist. This is what we can expect under five more years of the Conservatives: dentistry for the few and everyone else left to sink or swim. We in the Labour party will never accept that.

NHS dentistry is an issue that crosses party lines and is as desperate in many Conservative constituencies as it is in Labour ones. We have good data on dentistry practices self-reporting whether they can take on new NHS patients. In Milton Keynes North, 12 out of 12 practices are not accepting any new adult patients, and in Bassetlaw, 10 out of 10 surgeries are not accepting new adult patients and seven in 10 are not accepting anyone at all. In Louth and Horncastle, the Health Secretary's own constituency, not a single practice is accepting new

adult patients. That is a big constituency; imagine how far someone living on the coast would have to travel to get an appointment. I heard it is about 21 miles to the nearest dentist. Is her message to constituents just to get on their bike? Or will she back our proposal today for a targeted recruitment scheme to train up new dentists in left-behind areas?

The crisis in NHS dentistry is urgent and cannot be ignored any longer. The Government need to drop the spin and accept the facts. In the short term, services need to be put on a sustainable footing, and in the long term we need deeper reform to ensure that everyone who needs an appointment can get one. I urge Members across the House to do right by their constituents today and vote for Labour's motion to rescue NHS dentistry from further decay.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): I welcome the chance to come to the House to hear from colleagues about the challenges of dentistry and access to dentistry, as well as some of their constructive ideas for our recovery plan, so that all our constituents can get the healthcare they deserve at a time when systems continue to be under huge pressure since the covid pandemic. The Opposition were rather determined to debate dentistry today; I am a bit suspicious that that is because they are trying to pre-guess what the Government's dentistry recovery plan will contain, but I am as desperate as they are that we get on with it and I can assure all colleagues across the House that I am working flat-out on that.

When the Prime Minister asked me to take on this job in November, I leapt at the chance to improve our whole nation's health and especially—as colleagues throughout the House will know—to prevent future ill health in babies and children. It is the chance to change the future health of every baby and child that is the big opportunity here, and I am proud of some of the measures we have already introduced to support supervised toothbrushing through the start for life programme and in local authorities.

The Opposition's motion talks about supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds. I do not know whether they do not know this, but we have teeth from before we are born. If children do not get your supervised toothbrushing until they are three at a minimum, their teeth are about four-and-a-half years old. It is much more important to have that supervised toothbrushing in the family hub, education for parents and supervised toothbrushing in nurseries. Let us say that that is something we can all agree on: children certainly have their teeth long before they are three, so I think our plan will be significantly better.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in her opening remarks, recovering and reforming NHS dentistry is a top priority for the Government. That is why one of the first things I did as a new Minister was to host a roundtable with key figures from the dental sector, including the chief dental officer Jason Wong and dentists from right throughout the country, to hear about the challenges they face. I have also met colleagues from throughout the House to hear about the specific challenges in their constituencies. I have heard them loud and clear, and every bit of feedback is informing our dentistry recovery plan.

I want to set out some of the recovery that is already under way—not enough by any means, but good progress, and not the failure that Labour wants to portray it as. It is a good recovery from a disastrous situation during covid. In 2022-23, 6.1 million more courses of treatment have been delivered than in 2021-22, and seven out of 10 patients have had a good overall experience of dental services, according to surveys. More than 18 million adults were seen by an NHS dentist in the 24 months to June 2023, which was an increase of 10% on the previous year. Some 6.4 million children were seen by an NHS dentist in the 12 months up to 30 June, which was an increase of 800,000 compared with the previous year. Nearly 1,400 more NHS dentists were available in 2022-23 than in 2010-11.

Of course, in our long-term workforce plan we announced a 40% increase to dentistry training places—that is incredibly important. I pay tribute to all our NHS staff, who continue to work tirelessly to deliver vital dental care to those who need it the most. Dental staff deserve our support, which is why we are working flat out on both short and long-term solutions for the recovery and reform of NHS dentistry.

Colleagues raised a number of points that I will seek to answer in turn, although I apologise that cannot deal with them all. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and a number of other Opposition Members raised the issue of tooth decay in children. I totally agree with her that good oral hygiene right from the very beginning, even before milk teeth come through, is absolutely crucial. She also praised community dental services, and I share her gratitude to those who go out into care homes, hospitals and community centres to help people with urgent care needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who chairs the Health and Social Care Committee, made a number of incredibly helpful points. He asked specifically whether we plan NHS access for all. We certainly intend it for all who need it. He asked how we will realise it. He said that we need to get NHS dentists back on side through our reforms, and asked about the dental workforce. He is absolutely right to raise those issues, all of which will be dealt with in our recovery plan.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) is a huge campaigner for his area's needs. He and I have already met on a number of occasions to talk about dentistry. He is right to highlight that some areas are struggling more than others because of under-delivery on NHS contracts on the one hand and insufficient NHS contracts on the other. I am prioritising measures to tackle both.

The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) talked about the UDA rate, which he said was just too low. I have a lot of sympathy for that argument, but equally, he will appreciate that the '22 reforms ensured that dentists would be paid more for complex treatments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) rightly challenged Labour. This is a Labour Opposition day, but Labour has no real plan. Labour Members talk about lots more appointments but do not say how they will deliver them. They talk about raising the money from non-doms but they have spent that money many times over. They plan to supervise toothbrushing for three-year-olds, but that is too little, too late.

[Dame Andrea Leadsom]

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) raised the issue of access to dentists. He was right to do so because that is a key challenge for everybody throughout the country. There is no clear pattern of deprivation going hand in hand with poor access to dentistry; if anything, the worst access to dentistry is in coastal areas. We are looking carefully at that to improve access right across the country.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) pointed out that his ICB is supporting and promoting drop-ins where there is availability for patients. That is exactly what ICBs should be doing and is brilliant news. I appreciate his points about the difficulty that dentists find in updating the NHS website. If he wants to take that up with me separately, I will be happy to look into it on his behalf. Likewise, the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) raised an important case about dental insurance. If she writes to me, I will be happy to take it up on her behalf.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) talked in particular about the workforce plan and training, which are so important. We will look at many ways of increasing access, both by enabling dental therapists and hygienists to work to the extent of their licence and by getting far more overseas-registered dentists and improving their throughput so that they can start working, particularly in the least well-served areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) highlighted the problem with NHS dentists returning their contracts in order to work privately, and he is right that we need to work on that. He shared great thoughts about a dental school at Teesside University, about the importance of graduate dentists working in the NHS and, of course, about the importance of mobile dentistry, all of which are crucial ideas.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) talked about long distances and the problem of getting dentists into more rural areas. She also raised the fact that toothbrushing and prevention are crucial. There have been some great contributions from Members right across the House, for which I am very grateful.

Dentistry has been one of the most challenging subjects in my portfolio as a new Minister, and I am determined to address it. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State outlined, we are investing £3 billion a year in dentistry, and we need to ensure that every penny is spent properly and delivers the best results. However, the honest truth is that to recover from covid, during which hardly anyone saw a dentist, whether private or NHS, money will not be the silver bullet—a quick funding fix cannot solve all of the backlog and deliver on our ambition that everyone who needs an NHS dentist should be able to access one. As such, we are working on both short-term recovery and long-term system reform, supported by the profession. We will be fixing some of the fundamental flaws in patient access and health inequalities that have been highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic, many of which have been raised in the Chamber today. We have made good progress on dentistry, particularly through the 2022 reforms, and can be proud of the improvements achieved to date. Again, I sincerely thank all dental staff for their hard work and commitment to recovery.

Finally, having been on the receiving end of "in due course" for many years myself, colleagues will realise that I am chomping at the bit to reveal more about our dentistry recovery plan. I need to ask them all to be patient just a little while longer, but I will change the line about when to expect it from "shortly" to "very shortly".

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

The House divided: Ayes 191, Noes 299.

Division No. 34] **[4.31 pm**

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn *(Proxy vote cast by Florence Eshalomi)*
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fletcher, Colleen
Foord, Richard
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Girvan, Paul
Glindon, Mary
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lightwood, Simon
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema

Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, James
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Gavin
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Shanks, Michael
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Samantha Dixon and Tonia Antoniazzi

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, rh Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Sir David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, rh Vicky
Fox, rh Sir Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig *(Proxy vote cast by John Redwood)*
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Dame Amanda

Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, rh Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Wood and
Suzanne Webb

Question accordingly negatived.

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

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

Resolved,

That this House recognises the impact of a once-in-a-generation pandemic on NHS dental services, with 7 million fewer patients seen in England across 2020 and 2021; notes these challenges were reflected in both Scotland and Wales; acknowledges the steps already taken to recover services in England including the introduction of a minimum rate and increased payments for complex dental activity to better reward dentists for their work; welcomes the publication of the Long Term Workforce Plan which committed to expanding dental training places by 40 per cent; and supports the upcoming publication of the Government's plan to further recover and reform NHS dentistry and promote good oral health throughout life.

Rwanda Plan Cost and Asylum System

4.49 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an Humble Address be presented to His Majesty, that he will be graciously pleased to give direction to the Home Secretary that, no later than 16 January 2024, there be laid before this House:

(a) a list of all payments, either already made or scheduled, to the Government of Rwanda under the Economic Transformation and Integration Fund, including the cost of the fourth- and fifth-year payments due to the Government of Rwanda under the fund;

(b) any document provided by his Department to HM Treasury relating to the per person cost of relocating individuals to Rwanda under the Agreement for the Provision of an Asylum Partnership Agreement to Strengthen Shared International Commitments on the Protection of Refugees and Migrants (CP 994);

(c) an unredacted copy of the confidential memorandum of understanding referred to in response to question 20 at the Public Accounts Committee meeting on 11 December 2023;

(d) any paper setting out the cost per person of relocating individuals to Rwanda and the Government's assumptions about the number of asylum seekers to be sent to Rwanda per year shared with or provided by HM Treasury between March and July 2022; and

(e) his Department's internal breakdown of the 35,119 non-substantive asylum decisions made between 1 January and 28 December 2023 showing the number of such decisions that were classified as withdrawn asylum applications and the number further sub-classified as either:

(i) non-substantiated withdrawals

(ii) other withdrawals.

I move the Humble Address to get some basic facts out of Government Ministers. Facts that, so far, they have been desperate to hide: facts about the Rwanda scheme; facts about the asylum backlog; and just basic facts about policies that the Government claim are their flagships but, in fact, are failing. Taxpayers have a right to know how much of their money this Government have promised the Rwandan Government in exchange, frankly, for a series of press releases. More Home Secretaries than asylum seekers have been sent to Rwanda so far, and some pretty expensive trips they have turned out to be, with an average cost of around £100 million a trip so far.

The public also has a right to know what has really happened to the asylum backlog, which still stands at nearly 100,000 cases. A total of 35,000 cases have been removed from the figures in the past year with no answers on why or where those people are. Are they still in the UK, or has the Home Office lost them? There are basic facts we need to know, in particular the facts about the Rwanda policy that we need in advance of the debates in Parliament next week. It matters that we know those facts, because we now know that the Prime Minister himself had huge doubts about the costs and efficacy of the scheme when he was Chancellor. However, he is still going ahead with it and he still will not tell us what those costs and those doubts were.

We know now from papers leaked to the BBC that the then Chancellor, now Prime Minister said that the "deterrent won't work". He was so sceptical about the scheme that he tried to cancel it in the leadership election and had to be persuaded against doing so, and he pushed for smaller volumes and lower costs, yet he will not tell us what the final agreement on costs and numbers was between the Home Office and the Treasury. Is it true that he watered down the scheme, just as the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) claims he watered down so many of her proposals?

We still need to know the facts, because the Prime Minister is still going ahead with a scheme that he does not believe in, does not think will work and knows is extortionately expensive, because he is too weak not to. We can see on his face that he does not support it and does not believe in it. He is just desperately hoping, in the words of the former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), for

"one or two symbolic flights off before the next election",

even if everyone ends up being sent back again, even if the whole thing collapses after that and even if the cost is a total fortune, because the Prime Minister is not planning to tell anyone before the election what the total costs are. In the end, the only deterrence that the Prime Minister believes in is deterring his Back Benchers from getting rid of him. It is weak, weak, weak, and the taxpayer is paying the price.

It is a totally farcical situation: a Prime Minister who does not think it is a deterrent, a Home Secretary who thinks it is "batshit", a former Home Secretary who says it will not work, a former Immigration Minister who says it does not do the job and everyone who thinks that what we have is an incredibly expensive sham with the taxpayer being conned. If Ministers disagree with everything that I just said describing their plans, what is there to hide? Tell us the facts, and show us where all of that is wrong.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): We do know a few facts here, and one of the facts we know is that the scheme has been in the making for 18 months. In that 18 months, the money that has been spent on it would have employed 6,000 caseworkers in the Home Office. Might that not have been a better way of proceeding?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member is right. There are many ways in which the hundreds of millions of pounds spent could alternatively have been invested. It is probably roughly equivalent to about a third of the budget of the National Crime Agency, for example, to take action on criminal gangs.

The right hon. Member is right, and we do know some figures on the costs of the Rwanda scheme. We know that Ministers wrote a cheque for £120 million in April 2022, and then there was another £20 million in summer 2022. They then did not want to tell us anything more at all. It was only thanks to the Rwandan Government and the information that they provided to the International Monetary Fund that the Home Office has been forced to give us a bit more information. Against Ministers' will, we know that they have written another cheque for £100 million during 2023, and they promised another £50 million in spring this year, in just a few months' time.

We have £290 million of cheques to Rwanda for no asylum seekers to be sent, £290 million to send more Home Secretaries than asylum seekers, nearly £100 million per Home Secretary trip, and there is more. The permanent secretary has admitted that there is a further payment planned for 2025 and another one for 2026, all independent

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of whether any asylum seekers are ever sent. I asked the Home Secretary in December whether in fact those payments were also £50 million each; he said that he was happy to confirm that. The following morning, it was put to him in media interviews that the Government were now spending £400 million on Rwanda, and he did not deny it. So we can only conclude that the sums are indeed nearer £400 million. Independent of what happens with this law, the plans and the flights, £400 million of cheques are being written to Rwanda when that could have been invested in tackling criminal gangs and could have been invested in making a difference. If it is not £400 million, again, Ministers should tell us what the actual figures are.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The right hon. Lady is making a persuasive case, with which I entirely agree. But does the Labour party have any moral or ethical opposition to processing in third countries?

Yvette Cooper: We already have, and have had for a long time, processing in other countries within the UK asylum system. For example, the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which I think both he and I support, means processing cases in other countries. It is also what happened for the Hong Kong scheme.

We know that the cost is now £400 million, and we can conclude that it is possibly considerably more. According to the treaty, there are additional per-person costs—if anyone is actually sent—to cover asylum processing, to cover accommodation costs for five years, and to cover three meals a day for five years. That is in the treaty, but the Government will not tell us how much all that adds up to. We know from the impact assessment for the Illegal Migration Act 2023 that the Home Office was prepared to say that the average cost of sending someone to a theoretical third country would be £169,000—a remarkable level of precision for a figure picked out of thin air. However, it will not have chosen a figure for that assessment that was higher than the Rwanda costs, because it will not assume that it would have to pay for three meals a day for five years everywhere. That suggests that the actual figure per person is higher. Maybe nearer £200,000 per person? Again, if that is wrong, Ministers should tell us.

Otherwise, it suggests that if the Home Office manages to sort out its legal wrangles and get flights off the ground, another whopping bill is coming. Suppose the Home Office manages to send 100 people to Rwanda this year, which is what the Court of Appeal said was Rwanda's capacity. Well, that means another £20 million cheque. If that is wrong, again, tell us the additional per-person costs.

Ministers say that they cannot possibly tell us any of these things because it is somehow commercially confidential. What a load of total nonsense. This is not a contract with a company with shareholders and intellectual property rights and competitors who will not bid if they think all their cost details will be scrutinised by other companies; this is an agreement with a sovereign state. If the Kigali Government choose to contract out housing to a private provider, that might have some commercial considerations, but that is a matter for them, not for us. Ministers claim that it will somehow make it harder to agree deals. Again, they are making up these arguments because they are embarrassed and do not want to reveal the figures.

In other areas, the Government have told us the facts. In March 2023, the Prime Minister announced £476 million over three years for the agreement with France. It was set out in detail, with £124 million in 2023-24, £168 million in 2024-25 and £184 million in 2025-26. We know what the future spending will be on that agreement with France, so why not tell us the future spending agreed with Rwanda? The work with France, which we support, covers coastal patrols, drones and technology. It needs to be properly scrutinised to ensure that we are getting value for money, but we support working with the French police along the coast to prevent dangerous boat crossings and to protect our border security. We want to go further, working with other countries to tackle the criminal gangs, but why publish those details in full and set them out several years in advance for France and not for Rwanda? The Government cannot claim that it is because they might be trying to negotiate agreements with other countries compared to Rwanda and not with France. They might have to negotiate future agreements with Belgium, the Dutch police and other Governments, given that the borders inspectorate has pointed out that many of the smuggler routes pass through there, but that is not preventing the Government being public about the facts on the France scheme. It is time that the Government gave us the facts that Parliament would normally be entitled to, and that the public and, crucially, the taxpayer should be entitled to. How much of taxpayers' money have they promised to Rwanda for a scheme that is failing?

The motion sets out some of the facts that we want: payments made or scheduled, including the fourth and fifth year figures; the per person costs; the memorandum of understanding that sets out the money agreement; and the agreement between the Home Office and the Treasury while the Prime Minister was Chancellor on costs and numbers, so that everyone has the chance to see what doubts the Prime Minister had, rather than their being hidden away from the taxpayer. We are holding this Opposition Day debate to give the Government the chance to give us the proper figures, which cross-party Select Committees such as the Public Accounts Committee, the Home Affairs Committee and the Liaison Committee have been asking for.

The Government also claim that none of that matters because the costs will be outweighed by the savings on asylum hotels, but I must break it to them that all this money for Rwanda is in addition to asylum hotels. It has been reported this week that the Prime Minister told the Home Office to keep open some asylum hotels. We know their plans for bases and barges have been unravelling. One hundred people were quietly moved out of Wethersfield in the Home Secretary's constituency and moved into hotels. Plans to put people into Catterick, in the Prime Minister's constituency, have now been dropped. It is costing more to keep people on the Bibby Stockholm than it is in hotels. It is total chaos and a total mess, which is why there are 20% more people in asylum hotels than there were a year ago when the Prime Minister promised to end them. Rwanda does not change any of that. In fact, their migration legislation, supposedly to enable Rwanda, is likely to make the backlog and the costs worse.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the lack of clarity over the Rwanda plan and its cost is happening at a time when the Tories have weakened our border security and broken the asylum system? For six years we have had criminal smuggler gangs continuing to take over the channel, while Home Office asylum decision making has collapsed. It is incredibly important that we get control of our borders and our systems at the Home Office, and it is vital that that transparency comes to Parliament.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is completely right. Over the last five years, the Conservatives have let criminal gangs take hold along our borders, along the channel. That is undermining our border security. We should be strengthening our border security and fixing the asylum chaos that has built up over the last few years. That includes going after the criminal gangs and stronger border security measures.

The Court of Appeal says that the Rwanda scheme capacity will be only about 100 people. Rwanda's asylum system is used to deciding only about 100 cases a year, and the Immigration Minister has admitted that the likely number of people is only in the hundreds. The current backlog is over 100,000 people, and last year over 90,000 people applied for asylum in the UK. We have a policy that will likely cover less than 1% of those arriving in the UK, at a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds that the Government will not come clean about. That raises another important question.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) *rose—*

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) *rose—*

Yvette Cooper: Before I get to that important question, I will give way briefly to both hon. Members in turn.

James Daly: Will Labour's policy, or proposed policy, for addressing border security be to allow offshore processing claims in Turkey?

Yvette Cooper: In theory, someone who was in Turkey and applied for the Homes for Ukraine scheme would be processed while in Turkey. However, it is not clear what the Government are proposing, or what the hon. Member is proposing, because nothing has been proposed by the Government. Labour's proposal is to go after the criminal gangs through a new cross-border unit, with stronger security powers, and a new security agreement with other European countries, and to stop the boats before they reach the French coast by going after the supply chain of the criminal gangs. Under the Conservatives there has been a 30% drop in the number of people smuggling convictions, which shows that they are not taking action on the smuggler gangs but instead have let them take hold, and we will tackle that.

Yasmin Qureshi: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Are not the problems with the Rwanda scheme compounded by the fact that it means we have to take people from Rwanda as well? What benefit do we get?

Yvette Cooper: That is an interesting point. It is true that the Rwanda treaty that has been agreed states that first the United Kingdom will need to take some refugees from Rwanda, but it does not specify who will pay for those refugees. We know that people who are transferred to Rwanda will be paid for by the UK taxpayer, and also that people can be returned if, for example, they commit serious crimes in Rwanda, which will mean that, effectively, foreign national offenders are being returned. There is a question mark over that as well. We assume from the lack of information that the UK taxpayer will also pay those costs, but again, if the position is different it would be helpful to know about it. The Minister has the opportunity to respond by giving us details of all the costs.

This raises another important question to which we have not yet received answers. Under the suspended provisions of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which the Prime Minister often boasts about as if they were law but which, in fact, have never been enacted, everyone who arrived in the country after July 2023 should be detained and removed to a third country. The Home Office has suggested that that provision will be enacted once the flights to Rwanda start, but more than 33,000 cases—probably involving more than 40,000 people—are already on the list. Are Ministers really saying that all those 40,000 people will be sent to Rwanda this year, even if the Government manage to get the flights off the ground? Given the rate at which they are talking of sending people to Rwanda, it will take more than 100 years to clear the backlog—and presumably all those people will be in hotel accommodation in the meantime, paid for by the UK taxpayer.

Will the Minister tell us what the actual plan is? Are the Government planning to implement the Illegal Migration Act if the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill is passed and to push up the backlog for perhaps a century, or are they in fact planning an amnesty in respect of the Act for tens of thousands of people? They have not admitted such a plan to their Back Benchers, and they certainly do not admit it in the social media graphics they send out.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Does my right hon. Friend agree that instead of spending this vast amount of money on a failed Rwanda scheme, Britain and the other European Governments ought to be thinking about the numbers of people, many from Afghanistan, who are leading a marginal existence, in desperate poverty and freezing to death, on the streets of Calais and other cities around Europe? They are the victims of human rights violations and war all around the world. Should we not be thinking about them and helping them rather than pouring money into the Rwandan Government, which has achieved absolutely nothing?

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend has made an important point about, in particular, the issues relating to Afghanistan, where we know there has been huge persecution by the Taliban. We also know that there are people who helped our armed forces and, effectively, worked for the UK Government in Afghanistan, and as a result have been targeted by the Taliban. The Afghan resettlement scheme set up by the Home Office has had all kinds of problems. It is important that there are proper reforms to the resettlement schemes to make sure that they are effective, and that they prevent people being exploited by people traffickers and people smugglers. That is why it is so important to take action to stop these dangerous boat crossings, which are putting lives at risk and undermining our border security, and on

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which the criminal gangs have made profits of probably £0.5 billion over the last few years as a result of being able to take hold along the channel.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The right hon. Lady mentioned 34,000 cases so far since the printing of the Illegal Migration Bill. Of those cases, if people are found to have no credible case for asylum to stay in the United Kingdom, and if they come from countries to which it is virtually practically impossible to return them, what would she do with them?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Member will know, we should be returning people who do not have a foundation in persecution or conflict, who do not have a well-founded asylum claim. They should be being returned to their own country. But he will also know that there has been a 50% drop in the returns of failed asylum seekers since 2010—a huge drop. We should be working with a new returns and enforcement unit, with proper staffing in place, to reverse that drop. He will also be aware, because it was in evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee, where he has worked immensely hard over many years, and because he takes these issues very seriously, that only 5% of those who arrived from Albania—including on small boats—over the past few years have been returned to Albania. Although we support the Albania agreement, it is in fact being used predominantly to return historic cases, and has not been used for the kinds of cases he is talking about, in which decisions should be fast-tracked and people should be being returned quickly.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way again, but she has answered a question that I did not ask. I was referring not to Albanians but to people from countries that she knows it is practically impossible to return them to. The Iranian Government will not let them off the plane. Eritreans would put them in jail and say they would be appealed on human rights. What would her party, in government, do with those people who had come here illegally from such countries, with no basis on which they could stay and no way of negotiating returns agreements with countries like Iran?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that people from countries such as Eritrea and Iran are very often granted asylum, and will not be sent to Rwanda under his Government's policy because Rwanda will only be able to take a hundred or a couple of hundred people a year, at a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds. That is the core dishonesty and the failure at the heart of the Government's programme—they are promising people that they will make huge changes to the existing system, but they are not at all. Instead, if anything, all they will do is stack people up in asylum hotels for even longer than the taxpayer is funding them, for a bill, currently, of £8 million a day—up from £6 million a day.

The Prime Minister declared the asylum backlog cleared—that is what he said—which is taking the country for fools. There are 99,000 cases in the backlog. That is probably over 120,000 people, and all the Home Office have tried to do is clear the cases before July 2022—cases that are already more than 18 months old. Those cases should not be in the system by now anyway. Any properly functioning system would have cleared cases that were more than 18 months old, but that is the scale of Tory chaos. Why are they just trying to catch up with themselves, clearing those very old cases? Of course, the backlog since July 2022 has doubled. Even their weak, limited target to clear the so-called "legacy backlog" has failed, with 4,500 cases not cleared and 35,000 cases simply withdrawn. We want the facts about that. What has happened to those 35,000 cases?

We know from the evidence to the Select Committee in November that as of November, the Home Office had no idea where 17,000 of those claimants were. How many of the 35,000 does the Home Office know to have left the country? How many of them does it know to be deceased or to be duplicate cases? And how many are probably still here? They might be working illegally, they might have restarted their asylum application and gone back to the beginning of the system, or they might be destitute on the streets. Whatever has happened to them, they are still here and the Home Office does not have a clue. Can the Minister give us a breakdown of the 35,000 cases? Is enforcement action taken if those people should not be here? It not, this all looks like more smoke and mirrors from a dodgy salesman Prime Minister.

We support some of the Government's measures relating to France, and we support the agreement with Albania. We want to see more proper international co-operation like that, and we should be on steroids in tackling the criminal gangs.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will give way one more time. I need to finish so that others can speak.

Dame Meg Hillier: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. She will recall that at the end of the last Labour Government, there were returns at the rate of one every eight minutes. Does that not demonstrate that, where there is a will, we can tackle those who should not be in the country and welcome those who should?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right, which is why Labour will set up a new returns unit with 1,000 staff to do returns and enforcement—to actually get returns agreements in place, to go through individual cases and to reverse the 50% drop in returns since 2010.

Instead of the Rwanda scheme, as part of our five-point plan to strengthen border security and to fix the Tories' asylum chaos we would use the money to fund proper action to go after the criminal gangs. We would have new cross-border police with stronger powers, similar to counter-terror powers. We would have new security agreements with Europol and other countries to stop the boats reaching the French coast in the first place. We would properly clear the backlog, ending hotel use; we would have a major returns and enforcement unit, alongside reform to resettlement routes, so that the UK continues to do our bit to help those fleeing conflict and persecution and so that we prevent people from being exploited by criminal gangs; and we would have proper international co-operation and proper plans to deal

with the problems at source by providing in-region support to refugees, which is something this Government have repeatedly cut back.

We believe in strong border security and a properly controlled and managed asylum system, so that the UK does its bit to help those fleeing persecution and conflict, as we have always done, and so that those with no right to be here are swiftly returned. Under the Tories, we have none of those things. We just have chaos. We just have a con.

Five broken promises from a failing Prime Minister. He promised to clear the backlog—it is still 100,000. He promised to stop the boats—last year saw the second-highest number of crossings on record. He promised to end hotel use—it went up, not down. He promised to return everyone—returns are down 50%. He promised to pass a new law and, to be fair, he did pass a new law—he just did not implement it.

That is the problem with this Prime Minister: shiny graphics but shoddy gimmicks; wide-eyed promises but never delivery. The Tories all know it, which is why they should all be calling for the same facts as us, because those facts will expose what is really going on in this Government—the con on everyone. They should stop letting their Front Benchers play smoke and mirrors. They should be asking for the figures. The House should get those figures, as they are the figures we need. That is what this Humble Address should deliver.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): The Opposition may not believe this, but I am grateful to them for giving us the opportunity to debate this important issue that undoubtedly matters to people across the country. I am grateful because this debate provides me with the opportunity to highlight the fact that this Government have a credible plan to tackle illegal migration.

Some things never change. When I moved to the Department for Work and Pensions in October 2022, the Labour party had no credible plan on illegal migration. And when I returned to the Home Office 14 months later, guess what? There is still no credible plan. Some things never change, and it is the same old Labour ignoring the British people's priorities and trying to glide to power under the radar without saying anything credible about these issues. By contrast, we have a credible plan, we are working through that plan and it is delivering results.

We should not see one aspect—one plank—of that plan in isolation; it needs to be seen in a joined-up way. Small boat arrivals to the UK were down by a third last year. Opposition Members may not want to hear that, but it reflects the fact that the plan and the earlier steps that were taken are working. It also bucked the trend across Europe, where illegal migration had risen. Our European partners are following our lead, with Italy, Germany, Austria and others all exploring models similar to ours.

The Government met their target of eliminating the legacy asylum backlog and there is improved efficiency across the system. We will take forward that learning as we set about dealing with the outstanding cases. The use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers is costing the taxpayer more than £8 million each day and one thing is for sure: if we were to take the do-nothing approach about the flow of cases into the system, which is precisely what the shadow Home Secretary's policy would result in, all we would see is ballooning costs. That would be unfair and unsustainable, which is why we have taken concrete steps to return hotels to their rightful uses, with 50 due to be handed back to the community this month.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I hope the Minister has had an opportunity to visit some of these hotels. This is about not just the costs, which are increasing, but the situation and dire conditions for people waiting for their claims to be assessed. We are talking about families living in rooms with no access to food and no space for their children to learn—it is not a nice environment for people who just want their claims to be assessed. Will the Minister please get to grips with that?

Tom Pursglove: It is absolutely right that the Government prioritise closing hotels. That is a policy we have set and are delivering against. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members keep saying it is going up, but what we are seeing is hotels being closed. That is happening week on week, and we will continue to sustain that process.

Yvette Cooper *rose—*

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly give way to the shadow Home Secretary, as perhaps she will have a credible policy to put to the House.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister confirm that the latest figures show that the number of people in asylum hotels is 20% higher than it was last December, when the Prime Minister promised to end asylum hotel use, and that the costs have gone up from £6 million a day when the Prime Minister complained about this last December to more than £8 million a day, as the Minister just said today?

Tom Pursglove: The fact is that we are closing asylum hotels and it is absolutely the right strategy to pursue. I regularly hear colleagues across this House complain about hotels being open in their constituencies. I want to get on and close those hotels, as do my colleagues, and that is precisely what we will do. It is not sustainable just to continue with the status quo, in the way that the right hon. Lady advocates, in respect of the flow of people into the system. We must not forget that all those individuals making perilous crossings of the channel, facilitated by evil criminal gangs, are coming from a fundamentally safe country. That is why, through our multifaceted approach to this issue, we will get to grips with it, because we are attacking illegal migration at every stage, through work both at home and abroad.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): The Minister may be aware that the Great Northern Hotel, once the flagship hotel for Peterborough, was being used as asylum accommodation, but a Peterborough-based campaign means that it has been stood down and now plans to be part—or could be part—of the £70 million regeneration package in the station quarter. Is he surprised to learn that Labour councillors in Peterborough oppose that and want the Great Northern Hotel to remain migrant hostel asylum accommodation?

Tom Pursglove: Very few things surprise me about those in the Labour party. The things they say and do do not always match the rhetoric of their Front Benchers. Their policies—or lack of—on this matter speak for themselves. My hon. Friend was an ardent advocate for getting that hotel closed, and I am grateful for the representations he made. The Government will continue with the mission we are on, which is to get this issue under control, close the hotels and make sure that our borders and migration system is sustainable for the future.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Ind): This is called a plan, but actually it is a strategy. The strategy is to dissuade and deter people from getting in boats and crossing the channel at huge risk. The plan may cost, but the implications are far bigger than just sending people to Rwanda.

Tom Pursglove: My right hon. Friend recognises that the plan is one part of the overarching strategy we are taking forward to address the issue. Let us not forget that if we had taken the advice of Members on the Opposition Benches, who have voted against so many of the measures we have put in place to try to address the issue, we would not have seen crossings down by a third, Albanian arrivals dropping by 90% or hotels being closed. It is fortunate that we did not take their advice—I dread to think what the situation would be had we done so.

Dame Meg Hillier *rose—*

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister says he has a plan, but this is the third plan set out during the last two years: the Illegal Migration Act 2023 has not worked, we were told the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 would stop the boats, and now we have the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. We are told that the Bill has been watered down because the Rwandans themselves want to comply with the international law and conventions that the Tories wanted to breach. How is Rwanda dictating our immigration policy consistent with the Government's claim to be taking back control of our borders?

Tom Pursglove: It is rather ironic to hear from Opposition Members on this subject. I well remember the shadow Home Secretary being one of the leading lights of the effort to try to keep us in the European Union, and I know where her instincts lie on these issues. She was very happy to continue with the free movement of people and willing to have that open-door border approach. The hon. Gentleman cited rhetoric from the referendum campaign, but he too has voted against every single measure that we have tried to take forward to make progress on this. *[Interruption.]* The good news for him is that there is an opportunity to put all that right and to be in the Lobby next week when we consider the Bill, to make sure we can get on and operationalise the plan. The Opposition keep saying it is waste of money but they could get behind the Bill in the Lobby and help to operationalise it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister says that hotels are closing, but in my constituency people are moving from hotels to houses in multiple occupation. How is that dealing with the issue rather than just moving it around?

Tom Pursglove: The policy platform that the hon. Gentleman is standing on would do absolutely nothing to reduce the flow of people coming illegally to this country, all of whom are leaving safe countries in order to make perilous journeys across the channel, with all the risk to human life that that presents.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Let us look at the issue over a 20-year time span. Under the Blair Government, people were trying to come here illegally under lorries; we did a load of work, we put in X-ray scanners and we stopped that criminal trade. They are now trying to come by boat, so we are putting the work in and trying to stop that. Does the Minister agree that Labour did not solve the original problem and has no plans to solve the current one?

Tom Pursglove: I agree with my hon. Friend on both fronts. It is important to recognise that this is one of biggest issues of our time. The British people want it dealt with once and for all, and so do this Government. Our position is clear. That is why we have put in place one of the most comprehensive plans for tackling illegal migration anywhere in the world, and it is why this endeavour is, and will remain, a priority for myself, my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister, and the Home Office more generally.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Tom Pursglove: I will give way to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), but I need to make some progress.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister keeps citing the British people. Are not most people in this country looking at what has happened on this vital question since 2010—over all the years for which this Government have been in power—and seeing that the situation has only got worse and that no policy has really worked? Is the Minister not ashamed of that fact?

Tom Pursglove: It is worth the hon. Gentleman reflecting on the fact that the small boats phenomenon was not an issue in 2010. He is yet another Labour Member who has voted repeatedly against the various efforts we have sought to make that have started to deliver the progress that I believe the British people want to see. The instincts of my constituents, and no doubt of his constituents, lend themselves to getting on and getting to grips with the issue. That is a fact, and the record speaks to that fact. We will continue not to take the advice of those who would do very little, if anything, to address this issue, and we will get on with delivering on this plan.

The plan recognises that illegal migration is a highly complex challenge, requiring innovative solutions. In the Rwanda partnership, we have just such a solution. We are sending the crystal clear message to those thinking about crossing the channel to get to the UK that they will not be able to stay. Let us not forget that, as I have said repeatedly, all those people are leaving what are fundamentally safe countries to make those crossings, which have been organised by criminal fraternities.

Of course it is true that the creation and implementation of a novel approach such as this comes with an expected cost. To date, £240 million has been paid to Rwanda,

and those figures have been provided to Parliament. The funding arrangement is boosting the economy of Rwanda, which will benefit both host communities and those relocated there, and will go to areas such as agriculture, jobs and infrastructure. We have also provided an up-front credit to pay for start-up costs in advance of flights.

Although we do not agree with all of the Supreme Court's conclusions, we respect the Court. Last month, the Home Secretary signed a new internationally legally binding treaty to address the Supreme Court's conclusions. Crucially, the treaty removes the risk of refoulement and provides for an excellent standard of care for all those relocated. Both countries' adherence to their obligations will be robustly monitored. The High Court and the Court of Appeal have already confirmed that the principle of the partnership—to remove those with no right to be here to a safe third country—is lawful and compliant with the refugee convention.

Dame Meg Hillier *rose—*

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly give way to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Dame Meg Hillier: I thank the Minister for finally giving way to me. He skipped over the costs of the Rwanda scheme. Yes, we know about the £240 million and the £50 million next year, but only because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, it was leaked—it emerged from the Rwandan Government. That is being investigated. Can he not just share with the House the total cost of the scheme? There is no reason not to do so. It is a flagship scheme of the Government. The Minister, from what he has said, is clearly proud of it, so why can he not share with us the total cost committed in the treaty?

Tom Pursglove: It is slightly uncharacteristic of the hon. Lady to be mean-spirited. It is fair to say that we are having a good debate, and both Front Benchers have taken many interventions. The Government have provided those costings to Parliament, and we will continue to report the costs in the annual report and accounts in a way that is perfectly normal, perfectly reasonable and perfectly respectable.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I will give way to the shadow Home Secretary just one last time, as I have been very generous. I am also conscious that there are many Members who wish to speak.

Yvette Cooper: The Minister has been generous. Given that he has published the future costs of the agreement with France, why is he still refusing to publish years 4 and 5 of the Rwanda agreement? We know how much will be paid in '24, '25 and '26 for France. Why not tell us the same figures for Rwanda? The taxpayer is entitled to know.

Tom Pursglove: That information will be provided in the usual manner—through the annual report and accounts. The right hon. Lady will recognise that, within that, there are elements such as the number and circumstances of individuals who will be relocated, and we will publish those costs. That transparency will come as part of the annual report and accounts, as she would expect.

We have touched in this debate on commercial sensitivity and the ongoing relationships with our partners. The courts acknowledge that Rwanda entered the partnership in good faith, and the mechanisms that we have introduced through the treaty will provide cast-iron guarantees to ensure the welfare of all those relocated. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, which is the toughest immigration legislation ever introduced in Parliament, will enable Parliament to confirm that Rwanda is safe. There will be very limited, specific circumstances under which someone can claim that Rwanda is unsafe for them in their exceptional circumstances. If a foreign court chooses to interfere, we will do whatever it takes to get flights off the ground. We will debate all of that again next week.

Rwanda is a beacon of Africa, a country full of potential and promise that stands ready to welcome people into its communities. Rwanda cares deeply about providing humanitarian protection. It is incorrect and, frankly, offensive to reduce Rwanda's interest in this policy to a financial incentive. Claims like that are often made by people who have never been and who choose to ignore the brilliant work that Rwanda does with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to provide sanctuary to many people in the spirit of partnership. That should be celebrated and welcomed, not traduced.

To be clear, the Government of Rwanda did not ask for money to sign the treaty, nor did we offer any. That said, doing nothing is not a free option. It is right that there is additional funding to reflect the future costs. The total cost of the partnership will depend on the number of people relocated, the timing of when it occurs and the outcomes of individual cases. Rwanda has the capacity to deliver on this uncapped partnership, and we have been working with it to build its capacity over the past year. As I say, it already hosts 135,000 refugees and asylum seekers working with the UNHCR and other partners.

We must stop the boats and save lives. The moral imperative could not be clearer. Ensuring that those who arrive in the UK through unnecessary, illegal and dangerous means cannot stay here should prove a deterrent to others who may try to do the same thing. We need to stop criminal gangs profiting from this through decisive action. We know deterrents work. We have seen that clearly demonstrated through the returns agreement with Albania. That strong deterrent has seen us return 5,000 Albanians in 2023 alone and Albanian arrivals fall by 90%.

We want every people smuggler to know that the UK is off limits and that we will not tolerate any further loss of life. Nor will we accept the strain that high levels of illegal migration place on our communities and public services. To the criminal gangs profiting from misery, we say, "Your despicable business model will no longer be viable." We remain firmly committed to getting flights to Rwanda off the ground as soon as possible. We want the British people to know that we are putting them and their interests first. We will not be deterred. We accept and embrace the challenge. Unlike Labour,

[Tom Pursglove]

we have a credible plan, are working through it and are making progress. By sticking the course, we can and will stop the boats.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Some 14 hon. Members seek to take part in the debate. We have to go into the wind-ups at about 6.40 pm. By my miserable maths, that means I need to put an immediate time limit of five minutes on speeches after the SNP spokesman. I may have to bring that down—we will see how we go.

5.37 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I would like to put on the record yet again that the SNP wholeheartedly opposes the principle of the Rwanda plan, of offshoring people as if they were some kind of tiresome trash that the UK does not want to deal with—a plan that amounts simply to state-sponsored people trafficking. It is not just about the money, as Labour set out in its motion today, as egregious and obscene a waste of money as this is; it is about how we treat our fellow human beings. These are people who have experienced torture, have seen their families murdered and are running from horrors that we are fortunate never to have known. They deserve much better than being yeeted to Rwanda, a country that the Supreme Court has found is both unsafe and without the administrative capacity to take on the sensitive role the UK Government are putting on it.

According to the latest UNHCR data, the majority of those who flee—69%—stay in neighbouring countries. Low and middle-income countries host 75% of the world's refugees and other people in need of international protection. Those who do make it to our shores more often than not already have ties to the UK—of family, language or the long legacy of war and empire. UK Ministers often make the wild assertion that the 110 million displaced people around the world are somehow all making their way to Dover and that the Rwanda plan is some kind of deterrent. That is not an assertion based in reality.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Alison Thewliss: I would like to make some progress because, as Mr Deputy Speaker said, we are quite short of time.

To take Afghanistan as example, 6 million Afghans have been classed by UNHCR as refugees, of whom 91% have stayed in neighbouring countries, with 3.5 million in Iran and just over 2 million in Pakistan. There are 239,600 in Germany, 71,200 in France and just 12,200 in the UK—a mere 0.2% of the total.

Dr Evans: Given that there are 100 million people displaced, if Scotland was an independent country, how many people would it take in?

Alison Thewliss: I have just made the point that, of those 110 million people, a very tiny proportion actually come here. I also point out to the hon. Member that putting a specific numbered cap on things has not worked either. I remember the Government saying they were going to get net migration down to the tens of thousands, and that has not worked out. So numbers are not worth speaking about in this debate in the way he thinks they are. That is a spurious argument and he should learn to look much harder at the issue, rather than putting a very basic interpretation on it.

The hon. Gentleman ought to know that Afghans have consistently made up a very high proportion of the people coming across the channel in small boats. As I have pointed out repeatedly in this place to various Ministers at various times, that is a sign of the failure of the supposed safe and legal routes they have set up. For every Afghan who has arrived on a resettlement scheme, around 90 have arrived by small boat. Just imagine if the UK Government schemes were not so riddled with incompetence. No Afghan would need to risk setting foot on a dinghy, and no one would need to sell everything they own, be exploited, beg, borrow and steal, and be bonded in debt to people smugglers if the Government had schemes that worked.

It bears repeating that the only way for people to claim asylum is to get themselves to the UK. They cannot claim in an embassy overseas, and airlines and ferries will not board them if they do not have the requisite visa to get here. Small boats are very much a last resort, not an easy option, and their use has increased as the routes via lorries and other means have become more difficult.

Ministers talk about the expense of the asylum system, but that has come about largely as a result of their own incompetent administration. They have downgraded roles in asylum casework and created a work culture so toxic that employees do not stay, with a lack of expertise and unmanageable caseloads. The issues with the backlog are entirely of their own making, and they deserve no brownie points at all for attempting to fix what they broke. We know that the Home Office's new asylum backlog stands just shy of 100,000 people who still require to have their cases processed. I see those folk at my surgeries every week, and they certainly do not perceive much of an improvement from the Home Office, despite the Minister's spin.

Ministers appear to have massaged the figures to make the legacy backlog reduce from 92,000 to just under 5,000, but a cynic might wonder why around a third of those backlog cases are not actually decisions made, but withdrawals. Free Movement has said:

> "The heavy use of withdrawals to reduce the number of pending applications does make it look as though the backlog clearance was an exercise in number management more than anything else."

Ministers cannot tell us where those 30,000 people are within the system, and it is also worth noting that the first-tier immigration tribunal has seen a 20% increase in outstanding appeals, which now stand at 31,000.

I also note the further cost to other parts of the immigration system due to the political focus on dealing with the backlog. For example, I have heard increasing instances of international student visas not being processed in time for the start of term, with people having to defer their studies because they have missed so much of their course that they cannot turn up and study as they had planned to.

For those who recall my mention in the previous debate of a Sudanese constituent whose wife has been shot in the leg while waiting a year and a half for a

family reunion application, I wrote to the Home Secretary on the subject and finally received a letter from a civil servant saying there are

"considerable delays in family reunion decision making at this time"

and that

"applications are being considered outside of the 60 working day service standard".

In fact, 60 working days would have been quite good for that woman, because had her application been processed in time at the time, she would have been out of Sudan before the current conflict broke out. Now she waits in a very unsafe situation for a Minister to make progress on this matter. How long must she and others wait?

The former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), even admitted on TV in August that processing asylum claims quickly

"just encourages more people to come".

Of course he has never presented evidence to back up that assertion. If delays of several years are a feature, not a bug, Home Office Ministers are on shaky ground when they girn about the cost of keeping asylum seekers in hotels. They have set the system up to work in this way.

Quite aside from the eye-watering £8 million a day—over £3 billion a year—that it costs to house asylum seekers in inadequate hotel accommodation, there is a human cost to keeping people in limbo. The asylum seekers I listen to want to be able to work, contribute and rebuild their lives. They are skilled and talented people with a lot to give to their communities, and they are grateful for the opportunity, but as long as they are kept out of the labour market and prevented from working, they lose their skills and confidence, and their mental health deteriorates. I have seen far too many people at my advice surgeries who cannot understand a system that treats them with such disdain.

A recent Scottish Government paper draws on analysis from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, which suggests that granting people who are seeking asylum in Scotland the right to work would add £30 million per year on average to the Scottish economy if it were granted immediately on arrival, or £16 million per year if it were granted after a six-month waiting period—tax revenues increase and support costs are reduced. Only a Government so wedded to a toxic ideology would refuse to accept such a logical position.

It is stranger still that that persists because, as we in this place know, all policies come through the Treasury. The Prime Minister himself apparently voiced concerns regarding the cost of the Rwanda policy during his time as Chancellor. It was reported that he wished

"to pursue smaller volumes initially, 500 instead of 1,500"

in the first year of the scheme, and

"3,000 instead of 5,000 in years two and three".

The papers, seen by the BBC, also suggested that he was

"reluctant to fund so-called 'Greek-style reception centres', sites where migrants could be housed, rather than being put up in hotels which were said to be costing £3.5m a day at that point, the documents suggest. They say, the 'Chancellor is refusing to fund any non-detained accommodation, eg Greek-style reception centres, because hotels are cheaper'."

We can see that clearly from the example of the Bibby Stockholm, which, at over £22 million, is more expensive per night than putting people in hotels. Neither the Minister for Legal Migration and the Border, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), nor the director general for migration and borders at the Home Office could vouch for the value for money of the vessel or provide comparative figures when they came to the Home Affairs Committee in December. The private companies that provide such accommodation—Mears, Serco, Clearsprings, Corporate Travel Management and the rest—are raking it in. Misery is lucrative.

Home Office Ministers often talk up the nebulous concept of deterrence, but oddly enough, they provide little evidence to back it up. We know from those papers seen by the BBC that the then Chancellor did not believe that the deterrent would work, but now that he is Prime Minister, he will chuck any amount of money into the same vague concept. The Minister for Countering Illegal Migration, the hon. and learned Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), said that the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill was the toughest Bill ever—well, since the last one, and the one before that, neither of which have worked, and some of which has not been implemented.

Free Movement has published a useful graph indicating that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and Illegal Migration Act 2023 have not had any deterrent effect on the figures. There is no evidence to suggest that the new Rwanda legislation will be any different. No wonder the Home Secretary is reported to have called it "batshit". It will not even work; we know that because the Home Office has earmarked at least £700 million to manage small boats until 2030, which it would not do if it expected the boats to stop coming—it is ludicrous.

As well as being illegal and immoral, the Rwanda scheme is eye-wateringly expensive. The UK Government's own figures suggest that removing each individual to Rwanda would cost £63,000 more than keeping them in the UK. If the Government were to send every asylum seeker who arrived last year, it would cost £7.7 billion. Do Conservative Members truly believe that that is a price worth paying, particularly when people are struggling to feed themselves during a cost of living crisis?

Given the absurd costs, the Home Office has been understandably reticent to provide more details of the scheme. Permanent secretary Sir Matthew Rycroft initially provided details of the £140 million paid—£120 million through an economic transformation and integration fund, and a separate £20 million to cover initial set-up—but told the Home Affairs Committee that he could not provide details of further payments as that was "commercially sensitive" information and would only be released in the annual report and accounts each year. He was then forced into disclosing further costs in a letter to the Public Accounts Committee, in which he outlined that a further £100 million was paid to Rwanda in April last year, with another payment of £50 million due this year.

During the debate on the Rwanda Bill, the Home Secretary confirmed that the deal with Rwanda also included further payments of £50 million in 2025 and £50 million in 2026, bringing the total cost of the scheme to nearly £400 million without a single asylum seeker having been sent there. That is a cost of about £130 million per Home Secretary who has been to Rwanda.

[Alison Thewliss]

A Freedom of Information Act request revealed that as of last month, the UK Government have spent £2.1 million defending the scheme in the courts. With new legal challenges to the Bill and the treaty, more costs to the taxpayer are surely yet to come. All the time, while this cruel posturing continues, the number of people waiting for asylum decisions grows, safe and legal routes have not emerged and have been closed down, and Home Office staff are left without the resources they need. All in all, it is an expensive distraction from the dull and boring work of governing well.

As it is Labour's debate, I want to focus briefly on its plans. As the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) highlighted in his question, the shadow Home Secretary did not rule out offshoring people should Labour be in government, so I ask the Labour party whether it is the cost of offshoring that it objects to, or the principle. I was particularly interested in the papers released by the National Archives over Christmas, including the paper presented by Jonathan Powell to the Blair Government entitled "Asylum: The Nuclear Option", which suggested interning people on Mull or the Falkland Islands and deporting people to Turkey and Kenya. When officials from the Home Office warned that those measures would fall foul of the UK's international obligations to refugees, the Prime Minister's handwritten note read

> "Just return them. This is precisely the point. We must not allow the ECHR to stop us dealing with it."

Twenty years on, that is chillingly reminiscent of the current Conservative Government.

Back in 2003-4, Labour was also trying to find a way of offshoring people to Tanzania, and it has been reported that it has recently been consulting with the architects of that plan. If Labour still plans to offshore people, I ask how many, on what terms, and at what cost? How can it possibly be cost-effective to send people halfway around the world, only to bring them back if their case is successful? When Full Fact asked Lord Blunkett about those historic plans, he said that he had

> "looked at a system for processing appeals for failed asylum seekers in other safe countries but rejected it as impractical",

so is Labour for or against offshoring, and is that in principle, or on the basis of cost? Will it categorically rule out offshoring, or is it prepared to sell out the world's most vulnerable just to get Labour over the threshold of No. 10?

It does not need to be this way—everything that has happened has been a political choice. This is about our duties and obligations in the world; about the European convention on human rights, which protects all of our rights; and about the refugee convention, which treats others as we would expect to be treated if a catastrophe happened on our own doorstep. Scotland wants none of these cruel, inhumane plans. The Scottish Government have published papers setting out our direction of travel on this issue, which I commend to all those who are listening. The Scotland we seek would take her duties to the world seriously: the spirit of Kenmure Street tells us that these are our neighbours and our friends, and we must do our part to see that they are safe.

5.51 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is unfortunate that Back Benchers will have under a third of this already truncated debate on what is a very important subject, but I start by praising the Opposition for starting the new year as consistently as they ended the last one: consistently undermining and attacking the Government's policies to tackle illegal migration and questioning the cost and cost-effectiveness of such measures, while consistently voting against those measures to tackle illegal migration—no fewer than 86 times—and consistently failing to come up with any serious, practical alternative measures to clamp down on illegal migration themselves. When they do produce flimsy and ill-thought-through measures, as they did before Christmas, they are completely opaque about the cost, or any aspect of any effectiveness at all.

Today, the Opposition have excelled themselves with another Opposition day debate that is light on substance, light on comprehensiveness, completely light on viable alternatives, and light on throwing any light on anything at all that they would do. Time and time again, they have been challenged to come up with their own plans, and have failed. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have been pretty consistent myself—both on and off the Home Affairs Select Committee—in challenging Ministers and officials on the workings and, often, shortcomings of migration policies for more clarity and evidence. That includes the withdrawals figures, on which we challenged the permanent secretary just before Christmas. That is the only part of the motion with which I agree; clearly, the Opposition got the idea from the Home Affairs Committee, and have just cut and pasted it into the motion today.

Having visited Tirana, Paris, Brussels, Calais, Belgian beaches, asylum seeker accommodation, detention centres, Border Force operations and so on with the Home Affairs Committee, I know that illegal migration is a complex and challenging issue that the PM has quite rightly identified as a priority for the British people. However, the Rwanda scheme is just one element of that bigger solution. No one is claiming that the scheme is ideal—as the Supreme Court has judged, it has flaws in its design to overcome, which the Government are now addressing—but essentially, it is there to deal with one major problem, and an unfairness that undermines the generosity of the British public in rightly providing and funding a safe haven for asylum seekers who are genuinely fleeing conflict, persecution and danger.

There is a question here, and until you can answer it, you lack credibility when attacking the Government's attempts to do so. It is the question I raised earlier with the shadow Home Secretary, to which she did not have an answer: "What do you do with migrants from certain countries who have entered the UK illegally, who do not have credible claims to remain in the UK, yet where it is virtually impossible to return those people to their country of origin?"

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): On that point, my hon. Friend will know, as I do from my experience with foreign national offenders, how difficult it is for countries of origin to accept people back. Very often, they just will not acknowledge their existence, because it is not in their interests to take back people who they may think are a detriment to them. He mentioned

Eritrea and Vietnam, and there are a lot of other countries. This is difficult stuff, and he is right to press the loyal Opposition to come up with something more than the soundbites we have heard.

Tim Loughton: I completely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend, because once those people make it into British territorial waters, they are in effect guaranteed to be living in the UK at the UK taxpayers' expense for the foreseeable future, and that is what the Rwanda scheme aims to address. It is a deterrent to stop people making that dangerous journey in the first place, and it will become a lottery whether they end up in a hotel in Kent or on a plane to Rwanda. As I have said time and again, when the Home Affairs Committee went to Calais in January, we were told by all the officials dealing with the schemes over there, that when the Government initially announced the Rwanda scheme, there was a surge of people at Calais seeking to regularise their migration status in France, because they did not want to risk being put on a plane to Rwanda, so we know that it has a deterrent effect.

James Daly: As a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee, would my hon. Friend agree that the same official said it was crucial that the United Kingdom Government have a strong deterrent policy as part of other policies to protect our borders?

Tim Loughton: That is exactly right. Other countries have shown an interest in the scheme, as did the officials when we spoke to them in France, and other countries want a part of the action that Rwanda may be getting once this scheme actually starts. It can unlock a whole host of opportunities, and I hope that we can ultimately have a series of European countries, particularly in north Europe, working together as a multifaceted network on a Rwanda-type scheme.

People smugglers thrive on any attempts to suggest that schemes such as this will not take off, so the Opposition are doing us a disservice. They are only playing into the hands of the people smugglers by trying to undermine the Rwanda scheme without coming up with any alternative that would seriously damage the trade of the people smugglers in the first place. So it is right that we should give the Rwanda scheme space to get off the ground—literally—and it is also right that we should scrutinise the effectiveness of the scheme.

The scheme needs to be put in the context of the alternatives. What is the cost of accommodating asylum seekers who have entered the UK illegally in hotels or other rented accommodation while awaiting their decisions? On the basis of £6 million or £8 million a day for hotels alone, every additional £100 million estimated to be spent on the Rwanda scheme would accommodate people in hotels for just 17 days. Let us put it in that context. What is the cost of multi-agency control and operation centres, and of Border Force and others patrolling the English channel and picking up the boats? Where is a reference in this motion to more transparency about how the £480 million subsidy we now give to the French police force is being spent? Despite the fact of that record subsidy, interception rates by the French authorities actually fell last year, and there is evidence that some of our money is being used in operations on the Franco-Italian border, rather than on the channel. Those are the comparisons that need to be made.

Labour—the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—came up with the five-point plan in March last year, but it turned out that most of those five points were already being undertaken by the Government anyway. Before Christmas, there was a story that Labour is considering detailed plans for a so-called offshoring scheme, and that the last Labour Government—David Blunkett and others—apparently discussed a scheme for offshoring to Tanzania, something that has been described by the current Labour leader as a "gimmick", so why the change of heart? What is different in the principles of what they are apparently looking at now from those of the Rwanda plan for offshoring migrants? Is this a change of heart on the policy, and if so, why are they still objecting to the Rwanda scheme? Is it that they just do not like Rwanda, or that they just do not like the cost of it, in which case, what is the cost of their own scheme? If they are going to criticise what the Government are doing because of a lack of transparency, their potential schemes, which have been denied and then not denied, are completely and utterly opaque.

This is a sham, a shambles, a Labour gimmick and a con. It is a feeble attempt to show that the Opposition are somehow tackling illegal migration by talking about it, attacking the Government and voting against every attempt to bring forward practical measures, while having no credible working plans of their own. They need to be called out for it, and I shall be voting against this motion.

5.59 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I will focus my remarks on the cost of the Rwanda plan, whether it is going to be effective and whether it is value for money. Nearly 18 months ago the Select Committee on Home Affairs stated in our report on channel crossings:

> "The Home Office must provide more detailed costings for its Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda, including estimates of the likely cost within the current financial year of relocations and probable costs of relocations during the full five years of the programme."

We made those recommendations all those months ago in part because we learned that the then Home Secretary had been required to issue a ministerial direction to the Home Office permanent secretary to implement the Rwanda scheme as he felt there was insufficient evidence of deterrent to enable him to guarantee the policy's value for money, which, as the accounting officer, he is responsible for, and to date he has not changed his view.

That issue and the use of public money for this controversial plan have been a source of contention for many from the get-go, which is why we believed transparency about the costs involved was vital for proper scrutiny and public trust in this policy, yet here we are with what limited information we do have about the scheme's costs having dribbled out slowly and most recently accidentally via the International Monetary Fund's board papers. That is despite questions about the costs being repeatedly put by myself and other Committees including the Public Accounts Committee over the last 18 months.

The most recent substantive update on costs came in a late-night letter from the permanent secretary to myself and the Chair of the PAC my hon. Friend the Member

[Dame Diana Johnson]

for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) following that inadvertent disclosure via IMF papers, and we learned that following the £140 million paid to Rwanda in '22-'23 there has been an additional £100 million in April '23 and a further £50 million would be paid in '24-'25, but the deal with Rwanda is for five years and we are yet to discover what the Government have pledged to pay for the final two years of the scheme.

The justification, which I have heard again today, is about commercial sensitivity, yet apparently it is not so commercially sensitive that the costs cannot be disclosed retrospectively via the annual accounts. Clearly there is something here that does not add up and I know that the Chair of the PAC shares my view on this: that in other instances it has been possible to have regular updates on spending proposals and policies like this.

Question marks hang over not just the fixed cost of the scheme but the per-person costs of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda. We know the Government have pledged to pay Rwanda a certain amount for each asylum seeker sent there to have their claim processed, but again we do not know how much, although it is of interest that the Home Office estimate in the economic impact assessment of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 the cost of relocating a single individual asylum seeker to a third country at £169,000, which represents, we are told,

"additional costs incurred relative to processing an individual through…the current migration system."

We understand that the cost of processing asylum claims here in the UK through the current migration system is around £12,000. As the Home Affairs Committee pointed out almost 18 months ago:

"Migration, including irregular migration across the English Channel, is an issue on which no magical single solution is possible and on which detailed, evidence-driven, properly costed and fully tested policy initiatives are by far most likely to achieve sustainable incremental change."

Katherine Fletcher: Better get some then.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am going to carry on.

With a singular yet untested Rwanda scheme swallowing up so much Government time and resource it is vital that the Home Secretary is up front about the costs involved. This is about public money being paid to Rwanda by the UK on an issue of great concern to the British people; it is not private funds being exchanged between two companies, and as the Institute for Government points out,

"good scrutiny really can contribute to good government."

Transparency is key to unlocking good public policy. It is therefore absolutely right that Parliament asks and gets detailed responses to questions concerning the cost of the Government's Rwanda plan and administration of the asylum system. This is about Parliament being able to do its fundamental job of scrutiny, holding the Executive to account.

I do not have time to ask all the other questions I would like to raise which relate to the treaty that has been signed, the new appeals system, the right to legal advice for all asylum seekers sent to Rwanda, and whether additional moneys will be paid by the British Government for all of those, but I hope the Minister will come clean in his wind-up as to the exact costs of the scheme.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. To accommodate all Members as best I can, after Sir Robert Buckland, the time limit will drop to four minutes.

6.4 pm

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who addressed the motion tabled in the name of her Front Benchers and came to the meat of the issues in a succinct way. The arguments that she has put before the House are legitimate and merit close scrutiny by both her Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, and were the subject of a letter that she jointly sent with the Chair of that Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), on 8 December. Putting my Select Committee Chair hat on, I associate myself with those remarks in the spirit of cross-party co-operation.

However, Opposition Front Benchers have stumbled into what is, frankly, a debate between the Select Committees and the Government. They have missed a trick on this motion. We are now used to Humble Addresses, as they became a fad and a fashion much beloved of the now Leader of the Opposition when he was shadow Brexit Secretary back in 2017-18. Those of us who were Members of that Parliament may not want to be reminded of those times. I certainly remember being on the Front Bench as Solicitor General during the great debate on contempt of Parliament that we well remember—I bear the scars on my back.

I could simply fold my arms and say that Humble Addresses are very 2019, and perhaps we have moved on, but I will not because a number of past Humble Address motions have related to disclosure not to the full House but direct to Select Committees. Here is the point that we might have reached some compromise on. Select Committees are more than capable, through the good offices of their Chairs and Clerks, to hold sensitive information in a confidential way, yet still provide the scrutiny and accountability that, clearly, Parliament is here for. It has been done in the past, and on this occasion my hon. and hon. and learned Friends on the Front Bench should actively consider whether commercially sensitive information can be shared in a sensible way with the appropriate Select Committees.

Dame Diana Johnson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes an interesting point. Both the Home Affairs Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have asked for information that we would hold confidentially, just to reassure ourselves about the value for money of these schemes. Sadly, we have been refused that information by the Home Office.

Sir Robert Buckland: I know that a letter was sent to the permanent secretary. I could not find a reply—the Committee may not have had one—and I suggest that civil servants in the Home Office need to respond with expedition to the Committee to furnish them with information. That is how we could have proceeded.

The Opposition Front Benchers have missed a trick by not couching their resolution in more specific terms, with the consent that I am sure would have been forthcoming from the respective Chairs of the Select Committees. But that is not the motion that we have before us.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): As deputy Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, let me inform my right hon. and learned Friend and the House that the Committee has some of the most sensitive information available in a private reading room capacity, so there is no reason at all why we should not hold that information.

Sir Robert Buckland: I am hugely grateful to my hon. Friend, a parliamentarian of great experience. He is absolutely right to make that point. I urge consideration of that course upon my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) at the Dispatch Box, to consider whether that could be a way forward.

When Labour has a policy, it should be outlined in the form of an Opposition day motion. When it does not have much of a policy, it relies upon process arguments and Humble Address motions. That is what we see today. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) put it extremely powerfully in his remarks a moment ago that Labour is a party still in search of a coherent and cogent approach to this most serious of issues. It is all very well coming up with ideas that are already being deployed by the Government, or saying, "We'll do it the same but a bit better," but that is not up to the level of the events that face us. With climate change and conflict, mass migration of peoples out of harm's way, or indeed for economic reasons, is a challenge not just for the United Kingdom but for the entire western world. These challenges face Governments of all stripes and colours.

I am glad to say that it is this Government who, through their arrangements and agreement with Albania, have achieved singular success in the past year in reducing those unacceptable numbers of small boats coming across the channel. It is this Government who are painstakingly working their way through bilateral agreements with key countries to speed up the process of returns to ensure that we can clear our prisons of foreign national offenders, rather than having to hold them in immigration facilities after the expiration of their sentence.

This Government are seeking, in an honest and realistic way, to answer the question of, "What on earth do you do with individuals who have had their applications determined, who have failed in their applications, but whose country of origin refuses even to recognise they exist?" I am afraid that is the big question—the $64,000 question, although perhaps I should adjust that for inflation—that needs to be addressed and faced up to. I know my hon. Friend the Minister is grappling with that problem, as have his predecessors.

There is nothing wrong in law or in principle with seeking to work with third countries to process asylum claims. I will reserve my remarks for next week's two-day debate on the Floor of the House, when I will ask that question, but it is interesting that the Rwanda scheme is different from other schemes, such as the Australian scheme, in that we are not using UK law to determine these applications, but are outsourcing the whole thing to Rwanda. That sometimes is not fully understood, and I have to say that that has been a bit of a glass jaw, and it was quite broken by the Supreme Court in its judgment in November. Having said that, we are in a position now where the Government are seeking to try and deal with a position, and the Opposition are saying that even if Rwanda works, they will not do it. I do not think that sort of extreme approach is what the British people want to see, and it is not what this policy debate needs. We need an acceptance that what was being looked at by the previous Labour Government on third-country solutions is the right approach. Only by taking that particular line will we manage to crack this most difficult of problems.

6.12 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The unworkability and cost of the Rwanda scheme are representative of this Government's dysfunctional approach to asylum applications as a whole. Faced with an election this year, and having failed to stop the boats—indeed, the failure was such that 2023 had the second-highest number of boat crossings ever—the grand plan is now to embark on a £400 million gamble on the promise to stop the boats. That is £400 million of taxpayers' money being effectively lumped on one number at the roulette table with nothing other than blind faith being relied upon that the scheme will deal with the problem. What started as distraction tactics as part of Operation Save Big Dog has become central Government policy as part of Operation Save Ourselves.

I am probably overstating it by saying that blind faith is being shown in the plan. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the previous Home Secretary and the previous Immigration Minister all seem to have privately had doubts about it in office, and nothing I have heard from those on the Government Benches has persuaded me that this is being driven by anything other than desperation. Indeed, the Prime Minister was challenged on "Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg" about his time as Chancellor, when he supposedly examined the scheme. In effect, he said of the deterrent effect that it would supposedly have, "We have not tried this before, so we might as well give it a go." His precise words were:

> "This hasn't been tried before in our country. It's fair to say it is novel. I've been very clear that this is a novel scheme."

I am all for innovation, but £400 million being spent on something on the basis we have not tried it before ought to be ringing alarm bells, particularly when nothing else that this Government have tried has stopped the boats either. It seems that the Government's approach now is, in effect, third time lucky.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Justin Madders: No, I have not got time, sorry.

It is £400 million at least, and there may be other costs that we do not know about, and that is why our motion is so important. I thought that taking back control meant an end to handing over millions of pounds to foreign powers without anything coming back in return. The Government's impact assessment for the Bill states that it is

> "uncertain what level of deterrence impact it will have",

and given that deterrence is its whole point, there could not be a clearer case of the headline-first approach that this Government take on so many things, which is why, from housing to health to education to the economy, we are in such a mess.

[Justin Madders]

In the most optimistic scenario, about 1% of those who cross the channel can expect to be sent to Rwanda—that is if all the numerous hurdles that we have talked about are overcome. Will anyone say, "I won't take a chance on that 1% risk"? Of course not; it is just a giant smokescreen to cover up the Government's many failings.

Those who work day to day in housing asylum seekers do not appear to have much confidence in the likelihood of there being any deterrent effect, either. We can go online and see that Serco, which is responsible for housing asylum seekers in private housing, is still advertising to landlords that it can guarantee rents for up to five years for doing so. It would hardly be doing that if it thought the Rwanda scheme would be a success or any other Government policies in the area were likely to have any effect.

I see nothing in the Rwanda agreement that will deliver on the claims being made about it. Never before has so much been given by so many for so little in return. When we have record taxation levels, public services on their knees and record Government debt, it is right that we challenge and question whether all that expenditure does what it says on the tin. It seems that the Prime Minister agrees with Labour's approach. I will end with some words from his appearance on "Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg". When asked about the examination of the scheme, he said:

> "You should always ask probing questions. You should always approach things from a position of scepticism to ensure that you get value for money for taxpayers."

That is exactly what Labour's motion seeks. The fact that the Government are set to oppose it says everything we need to know about why there is so little confidence that the scheme will deliver.

Putting Rwanda rhetoric ahead of reality is a really poor way to run the country. With that approach, it is no wonder that the Government are running scared of the people's verdict.

6.16 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): When I first came to the House, under a Labour Government, I was on an immigration Bill Committee. The key difficulty then was people coming on aircraft and ferries and, for road hauliers, people coming in lorries. That was eventually dealt with in places such as Dover by putting in machinery to look at heat from bodies, and that stopped that trade.

This is a profitable trade where inventive people—criminals—look at how they can get people in. They have decided that rubber boats are one way of doing so, and our maritime tradition and the treaties to which we have signed up over hundreds of years mean it is difficult to deal with people once they have set off to sea. The Government have a plan and a strategy to deal with that. The Opposition would have more authority in the debate had they not opposed the plan and strategy but instead shuffled the papers around, asked all these questions and bemoaned all the costs rather than setting out what they would do.

Of course, the Humble Address wants paperwork and more paperwork. Governments have internal debates and then come to a fixed position. The Treasury, the Education Department and the Home Office will have different views. We would expect Ministers to argue privately and then come to a fixed position, but if people keep asking for papers to try to find out what those differences are, that will drive those debates underground, into private meetings and on to WhatsApp, which would not mean good government. The fact that the current Prime Minister argued a slightly different point when he was in charge of the money proves that he was doing a good job as Chancellor—he was kicking the tyres and ensuring that things had been thought through. We can see the Opposition's motion as a substitute for having a policy. It just says that we are rubbish and that they would do things better, but they do not specify what they would do better.

The Government have a policy, and the $64,000 question is, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, about those people who come to the UK and cannot be returned to their countries. The ideal thing is to have country-to-country agreements, which are proven to be working—I am glad we have more of them—and are a strand of dealing with the issue. However, where we have an Iran, an Eritrea or another country where someone's life might be threatened were they returned, we need somewhere else for them to go. Rwanda has made it part of its agenda, because it is financially to its benefit, to do deals with countries such as Britain to help to deal with the problem. Everybody can be a winner if we get there in the end.

There is no point in people in this debate saying it will not be a deterrent when it has not actually been tried and when every time we have tried to implement it there has been a range of people to deal with, not least some of the courts. The Government are legislating to deal with the concerns of our Supreme Court. We have a treaty that is based on international law and we will see whether it works. I hope that when it is proved to work, some of those who are criticising will stand up in this Chamber and say, "Actually, you were right."

6.20 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): The Government's approach to asylum seekers can at best be described as a farce. The asylum application backlog persists and is growing. Thousands of people have simply disappeared into the underground economy, with the Home Office admitting that it has lost track of nearly 17,000 people. The continued use of hotel accommodation is costing the British taxpayer untold millions, while the disgraced Rwanda plan limps ahead—a plan that even the Prime Minister admitted is costly and unworkable. It is no surprise, then, that the Government continue to refuse to disclose the full costs of the scheme. When the Prime Minister came into office he promised professionalism, integrity and accountability at every level. One thing is sure: he has failed at every level on all three.

We know that the Government have already paid £240 million to Rwanda. Further money, in the hundreds of millions, will be paid. It will cost £100 million more to operate, with additional costs of nearly £170,000 per person relocated to Rwanda. Given that it costs £12,000 to process asylum claims in the UK, the cost-benefit of the Rwanda scheme seems non-existent—and that is before one even begins to consider the moral and ethical cost of deporting people to Rwanda.

The UK Supreme Court found that sending asylum seekers to Rwanda would be unlawful, given "substantial grounds" to believe that those transferred there could be sent back to countries where they could face persecution and inhumane treatment. We would do well to remember that according to the 1951 refugee convention, any person seeking asylum has the right to apply for asylum in the UK and remain here until the authorities have assessed their claim. Furthermore, it is also recognised that persons fleeing persecution may use irregular means to escape and claim asylum.

The Rwanda scheme, along with the Government's continued criminalisation of asylum seekers crossing the channel, amounts to a complete repudiation of international law and the universal obligations under which we in the UK are bound to assist those seeking safety and security. I have no doubt that the British public will see the Government's effort regarding the Rwanda plan for what it is: a flagrant, cynical and cruel attempt to force through costly and unworkable legislation, contrary to the findings of the Supreme Court, in a desperate bid to salvage an already ruined reputation.

The asylum system in the UK is in crisis. It is precisely due to the continued incompetence of the Government and their Ministers that the crisis has come about and it will persist until a Labour Government are elected to sort out the mess.

6.23 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Listening to the debate, I think there may be a complete misunderstanding about the fundamental point of the legislation. It is a deterrent. I could pluck any figure out of the air and if the deterrent effect, together with other measures, is to hopefully reduce to zero the number of channel crossings, that will be money well spent. It is a deterrent.

I agreed with absolutely every word said by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee. I do not know how many Members present have actually been to the beaches in Calais, engaged with people and asked for their views on whether this is a deterrent or not. There has been talk about Select Committees, but I, along with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham and one of the best politicians I know, the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—I hope the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) does not mind me being nice to her in the Chamber—have actually been there. French officials who are working on the frontline support this policy.

What evidence could be cited to suggest that there is a deterrent effect? Well, as my hon. Friend said, when the policy was announced there was a rush to get over here before it was actually in place. This may come as a shock to Opposition Members, but when we were speaking to people on the beaches, who were almost universally single males in their 20s, the vast majority of those I, at least, spoke to—I stand to be corrected—said that they were coming here for purely economic reasons. They saw the streets of the United Kingdom as streets paved with gold. The only piece of evidence that can be advanced by the members of the Select Committee who have actually been to Calais shows that this policy will have a deterrent effect and that it will work. There is not a shred of evidence from the Opposition that it will not work.

My right hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee—I will call her my right hon. Friend—is an extremely good politician. As a member of the Committee, I know that the questions asked about costings are extremely fair, and I am sure that my hon. and learned Friend the Minister will answer them this evening, just as he has answered many of them when he has appeared before the Committee, but I do wonder sometimes when we talk about the principle behind the Bill. I asked the shadow Home Secretary whether the Labour party was considering the use of offshore processing. There was no answer, and we know that that is because Labour is considering it. The Leader of the Opposition has said that he will consider any plan that works. Rwanda will work, so on the basis of that logic, he will have to accept Rwanda.

I wonder what Opposition Members make of the fact that the Austrian and German Governments are considering processing asylum seekers abroad. Denmark, that bastion of right-wing extremism, passed a law in 2001 allowing refugees to be moved to asylum centres in third countries for processing. The EU, which is exactly the organisation on which the Labour party bases itself, indirectly supports offshore asylum processing as part of broader efforts to stop refugees coming across the Mediterranean and—I cannot believe I am saying this—the bloc has spent not millions but billions of dollars to prevent refugees from reaching Greece and funded the Libyan coastguard to push migrant boats back to north Africa from Europe. Perhaps we could ask the French to do it, but I will leave that question hanging in the air for my hon. and learned Friend the Minister.

To top it all, there is even a UN programme, the emergency transit programme, under which more than 3,000 people who were heading for Europe were moved from Libyan detention centres to Niger—a scheme similar to the Rwanda scheme for asylum seekers. Every international body supports what we are doing. They are all spending money, and they all believe that this will have a deterrent effect. The Opposition have no policy. This debate is a complete gimmick. The Government's policy is the only policy in town, it is being followed by other countries, and it will work.

6.28 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) has read the motion, but it is about the cost of the scheme, and it restricts itself entirely to that. Essentially, it comes down to one issue: transparency. Do we believe that our constituents deserve to know how much of their money the Government plan to spend on their shambolic Rwanda scheme, and do we believe that they deserve to see the full details of the asylum backlog clearance programme so that they can understand how it is possible for the Home Office to have lost track of thousands of asylum seekers?

Katherine Fletcher: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Western: No, I will not. I apologise, but time does not allow me to do so.

Ministers need to be held to account for an expensive shambles that has sent more Home Secretaries than asylum seekers to Rwanda. Meanwhile, our borders

[Andrew Western]

remain in a state of chaos and desperate people suffer enormously at the hands of people smugglers, but here we have a Government ducking transparency yet again when it comes to the cost of the scheme.

What we do know is that £240 million has been sent to Rwanda already, with £50 million more scheduled for this spring. We know too that the Home Office has admitted that at least two further payments are planned for the next two years, but it will not confirm how much these payments will be. Why not?

We also know that Ministers have promised extra payments for every individual asylum seeker sent, but again they have refused to say how much—why on earth not? Presumably they have told their Rwandan counterparts how much they are paying them, so if the Minister is still refusing to disclose those costs in this place, perhaps he can answer why he thinks the Rwandan Government should know more about how British taxpayers' money is spent than British taxpayers themselves.

Tim Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman is aware of the time constraints, so I apologise, but I will not.

The Prime Minister and this Government are taking the British public for fools—not just over the Rwanda scheme, but over asylum backlogs too. It is categorically false to claim that these backlogs have been cleared. The current overall backlog is almost 100,000 asylum cases. Even so, the so-called "legacy backlog" remains at 4,500 cases. Amidst this chaos, Home Office officials have admitted that as many as 17,000 asylum seekers are now missing from their system and they have no clue where they are.

But perhaps the worst thing is that this complete dysfunction no longer shocks anybody. Who could be surprised that asylum policy is in chaos, with a Conservative party that has given us eight Home Secretaries in eight years and three failed pieces of legislation on channel crossings in three years, and spent vast sums of money on a Rwanda scheme that has been declared unlawful by the highest court in the land?

Convictions of people smugglers are 30% lower under this Government than under the last Labour Government, and returns of failed asylum seekers are 50% lower now than they were under Labour. Ultimately, if the Government had confidence in their record on asylum or the strength of their Rwanda scheme, they would have nothing to hide, and if they had nothing to hide, they would release the figures requested by supporting the motion today.

6.32 pm

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): We are having an interesting and important debate, set in the global context of increasingly large numbers of people on the move. Climate change is driving them forward. The entrepreneurial among them are looking for economic opportunity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) mentioned, but I think it is worth dwelling on what our Rwanda scheme seeks to stop.

What is actually happening to some of the most vulnerable people in the world? They have criminal gangsters coming up to them, in countries in Asia, the far east and Africa, getting hold of them, maybe even coercing them slightly, and saying, "You know what? Sell granny's farm, because the streets of the UK are absolutely paved with gold. You give us five, eight, 10 grand, sell granny's farm to mortgage it, and you'll be able to make a fortune and look after her." Only when they are on a beach in Calais, with a gangster pointing a gun at them, telling them to get in an overcrowded and dangerous boat, do they understand what we are trying to stop. They are being sold a pup by criminals.

Today's debate is not about point scoring and policy, although you would not believe it from listening to some of the stuff the Opposition say. We are taking action to tackle it. We are saying that if someone comes to this country illegally, they cannot stay here illegally, because otherwise we would be opening the window to a demand model for gangsters who were strapping kids under lorries under Tony Blair and are now strapping young men, teenagers, women and children to dangerous boats across the channel.

So we are working with France, and with Albania. The Home Office is taking a lot of steps to tackle what happens further upstream, including where the boats are bought from. We have got a treaty with another country, we are sorting out accommodation, and we are sorting out the backlogs. We are getting involved, putting more staff in.

What do the Opposition offer us? They offer us a highly moralising case. If this has not been clear from my remarks, there is a moral case to take every action we can possibly take to stop people getting done by criminals. So what do Labour Members do? They vote against it—is it 76 times, 73 times, 83 times? Goodness knows.

Tim Loughton: Eighty-six.

Katherine Fletcher: I defer to my hon. Friend's knowledge.

Government Members are putting practical ideas in place, and what is the Labour party doing? Changing its mind. It has no plan and no ideas. Its soundbites are so brittle that its Members cannot take interventions from Conservative Members.

We have a worked-through plan that is trying something different to make sure we handle this in a global context. Everybody is facing this problem and, with channel crossings already down by a third, a nascent deterrent effect is occurring. We are working with the social media firms to make sure these—rude word—gangsters cannot sell absolute nonsense on TikTok and Facebook to kids who just dream of a better life. That is the action we are taking, and what are Labour Members doing? They are tabling process motions and asking for details but, crucially, they will not tell us their plan, because they do not have one.

6.35 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank the shadow Home Secretary for securing this debate. This emotive issue affects every one of us, which is why we need to be open, honest and up front with the people of the UK about how we protect our borders and tackle migration.

I thank the Welsh Refugee Council for working tirelessly with refugees and asylum seekers, in spite of the horrific abuse it faces from the far right. The Welsh Refugee

Council is a standout example of Wales putting into practice its ethos of being a nation of sanctuary, and it deserves our praise.

I also thank the sanctuary in Newport run by The Gap, and particularly Mark and Sarah for their diligence, passion and advocacy. Their innovative ideas and compassion in working with refugees and asylum seekers are a credit to them.

We are in a financial mess, and the Government need to come clean about the likely cost of the Rwanda scheme to the British taxpayer. It is at least £400 million, and that is without a single asylum seeker being sent to Rwanda. All this is happening when the cost of living crisis in Newport West and across the United Kingdom continues to hit the poorest hardest, yet Tory Ministers seemingly have no concern, no issue and no shame about wasting taxpayers' money on a scheme that simply will not work. Is it any surprise that our unelected Conservative Prime Minister thought the scheme was not worth the money? For the first time, I agree with him.

This unelected Prime Minister is taking us for fools on the asylum backlog. His claim to have cleared it is completely false. As we have already heard, the current overall backlog is almost 100,000 asylum cases, which is why record numbers of people are still in asylum hotels, costing the taxpayer £8 million a day, 12 months after the Prime Minister promised to end it.

The Tories have not even cleared the so-called legacy backlog, with 4,500 cases still unresolved and tens of thousands of cases having simply been withdrawn by the Home Office. I have some experience of the backlog in my constituency, and it is a very real problem. I have real people in Newport West waiting for Home Office decisions, such as the Ethiopian student who has been waiting for a decision on the interview he had in 2021—he has still not heard. A husband, wife and four children who applied for citizenship in December 2021 are still waiting, too. Those cases are just the tip of the iceberg, and let us remember that those are real people doing their best in very difficult circumstances.

On the opposite side of the coin, we have officials admitting that as many as 17,000 people are missing. They do not know where they are, and they may well be in the underground economy. What a disgraceful state of affairs. Can the Minister tell us how many asylum backlog cases were cleared simply by removing people from the list? Does he know where those individuals are?

The motion before the House calls for the Home Office to publish the full cost of the Rwanda scheme, as it did for the France co-operation programme, for which funding has been announced up until 2026.

Over the last six years, the Tories have let the criminal smuggler gangs take over the channel, and they have allowed Home Office asylum decision making to collapse. We have record asylum backlogs and huge delays, and the taxpayer is having to fund asylum hotels. This is the Tories' asylum chaos, and they are failing to fix it.

Labour's plan would strengthen our border security and smash the criminal gang networks and supply chains, with new powers and a new cross-border police unit. We will clear the backlog with new fast-track systems and end hotel use, saving the taxpayer over £2 billion, and we will improve enforcement with a new returns and enforcement unit to reverse the collapse in returns for those who have no right to be here. That is how we in the United Kingdom can do our bit to help genuine asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution and conflict, while returning those with no right to be here, but we have none of that under the Tories, just more chaos. The sooner we get rid of them, the better.

6.39 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I wish to start by emphasising that many asylum seekers are fleeing abhorrent conditions that many of us in this Chamber could only imagine, and it is important that we do not lose sight of those stories. However, we must end the current chaotic approach adopted by the Government. The unworkable, unaffordable Rwanda plan claims to deal with 100 people, but we need a proper plan to deal with the 100,000 people's cases stuck in the backlog of the system.

In my constituency, local residents are concerned about the use of the Holiday Inn to host asylum seekers; the enormous backlog of cases means that many are still there. My constituents are concerned not only because these hotels cost the taxpayer £8 million per day, but because this hotel plays a fundamental role in the local community and economy. Some of these people have been living in the hotel for years—they have been there so long that they have the right to work and are contributing to a charity in the local community. Some have even been baptised in the local church but have been moved to other locations and once again find themselves uprooted in this chaos. For those who have tried to settle in the community but whose applications have still not been processed, this is a terrible failing.

Tamworth is a beautiful town that many people come to visit. We are proud of our local heritage and landmark tourism sites, be it the Drayton Manor theme park, the SnowDome or Tamworth castle, and the Holiday Inn should be used for holidays. This £8 million per day would go a huge way in helping Tamworth to redevelop its town centre and bolster its tourism economy, and it could be far better spent in revitalising local communities across the country. My constituents want to know that those seeking refuge and who are eligible have their claims dealt with swiftly and fairly, but they also want their hotel back. Can the Government explain why it is taking so long to recruit the staff needed to process applications, whom they cut years ago? That has landed the Government in this mess in the first place.

I call on my colleagues to adopt Labour's plan to strengthen our border security, clear the backlog once and for all, and finally bring an end to hotel use. That includes recruiting the Home Office caseworkers to clear the backlog and 1,000 staff for the returns unit so that those who do not have a right to stay here can be quickly removed. Crucially, the plan will crack down on the criminal smuggler gangs, through the cross-border police unit and deeper security co-operation with Europe.

The Rwanda plan has seen £240 million of taxpayers' money paid to Rwanda so far, yet not one asylum seeker has been sent to the country. The current overall backlog is almost 100,000 asylum cases, resulting in record numbers of people still in the asylum hotels, such as the one in Tamworth, 12 months after the Prime Minister promised to end them. I know that my constituents are concerned about the use of the Holiday Inn to host asylum seekers, which they feel is a waste of money, so when can we have our hotel back?

[Sarah Edwards]

We still do not have a clear idea of just how much taxpayers' money is going to be funnelled into this broken project. We have weakened border security, a broken asylum system, criminal gangs taking advantage and risking lives, and record levels of boat crossings. Transparency is fundamental to any good democracy. With this level of taxpayers' money being funnelled into a scheme under which we are yet to see 100 asylum seekers sent to Rwanda, the Home Office must publish the full costs of the Rwanda scheme, as well as the full details of the asylum backlog clearance programme, so that we know how many people the Home Office has lost track of and what decisions are being taken.

I call on my colleagues to adopt Labour's plan to strengthen our border security, clear the backlog once and for all and finally bring an end to the use of Tamworth's Holiday Inn as an asylum hotel. Labour's plan includes recruiting the additional caseworkers who could deal with this—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I call Michael Shanks.

6.43 pm

Michael Shanks (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): The last debate we had in this place on this Rwanda plan was such a bizarre moment, as we watched Conservative Members, from one side of the party to the other, lobbying one another, with threats to vote against the Bill all quietly dispensed with when the moment finally came. Today, we seemed to have a bit of consensus on the Government Benches—consensus to withhold transparency from the taxpayers as to how much the Government's plan is going to cost. I am surprised that we do not agree about that, because surely we can all agree that the public have an interest in knowing how taxpayers' money is being spent.

I have not yet heard any explanation from Government Members about why not withholding this information is so difficult. Perhaps it is because the economic note attached to the Bill has an intriguing section under "Costs and benefit summary" that states:

"There are no monetised costs or benefits."

The assessment is not even convinced the plan will work, saying

"dependent on the deterrent effect achieved, there could be fewer individuals undertaking hazardous and unnecessary journeys".

As I said last time we debated the issue, we are united in wanting to bring these dangerous crossings to an end, but it is clear the Government themselves do not have confidence that the plan will work, which is why nobody was surprised by recent news reports that the Prime Minister was not convinced by it either.

Instead of facing up to the Government's failures on immigration, we are presented with this hugely costly distraction. The Chairs of the Home Affairs Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have had to drag out of witnesses the fact that even more money will be spent on the plan in years to come. In December, the permanent secretary at the Home Office told the Public Accounts Committee that he could not confirm any future funding had been agreed for Rwanda, and I heard the Minister say in his opening remarks that the Government of Rwanda asked for no money and no money was offered. That means either the funding for future years was already agreed in advance, or we are not sending any further money to Rwanda. In either case, it would be easiest for the Government to simply confirm one way or another what funding is being sent.

These are, of course, only the costs we know about. Aside from the financial cost, there is a broader cost to this absurd plan: a moral cost. The Home Office's own statistics show that at least six out of 10 of those who made the dangerous channel crossing to the UK last year would be recognised as refugees, and would therefore be given asylum in this country, meaning the plan will not tackle that particular problem, and it does not deal with the criminal gangs who are exploiting these vulnerable people in the first place.

There is also a cost to Britain's standing in the world and a diminishing of the sense that we follow the rule of law. Now we simply pass laws saying that one thing is true, even if it is not. No doubt, a flurry of amendments are being drafted as we speak ahead of next week's debate. The agreement we have seen on the Government Benches today will disappear by Tuesday, when we will see the Bill back before us and it may not even pass.

As unpalatable as I find the legislation, I cannot understand why there is no transparency for those Government Members who support it. If they believe in this policy, if it is a rock-solid proposal that presents good value for money and if the costs are already written down somewhere, as we know they are, why not just tell us what they are? The least this Government should do today, with no effort whatsoever, is release the financial costs to the public, so that we know how much of our taxpayers' money is being spent.

6.47 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I pay tribute to all colleagues who have taken the time to speak today, particularly the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), and my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), for Newport West (Ruth Jones), for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Michael Shanks), who made excellent contributions to the debate.

It is crystal clear that the money being wasted on this fantasy—this fixation—in which Members on the Government Benches choose to indulge would be far better spent on proper investment in a cross-border police unit and a security partnership with Europol to go after the criminal gangs upstream, smash those gangs and stop the boats getting in the water in the first place. That is what the Labour party has spent the last year urging the Prime Minister to do and that is what we will do in Government, to help end this Tory small boats chaos. Yet the Prime Minister has instead chosen to bury his head in the sand and double down on failure.

The Rwanda farce is so riddled with absurdity that it is difficult to know where to start. Perhaps the most absurd aspect is that the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary agree with the Labour position on this whole sorry mess—they are Rwanda sceptics and non-believers.

Last week, it emerged that when he was Chancellor and during his leadership bid, the Prime Minister privately indicated that he had profound concern over the value for money and the workability of this hare-brained Rwanda scheme. "The deterrent won't work", he wrote. How extraordinary then that he is now staking his entire premiership on a scheme that he does not even believe in. How humiliating it must be for him to know that his Back Benchers are pushing him around. They are calling the shots. When all is said and done, what has the Tories' farcical Rwanda fixation delivered? They have sent three Home Secretaries to Rwanda, but not a single asylum seeker. There has been plenty of pie in the sky, but not a single plane in the sky.

I mentioned earlier the strong contributions from those on the Benches behind me. I was however struggling a bit to understand the logic of the Minister's point about the information being requested around the costs of the Rwanda plan being somehow commercially sensitive. The Government were all too happy to reveal that they are forking out £500 million on paying the French police to puncture dinghies on the beaches of Calais. The permanent secretary told the Public Affairs Committee that the Rwanda- related costs would be revealed in the accounts in July. Why not just reveal them now? What are they afraid of? Well, they are clearly terrified of admitting that they are blowing £400 million of taxpayer money on this failing scheme. They should 'fess up and reveal what the real costs are both in terms of what it will cost to fly each individual asylum seeker halfway around the world and what it will cost in terms of processing and related support. We know that it is at least £169,000 per asylum seeker, but can they confirm whether it is even higher—£200,000 or more, as was said earlier? What have they got to hide? Well, perhaps we know what they have to hide—that this Rwanda plan is unaffordable and unworkable. Even if flights take off, they will be about 1% of the 30,000 channel crosses at a maximum. That will not even scratch the surface of the people smugglers' business model.

Meanwhile, we see that: more than 100,000 asylum cases are unresolved, despite the deceitful nonsense the Prime Minister puts out on social media; nearly 400 hotels are being used for asylum seekers—a number that has gone up not down under this Prime Minister; and 56,000 asylum seekers are languishing in those hotels, costing the taxpayer a staggering £8 million per day.

We need transparency on this. We need transparency around the issue of withdrawn claims. Astonishingly, they make up one third of the recently processed asylum claims that the Prime Minister has been boasting about clearing, yet they have not even been processed properly. As an exercise in the politics of smoke and mirrors, this is surely without parallel. Did the Prime Minister and Home Secretary seriously think that nobody would notice? Did they seriously think that they could pull the wool over the eyes of the British public? What an insult to the intelligence of the electorate. They should come clean to the British public, with a full breakdown of the 35,000 withdrawn claims: who are they; where are they; and are they simply reapplying, or are they drifting away into the underground economy never to be heard of again? Last summer, the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) described that trend as an amnesty by the back door. Is he right? The Minister must come clean on these points.

We need a serious plan. We need the end of these headline-grabbing antics. We need common sense, hard graft and international co-operation, as has been set out in Labour's five-point plan for the past year. *[Laughter.]* Conservative Members do not like it, but the fact is that their plan is not working. They need to come clean over these costs. They need to clear this backlog. I urge Members from all parts of the House to support our Humble Address today so that we can begin the long road back to recovery.

6.53 pm

The Minister for Countering Illegal Migration (Michael Tomlinson): Oh, how much I enjoyed the smile on the shadow Minister's face as he wound up. I am delighted to have the opportunity to wind up this debate. My only disappointment, perhaps even slight sadness, is that this motion is more about process than it is about substance. On the substance, what we have not heard from those on the Opposition Benches is the cost of not acting. There is the financial cost: the illegal migration costs to the British taxpayer, amounting to billions of pounds a year, including £8 million a day for emergency housing, pressures on public services and more. There is also the human cost, the moral case for our Rwanda policy—I will turn to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) in a few moments—and the compassionate case for our Rwanda policy. How many more lives must be lost in the channel before Opposition parties join us in our mission to end those dangerous journeys?

The Rwanda policy is one part of an intensive and focused strategy for tackling illegal migration. As my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) pointed out, the plan is delivering. Small boat crossings are down by 36%—a reduction that has been achieved even as numbers rise elsewhere in Europe. We know that there is more to do, and the Rwanda policy will give us a powerful tool to complete this mission.

I will turn to some of the Back-Bench contributions, but I will start with the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I did not disagree with everything she said.

Alison Thewliss: I'm resigning!

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady threatens to resign, even as I say that. I knew she would be disappointed because I agreed with her on this point: she rightly challenged Labour on what its plan was. She is right to ask those questions, which have been repeated across the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) was absolutely right to set out that this is a complex and challenging issue. There is no lack of robust scrutiny from him, not least during the course of Home Affairs Committee sittings. He rightly pointed out the lack of credibility from Labour—that there is no plan or alternative put forward. I look forward to further scrutiny from him, and he rightly said that the motion is a Labour gimmick and con.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) addressed the substance of the motion and was credited for that by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon

[Michael Tomlinson]

(Sir Robert Buckland). What she did not set out was what Labour's plan was in the alternative. My right hon. and learned Friend reminded us that this was a process debate, not a debate of substance. He rightly said that when one does not have much of a policy, one relies on process debates and Humble Addresses—how right he was. This is a global issue, and Labour's one policy is that even if Rwanda works, it would scrap it. My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) set out his experience, and I treat it very seriously not only because he is my neighbour, but because he is an MP with a port in his constituency. He put it well when he said that the motion is a substitute for having a policy, and how right he was.

I do not have time to delve into each and every one of the interventions by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly). He rightly commented that the debate is a gimmick, but he also set out quite seriously the deterrent effect that is part of our Rwanda scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble set out the fact that some of the most vulnerable people we are talking about are being coerced by criminal gangs. She was right to state both that and the moral case for our policy.

The Government have a plan—this Rwanda plan—for deterring those dangerous journeys, but what again is the Opposition's plan? They do not have one. Their only reported plan is one that would increase the number of asylum seekers to this country, by allowing them to make claims from other countries. We do not accept that proposition. It would mean taking people from safe countries where they can already seek refuge from persecution, and there is no way that we could accommodate each and every one of those claims. What is the Opposition's plan?

As we have heard during the course of this debate, Labour has voted against our measures 86 times, but we will not be deterred. We will do right by the decent, law-abiding people of this country, who want and expect secure borders and an effective immigration system. When people with no right to be here know that they will not be able to stay, they will stop coming.

We know the deterrent effect because we have seen it with Albania. A year ago the Prime Minister secured the deal with Albania. Planes took off and more than 5,000 people have been returned to Albania. The deterrent effect has worked and arrivals are down by more than 90%. It has worked with Albania; it will work with Rwanda. Illegal migration costs lives. It costs billions of pounds a year. We need to end it, we will end it and we will stop the boats.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 228, Noes 304.

Division No. 35] [6.59 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn (*Proxy vote cast by Florence Eshalomi)*
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows)*
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson)*
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows)*
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Foord, Richard
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lightwood, Simon
Linden, David
Lynch, Holly
MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, James
Newlands, Gavin

Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows)*
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Shanks, Michael
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Strathern, Alistair
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows)*
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Samantha Dixon and Tonia Antoniazzi

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Sir David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Sir Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones)*
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sir Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin

Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, rh Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Wood and
Suzanne Webb

Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Financial Services

That the Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (High-Risk Countries) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2023 (SI, 2023, No. 1306), a copy of which was laid before this House on 4 December 2023, be approved.—*(Mr Mohindra.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Environmental Protection

That the draft Biodiversity Gain Site Register (Financial Penalties and Fees) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 30 November 2023, be approved.—*(Mr Mohindra.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Biodiversity Gain (Town and Country Planning) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 30 November 2023, be approved.—*(Mr Mohindra.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Disclosure of Information

That the draft Digital Government (Disclosure of Information) (Identity Verification Services) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 19 September 2023, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Mr Mohindra.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Building and Buildings

That the draft Higher-Risk Buildings (Keeping and Provision of Information etc.) (England) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 9 November 2023, be approved.—*(Mr Mohindra.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Boots Pharmacy closures in Hull North

7.16 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I rise to present this petition, mirroring the Boots pharmacy closures petition on my website, currently signed by over 430 Hull North constituents. Cuts to pharmacies are part of the wider crisis in the NHS, including GP shortages and in dentistry, in the most deprived and left-behind communities. I know that my local people in Hull North are particularly concerned, as are the elderly and families with children, about these closures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Kingston Upon Hull North,

Declares that the Boots Pharmacies in Hull North should not be closed; notes in particular residents' concerns about losing the pharmacies at 860 Beverley Road and 132 Chanterlands Avenue; further notes that pharmacies play a vital role in alleviating pressures facing the NHS and are relied upon by local communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Boots Pharmacies in Hull remain open and that local pharmacies are sufficiently supported and easily accessible to residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002885]

NHS dental appointments in rural areas

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 2,652 of my constituents, who declare their concern about the lack of NHS dental appointments available in rural areas such as ours in Cumbria, given that 50% of local children and 64% of local adults do not have access to an NHS dentist.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares concern for the lack of NHS dental appointments available in rural areas.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to increase training places for new dentists, reform NHS dental contracts and make it easier to recruit experienced dentists to fill dental vacancies in rural areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002895]

Grangemouth Oil Refinery: Energy Security

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

7.19 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): "Bathgate no more, Linwood no more, Methil no more, Irvine no more" sang the Proclaimers as they detailed the devastation caused by industrial closures and the hardship and emigration that followed. That was in the 1980s as Thatcher mercilessly shut the pits, decimating Scottish industry. Not just the many individuals who lost their jobs, but entire communities and the whole country suffered as de-industrialisation took root. The country has recovered but much has still been lost and for some it is irrecoverable, irreplaceable, or both. Scars remain and pain runs deep. The devastation will neither be forgotten nor forgiven. But is there now to be a new line of "Grangemouth no more"?

Scotland's oil refinery stands threatened. Its closure would result in the perversity of an oil-producing nation lacking refinery capacity. I asked the House of Commons Library for research on oil-producing nations and refinery capacity. There are few nations which are oil producers yet lack refinery capacity. Norway has two refineries, and of those nations which lack a refinery capacity none are in the top 25 oil producers, as Scotland is. Instead, they are countries which neither produce as much oil as Scotland nor even have a developed economy. They are largely developing nations such as the Congo or Trinidad and Tobago, not a developed and industrial land like Scotland, which now faces the absurdity of being a major oil producer yet lacking refinery capacity.

If closure proceeds, Scotland will be getting treated like a developing nation: its raw product taken for a song and then sold back as a refined product, but at a premium to people and nation. Exploitation is what it is called. The Rosebank field and the North sea are to be the saviours of the UK economy, yet Scotland is to lose its refinery and face social and economic hardship as a result. Exploitation is what it is. That is what we will inherit if action is not taken.

Oil was first discovered in the 1960s and it would have made Scotland one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, but it was deliberately hidden from the Scottish people. That was to downplay expectations and diminish ambitions. Norway across the North sea has been transformed socially and economically by its oil resource, with a standard of living that Scots can only look at with envy and a sovereign wealth fund that Scotland can only dream of. Yet Scots have continually been told that the resource would soon be gone, and in 2014 at the referendum it was not just running out but even an impediment, a drain on an independent Scotland. Yet now it is at the heart of the UK's economic recovery.

Although it has been rediscovered, what is in it for Scotland? As has been said, some nations discovered oil and made the desert bloom, but Scotland discovered oil and is seeing an industrial desert created in so many of its communities, and one could well now be Grangemouth. It is not just absurd but perverse that an oil-producing nation should have no oil refinery capacity. It is more than an economic argument; it is vital for economic security. War in Ukraine and conflicts in the middle east

[Kenny MacAskill]

have shown the consequences. In the world in which we live, energy is essential and securing all aspects of the supply chain is common sense.

Let us look at the economic arguments and consequences of any closure. The loss and hardship would be significant for thousands, not just hundreds, sending shockwaves through industrial Scotland. The plant's workforce is 500 but there are also some 2,000 contractors attached to it. Moreover, they are skilled jobs and their loss, as with past industry closures, will impact on future generations. Not only have current and past generations benefited from working there, but numerous apprentices were trained there, even if ultimately plying their trade elsewhere. We already have a skills gap; this would worsen it considerably.

Job losses would be significantly higher than those simply at the site. Closure would reverberate across industries clustered nearby because of the refinery. If it closes, many of them will also be lost. They are in a variety of sectors, whether chemicals, plastics or other fields. That is without even considering the huge number of individuals who depend on the site whether for their corner shop, as drivers or in other trades, both locally and from more distant parts. There is always a multiplier effect in any redundancy but, given the pivotal nature of the industry to the country's economy and its impact across a swathe of sectors, it would be huge. Both the town of Grangemouth and all of Scotland would suffer. The knock-on effect would echo across the entire country as industrial closures did decades ago, whether the pits or car plants.

Grangemouth's refinery is a national asset upon which our energy security and industrial economy depends. That is why it must be retained. There has been a refinery there for a century. It currently provides 70% of Scottish filling stations, as well as many in northern England. It is also the primary supplier of aviation fuel for Scotland's airports—not an insignificant issue for an island nation with many remote island communities. As I have stated, energy security demands it.

We are seeking to transition from a carbon economy, but it must be a just transition and at a pace allowing our economy and society to adapt. The cumulative impact of closure might not be the 4% loss of GDP suggested by Petroineos, but even the 0.25% or 0.3% loss of GDP suggested by the Fraser of Allander Institute would be damaging enough. Where is the outrage and anger? Where is the ministerial statement here at Westminster or the call to action at Holyrood? Instead, there has been silence or sanguinity, hope that it just might not happen or, even more disgracefully, quiet resignation to its fate.

Thankfully, Unite the Union and the workforce are strenuously making the case, and I am grateful for their assistance and input. Closure is still only potential rather than actual, but the threat is real, and there has to be a balance between causing unnecessary alarm and taking urgent action. Unless action is taken now, disaster will befall Grangemouth refinery and the impact will be grave upon all—workers, the wider community and the entire nation.

What needs done? Ownership has changed over the years, and profitability has been affected by under-investment. No blame can be attached to the current or past workforce. Responsibility may also rest with previous owners other than PetroChina and INEOS, currently in charge. Steps can and must be taken to address the current profitability and buy time so that a transition can take place both at the site and across our economy. Moreover, there are also actions that will increase capacity and thus profitability and productivity. That means linking Scotland's oil refinery with Scotland's oil production. Finally, there is the just transition and the need to prepare for the new world. That can and must be done at this site.

Let us examine those three aspects that must be done. First, there is the need to fix the hydrocracker at the refinery. Its current inoperability is impacting on profitability. Restarting it would increase profitability threefold. That is significant, and would allow an extension of life at the plant, even without any additional steps being taken. It is estimated that it would cost between £60 million to £80 million to do so, but it must be done. The money must be found, whether from Westminster, Holyrood or the existing business. Surely, from all three, finance can be found. It is a small cost for such a huge asset that is essential to not just our economy but our society. After all, there is a moral as well as a financial economy. The price must not be paid by the individuals and communities who would suffer from its loss.

As well as restarting the hydrocracker, there should be an increase in capacity and in what is refined. It will surprise many that North sea oil is not refined at the Grangemouth refinery, despite the pipeline for the Forties field coming ashore at Cruden bay and being pipelined on to Grangemouth. Almost all the product refined at the plant is brought in on tankers from elsewhere. It comes in on ships and goes away in trucks. Meanwhile, North sea oil is transported to other refineries, whether in the UK or abroad. That must end. It has always been absurd, but now it is criminal. Oil from the Forties field pipeline, which last year moved approximately 40% of the UK's oil from the North sea, must be refined at Grangemouth. It requires technological and engineering changes, but they must be made. As Rosebank comes on stream, and as the Forties continues to flow, refining must be at Grangemouth. Scotland is entitled to expect no less from its resource.

The Prime Minister has trumpeted the necessity of continuing to exploit North sea oil, and while I can take issue with the extent and pace of it, I agree with the logic. It is absurd to import oil when we have our own resource. Not only is it economic self-harm, but it is environmentally daft to transport it across the seas when it is off our shores. Why spew out the significant fumes of a supertanker by the hundreds of thousands when we can pipe the oil ashore? To achieve that requires ensuring that the oil is refined here, which it currently is not.

The hypocrisy of the Prime Minister's position has been exposed by those who oppose development. Their arguments have legitimacy unless steps are taken to ensure that the resource is refined here, rather than having the environmental double whammy of transporting our product far away for refining and then having those ships cross with others importing refined product from elsewhere. The Forties field oil supply must be refined at the site, and the technical and engineering work to achieve that must be done. It is bad enough that ownership

of the Rosebank field lies with the Norwegian state energy company, but to have that product refined abroad compounds the agony and the absurdity.

Finally, there needs to be preparation for the transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Steps must be taken to prepare the site for biofuels, which will be required in the future. The sites to refine them need to be established. It makes sense to secure the short-term future of the site by restarting the hydrocracker. Similarly, extending the refinery's capacity by ensuring that North sea oil is processed there is essential. Steps need to be taken towards that transition, which humanity is required to make for the sake of life itself, not just the planet. But it must be more than just warm words and empty rhetoric; it requires preparation and action. Making Grangemouth a future site for biofuels refining must be part of that.

In summary, securing the refinery is essential for Scotland, not just Grangemouth. The arguments for it are social, economic and environmental, and the case is overwhelming. It is simply perverse that an oil-producing nation should have no refinery capacity, or that an industrial desert be created where a natural bounty should see a country and its communities bloom. It is for those reasons that I ask the Minister to meet me and workers' representatives from the site. Additionally, and most essentially, will he ensure that these three steps are taken? First, will he ensure that funds are found to restart the hydrocracker? Secondly, will he ensure that oil from the Forties field that is piped to Grangemouth is refined there, and that oil from new developments such as Rosebank will also be refined there, negating the environmental harm of the trans-shipment inward and outward of oil?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. Does he agree that the East Lothian oil refinery at Grangemouth is a necessity not only for Scotland, but for all the United Kingdom? It must stay open not in opposition to renewable targets, but in partnership with them.

Kenny MacAskill: Yes, I agree with that.

My final point is that as we transition, we must ensure that actions are taken at the site for that new future by ensuring a biofuels capacity there. We simply cannot have the absurdity of an oil-producing nation lacking a refinery capacity, never mind the perversity of the oil it produces being shipped across the seas for refining.

7.33 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): May I begin by thanking the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) for securing this important debate and colleagues across the Chamber for joining it? I recognise that news of a plan to transition Grangemouth refinery into an import terminal is undoubtedly a matter of concern for many people. However, I make clear that the Government are committed to ensuring continued fuel supply, protecting jobs and creating opportunities in Scotland and across the UK. The primary responsibility of my Department is for the energy security of the whole of the UK, including Scotland. On 29 November, I met the Scottish Cabinet Secretary, Neil Gray, and we agreed that both our Governments would continue to work closely on this issue through forums such as the Grangemouth future industries board. Scotland and the UK will continue to have reliable supplies of fuels after the transition, in line with the UK Government's commitment to energy security and resilience.

Before I go into specifics, I want to recognise that Grangemouth refinery has been an important asset for the fuel supply of Scotland and the local economy since it opened in 1924. No final decision on the future of the refinery has been made, but the planning for the conversion of the refinery into an import terminal is a commercial decision by its owner, Petroineos. That reflects its view of the economic sustainability of the refinery in the context of expected refining margins, domestic demand projections and international competition. Even in this macroeconomic context, the UK and Scottish Governments are working together to understand all the options for the future of the refinery.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As the Minister just said, Grangemouth is a vital economic factor for the immediate vicinity, for my constituents in Edinburgh West and indeed for all of Scotland. Will the Government continue to support Grangemouth, given its importance to the future success of the green freeport, of which it is a vital component, not least because of its future capability to produce the sustainable aviation fuel on which so many developments are predisposed?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to champion such opportunities, of which there are so many going forward. That is why, if a decision is made on refining there, I believe that would be countermanded multiple times over by the opportunities in issues such as SAF, which she mentioned. Scotland and that area have such a role to play in delivering and continuing the UK's global leadership in cutting emissions. We recently celebrated the fact that we have halved emissions—we are the first major economy on earth to have done so—and of course going forward we are ambitious than any other major economy on earth. Scotland has such a vital role to play in that.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the importance of the jobs at Grangemouth and the skills that have been developed over the years—this year, it is 100 years since it first came on stream. Does he agree with me and most of the oil and gas industry, which is adamant that the skills, technologies and supply chains that supply not just the Grangemouth refinery but the whole North sea offshore industry are vital for managing not just the energy security of today but the energy transition of tomorrow?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is a great champion of those workers in the oil and gas industry. We now have an integrated energy industry. He may have seen the recent research suggesting that 90% of those currently employed in oil and gas have transferrable skills to the green transition, in which we can positively expect to see many more jobs in future if we maintain the strength of that industry today. That is why it is so disappointing that some Opposition parties oppose new licensing of oil and gas when that is vital to maintaining those jobs and that capability. In that respect, the Alba party is more constructive than others sitting on the Opposition Benches.

[Graham Stuart]

We are working closely with both the company and the Scottish Government to ensure a managed transition of the site, support its workers and ensure that Scotland's fuel supply remains resilient. Petroineos's plans will ensure that the Grangemouth site can maintain Scotland's fuel supply through imports. Adapting the infrastructure to accommodate imports in larger tankers, particularly of diesel at Finnart on the west coast of Scotland, will ensure that the import terminal has greater flexibility and maintain robust fuel security.

I recognise that consumers may be worried that increasing the UK's reliance on imported fuel products could increase the price they pay at the pump. I want to provide reassurance that this conversion is unlikely to drive up the price of petrol and diesel for the Scottish consumer. Fuel prices are mainly driven by international petroleum product markets and exchange rates, and imports into other sites such as Clydebank are already competitive in the Scottish market.

I also want to acknowledge that the announcement of the conversion will be concerning to the refinery's employees and their families. We remain in close contact with the Scottish Government to mitigate impacts on jobs and the local economy. As part of our commitment to levelling up, the UK Government are already supporting the Falkirk Council area through the UK shared prosperity fund. Its allocation of more than £6.1 million will deliver a range of interventions that support local businesses, communities, people and skills. We are also supporting Falkirk Council with £40 million of UK Government investment through the Falkirk city and regional growth deal, which is supporting a range of locally driven projects that will create high-value jobs to help boost the local economy. We are working with the Scottish Government to deliver the Forth Green freeport, which covers the area. The freeport aims to drive a transition to net zero by 2045 by attracting up to £6 billion-worth of investment and creating approximately 50,000 jobs, generating an estimated £4.2 billion in gross value added in the first five years.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Minister is giving a comprehensive reply. The Forth Green freeport is really important. He mentions that he has been in discussion with the Scottish Government and others in the Grangemouth area. Will he also make a direct plea to the freeport to make sure it is fully involved in any potential reinvestment in the facility at Grangemouth, which has been part of the industrial heritage and the industrial scene in Scotland for a very long time? It would be a very valuable contribution if the Government could make such an intervention.

Graham Stuart: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, through contracts for difference and many other policy announcements from the UK Government, we are driving enormous growth in jobs in the green sectors. We expect them to grow to 480,000 jobs by the end of this decade. As I say, as a global leader in decarbonisation, Scotland, and that area in particular, has an enormous amount to offer and there are huge opportunities coming forward. We will publish next year a green jobs plan, working with industry to identify the pressure points and the opportunities going forward.

The Government remain absolutely committed to supporting the North sea oil and gas sector. The conversion of the refinery into an import terminal is not expected to impact significantly on North sea production. That is because only a very small amount of oil refined at Grangemouth currently comes from the North sea. Indeed, since the start of 2022, Grangemouth has received on average less than 10% of its supply from the North sea via the Forties pipeline, which the hon. Member for East Lothian referred to. This North sea crude would be made available to the open market via the terminal at Hound Point, alongside the rest of the Forties blend production. I can also confirm that there will be no impact on gas supplies.

I assure the House that the Government will continue to back North sea production by granting licences for new projects, such as the Rosebank field development. Developments such as Rosebank will continue to strengthen our energy security, support the transition to net zero, and create new jobs and opportunities. Rosebank, for example, is expected to be significantly less emissions-intensive than previous developments, which will help the UK to reach its ambitious targets for net zero. Its operator, Equinor, estimates that it will produce oil at around 12 kg of carbon dioxide per barrel, compared with an offshore production average of more than 20 kg of carbon dioxide per barrel. So it is already a much more efficient production. If electrification were to go ahead, it would be significantly lower again. In addition, the Rosebank project will provide investment of £6.3 billion in UK-based businesses, support around 400 UK-based jobs, and add around £24 billion to the UK economy across the project's lifetime, according to its operator. Yet that licence finds itself opposed by the Labour party, even if it supports jobs and helps us to green the basin.

I want to finish by reiterating to the House the Government's commitment to backing the North sea oil and gas sector to protect our energy security, attract investment, and create opportunities for communities in Scotland and across the UK. It is a declining basin. It is expected to fall, with new licences, at 7% a year. New licences are not part of increasing production, because we will not have increased production. It is about managing the decline and doing so in a way that brings forward developments such as Rosebank with lower emissions than the alternative. That is why it is the right thing to do for the environment, however counterintuitive that might seem. It is also the right thing to do for jobs and for the maintenance of the capability for the long term as we go through the transition and the green economy grows in the freeport as well as elsewhere.

The UK Government will continue to work closely with the Scottish Government on this issue to ensure that when the time comes, there is a just transition of Grangemouth into an import terminal—if that is the decision made—and to ensure that fuel supplies for Scotland and the UK are maintained. The Government will also continue to support economic development in the local area to ensure that there is a just transition for the workforce.

I look forward to continuing to engage with Members, and with the hon. Member for East Lothian in particular, on this vitally important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 January 2024

[Carolyn Harris *in the Chair*]

Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases

9.30 am

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): As this is the first sitting in this Chamber of 2024, may I take this opportunity to wish everyone a very happy and prosperous 2024?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of the UK in ending malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

Thank you, Mrs Harris, and a very happy new year to you too. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate, and to the hon. Members from across the House who supported the bid, not all of whom have been able to make it here today. I think a few folk are stuck in traffic or whatever, so perhaps we will see some more faces as the debate goes on. I am very grateful to everyone who has come here to take part.

I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Last year I and a number of colleagues visited Malawi with the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases to learn more about the efforts to end these diseases, and to see at first hand the impact of UK investment on those efforts. I will draw on that experience in my contribution today.

We are particularly grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate now, because at the end of this month, on Tuesday 30 January, we will mark World Neglected Tropical Diseases Day—a day designated by the World Health Organisation to raise awareness of the challenge and the opportunity that we have to eliminate many of these deadly diseases. It will be the first such awareness day of the calendar year, and the fourth time that that particular day has been marked. This year's theme is "Unite. Act. Eliminate." It challenges decision makers and those in positions of power—including everyone taking part in this debate—to work together to mobilise the resources necessary to eliminate malaria and other neglected tropical diseases.

Debates such as this about international development can be full of acronyms, and we will no doubt hear today references to many of them, including SDGs, sustainable development goals; spending on ODA, official development assistance; and WHO, the World Health Organisation. Acronyms can be a useful shorthand, but we have to be careful that we do not reduce what we are discussing to technical or abstract concepts. When we talk about NTDs—neglected tropical diseases—we are not talking just about a group of 21 diseases that exist in test tubes or Petri dishes in a laboratory somewhere. These diseases are having an impact on the daily lives of 1.7 billion people around the world—nearly one in five of the global population. They can cause immense suffering, disability and disfigurement, and are often fatal. In many ways, it is not just the diseases that are neglected; the people affected by them are also, by definition, being neglected.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. He rightly says that we should not be distracted by the statistics, but given the fact that one in five people on the planet is affected, it is important that we remember that many of these diseases are entirely preventable if the right action is taken as early as possible.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I think that the point he makes will come through in all the contributions and evidence that we hear today.

The evidence shows that, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, it is the poorest and most vulnerable and marginalised people in remote communities, and particularly women and girls, who are affected most by these diseases. For example, noma, which was added to the WHO's list of NTDs just a few weeks ago, in December, is a severe gangrenous disease of the mouth and face that primarily affects malnourished children between the ages of two and six years in regions of extreme poverty. Hookworm, a type of soil-transmitted helminth, affects one in three pregnant women in sub-Saharan Africa and can cause anaemia and lead to death during pregnancy. Schistosomiasis, or bilharzia, which is slightly easier to say, is very common in Malawi, where we visited; it can lead to female genital schistosomiasis, of which there are 56 million cases worldwide, which can triple the risk of HIV and cause infertility, ectopic pregnancy, and in some cases maternal death.

The human cost of these diseases is incredibly high. On our visit to Malawi, in the Salima district we met a number of people who had lived with trachoma, a bacterial infection that can cause eyelashes to draw in, damaging eyesight and even causing blindness. People affected in that way can very easily lose their independence, and their family and friends have to dedicate time and resources to caring for them. If it is caught early, trachoma can be treated with antibiotics or surgery, and it can be prevented by good water and sanitation for health practices. The key lesson, which the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) just mentioned, is that trachoma can be eliminated altogether. That gives us another acronym, SAFE: surgery to treat the blinding stage of the disease, antibiotics to clear the infection, facial cleanliness and hand hygiene to help reduce transmission, and environmental improvements to help stop the infection spreading.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman. He is right to say that.

As you do over the holiday period, I watched lots of films. One of the advertisements on the channel that I was watching said that, at a small cost—I think it is as little as £11—a surgical operation that stops eyesight loss can be offered. That is a small cost to pay for a long-term health gain.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and we will come on to that as the debate continues. It is exactly as I was saying: we met people who had been affected by trachoma, but interventions supported

[Patrick Grady]

by the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust's trachoma initiative helped to restore their sight through are exactly the kinds of operations and access to medicine that he is talking about. Since 2022, trachoma has been eliminated as a public health concern in Malawi. It is the first country in southern Africa, the fourth country in the WHO Africa region and the 15th country globally to achieve that milestone.

What we witnessed was not just individual transformation—men and women whose sight had been restored and who could again live independently—but community transformation, because they could go back to actively contributing by caring for their grandchildren and helping with other tasks around the home. In turn, their families benefit from that support and can focus their time and energy back on education or employment. That is the reality of the statistics, which demonstrate both the value of taking action and the cost of continuing to neglect these diseases.

Many of the researchers and practitioners who are taking an interest in this subject have told us, as the hon. Gentleman just suggested, that investment in NTDs really is a best-buy in global health intervention. The campaign group Uniting to Combat NTDs reckons that, in some cases, investing just $1 in tackling these diseases could unlock $25 of benefits. Brighton and Sussex Medical School has calculated that the economic burden to a patient with podoconiosis, which is a form of elephantiasis, can be up to £100 per year, but that the one-off cost of a single treatment is just £52. A study by Deloitte showed that, if Nigeria met its NTD elimination targets by 2030, it could add $19 billion to the value of its economy. If we want to achieve the sustainable development goals, unlock wasted economic potential, change the nature of aid flows and release new forms of finance to help developing countries drive poverty reduction and grow their economies, investing properly and effectively in tackling NTDs is essential.

The fight against malaria is one of the best demonstrations of that point. The all-party group's visit to Malawi was not my first visit, or even my last visit to that beautiful country. I first lived and worked in Malawi nearly 20 years ago. The prevalence and impact of malaria has always been evident throughout that country's history. Those of us who came from Scotland and other countries where malaria is not endemic were affected, because we were strongly encouraged to take prophylactic medication—at that time, Lariam—which is not without side effects. Daily, we saw kids in the school where we taught missing class because they had contracted malaria. Sometimes it would affect the teachers, too, so that whole classes missed out on their education or relied on some of the volunteers to pick up the slack, which might have been okay if it was a maths or English class, but was slightly more complicated if it was Chichewa lessons.

Malaria, like so many of these diseases, is preventable and curable, yet there were 249 million cases in 2022, which is five million more than in 2021 and 16 million more than in 2019. Malaria still kills around 608,000 people around the world each year, most of them young children. That is approximately one child a minute, or 90 completely avoidable deaths in the time set aside for today's debate. There has been progress, but more can be made. Many of the required interventions are, in principle at least, very straightforward: for example, using bed nets is very simple and effective. The New Nets Project, developed by a number of UK institutions including the Innovative Vector Control Consortium, a Liverpool-based product development partnership, along with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and Imperial College London, has developed nets with dual active ingredients that combine insecticides to respond to growing resistance to insecticides among mosquitos.

In Malawi, in Mtira village in the Balaka district, we witnessed indoor residual spraying of insecticide, and in the local clinic—a small, brick, thatched building with one room—a chart was proudly displayed showing the dramatic decline in the incidence of malaria patients in the village in just the four years since the spraying began. Outside Lilongwe, in Mitundu village, we visited the clinic where some of the very first doses of the new RTS,S vaccine against malaria had been dispensed, starting in 2019. We were very privileged to meet young Evison Saimon, who is now five years old and had benefited from the vaccine.

These success stories have come about only through the incredible effort of and collaboration between a range of partners and funding bodies, including national Government ministries, UNICEF, the WHO and private or charitable organisations including GlaxoSmithKline and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. What they all have in common is security of funding and a clear goal.

Around the world, however, more money is still spent on treating male pattern baldness and curing hay fever—I and a few other hon. Members in the Chamber have lived experience of both conditions—than on tackling malaria. Hay fever can be debilitating, but it is rarely life-threatening, and the main symptoms of baldness can be readily treated with a hat. That speaks to some of the serious challenges in how the pharmaceutical industry approaches these diseases and how research and development can be properly carried out.

Many of us know about researchers' frustration with the lack of certainty around funding. The product development partnership model funded by the former Department for International Development worked to overcome shortcomings in the commercial research and development sector and was seen as a leader in funding such efforts through public ODA until the axe began to fall in 2021. Since then, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has been able to provide funding guarantees only one year at a time, which causes massive uncertainty for projects that require long-term funding. Clinical trials cannot be turned on and off like a tap; they take time and effort in the field and have to run over defined periods of time. They cannot be driven by political funding cycles.

Where trials work, there have been and continue to be breakthroughs. The drug discovery unit at the University of Dundee, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) will be familiar with, has worked with the PDP Medicines for Malaria Venture to develop cabamaquine, which could not only treat malaria with a single dose but potentially protect people from contracting the disease and stop its spread. The Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative has revolutionised treatment for sleeping sickness with fexinidazole, a simple oral cure, instead of the only available previous treatment,

which was toxic and cumbersome and could kill up to one in 20 patients. For those kinds of innovations to be effective, there has to be sustained, effective and targeted investment. Without it, we find an ever-changing environment where the malaria virus continues to adapt and evolve, and buzzes about just like the mosquito that carries it, frustratingly difficult for the scientists to whack it against the wall, even though they can see and hear it.

We know that elimination of malaria and other tropical diseases is possible, because it has already been done. Many diseases that were once endemic here in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world have been eradicated. Individual countries and regions, as we saw in Malawi with trachoma, have been able to make progress and eliminate certain diseases as public health threats, but if we allow progress to stall, we risk undoing the good work that has already been done, and new, stronger and more difficult to treat variants of these diseases will emerge.

That is before we take into account increasing challenges such as climate change. Last year, for the first time, the *World Malaria Report* included a chapter on climate change. Malaria and other tropical diseases are extremely sensitive to the environment, affected by temperature, rainfall and humidity. Locally acquired malaria has been detected in Florida and Texas in recent years, while dengue fever has appeared in France and other parts of Europe. All of a sudden, commercial pharmaceutical companies are taking more interest in many of these diseases, but a purely economic or profit-driven approach on its own will not be enough to tackle these diseases properly. For example, investing in a vaccine for dengue fever that would benefit tourists travelling to affected areas is very important, but for countries such as Bangladesh or the Philippines, an effective, immediate treatment for people who have already contracted the disease is more of a priority.

In all of this, we have to consider the role of institutions and organisations in the United Kingdom and the role of the UK Government in supporting them and global partners. There can be no hiding from the impact of the cuts to the ODA budget. Any of us who speak to partner organisations or to those who have previously received funding and put it to such good use, continue to hear of the long-term impact of short-term decisions. We all welcome the White Paper, the new tone and focus of the International Development Minister, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), and his team, the reinvigoration of the SDGs and the determination to build a new consensus, but at the end of the day, stakeholders ask us when 0.7% will return. That is a question both for the Minister and for the official Opposition, and for all our manifestoes in this election year.

The next replenishment cycle for the Global Fund will be in 2025. At that point, we hope that the UK will be in a position to meet the requested funding, rather than the 29% reduction that it provided last year. Can the Minister make similar commitments for multilateral initiatives such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and Unitaid? The UK has signed up to a number of commitments on neglected tropical diseases, including the 2022 Kigali declaration, the G7 leaders' communiqué and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting communiqué, so what steps will the Minister be taking to drive these commitments forwards?

The SDGs are a welcome focus in the White Paper. SDG 3.3 sets a target of ending the malaria epidemic and achieving a 90% reduction in the number of people requiring interventions against NTDs by 2030, so how are the Government leveraging funding and working with partners to meet those goals? In practical terms, can the Minister commit to multi-year funding for research and development in these areas, particularly for product development partnerships? What steps are the Government taking to build and support R&D and manufacturing capacity in affected countries? On our visit to Malawi, we saw the world-class Blantyre-Blantyre facility, which was developed in partnership between the University of Glasgow, in my constituency, and the Kamuzu University of Health Sciences, and funded in part by the Scottish Government. That is real innovation, genuine partnership and the empowerment of a new generation of young local researchers, clinicians and academics, and it was inspiring to meet a number of them during our visit.

The Government must recognise the importance of cross-sectoral approaches, and ensure that there is co-ordination and collaboration between malaria and NTD programmes and existing investments in nutrition, education, WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—disability inclusion, and maternal and child health. In all of this, we have to address the structural issues, including the climate emergency and the growing debt burden on developing countries. We have debated a number of these topics recently in Westminster Hall, and it shows the interconnectedness of so many of the challenges around achieving the SDGs.

In November's debate on African debt, which was led by the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who I am delighted to see present, I said that Malawi is one of 21 African countries that are in or at high risk of debt distress. Its external debt effectively tripled between 2009 and 2021, and we can see the impact of that in the country's inability to get moving. How different the country might be if the payments it is making on debt, or even just on debt interest, could be invested instead in primary healthcare and in eradicating not just trachoma, but malaria and all the other endemic diseases affecting its population.

All of these challenges are created or, at the very least, exacerbated by the actions and decisions of people, which means that the challenges can be overcome by the actions and decisions of people—whether that it is each of us as individuals practising basic hand and face hygiene to help prevent the spread of disease, or Government Ministers making decisions about millions of pounds of aid spending. Malaria and many other tropical diseases have been neglected for far too long, which means that the people most affected by these diseases have also been neglected for far too long, but all the evidence shows that we can cure, prevent and, ultimately, end the scourge of these diseases. For relatively little cost, we can achieve a massive return on investment, both in long-term savings on the costs of chronic treatment and in the actualisation of the economic and social potential of people who are no longer confined to a sick bed or, worse, to an early death, but who are working for the betterment of their families and communities.

Many, if not most of us, present for the debate will have witnessed malaria and tropical diseases at first hand on delegations or through our own personal

[Patrick Grady]

experiences, so I look forward to hearing the contributions from other Members and how the Minister responds. I hope that when we get to World NTD Day at the end of the month, the Government will be able to draw on the experiences of Members and their contributions to today's debate, and endorse this year's theme that we should all unite, act and, ultimately, eliminate malaria and all neglected tropical diseases.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), whom I commend. He and I are often side by side in debates on issues that are of interest to us—whether freedom of religious belief or health—and I know this subject is close to his heart. When he asked whether I would participate in the debate, I said, "Of course; it is Westminster Hall, after all."—*[Laughter.]* No, I said I would do it because it is the right thing to do and because the subject matter he has chosen is also close to my heart. Due to his personal experiences, he brings vast knowledge to the subject matter that I do not have. He also brings compassion for those who are less well off. That is what I always admire about the hon. Gentleman, and he has done that exceptionally well today.

I am pleased to see the shadow Ministers in their place and I look forward to their contributions, because they both have a deep interest in the subject matter. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. She often speaks as we speak, with the difference that the Minister has the opportunity to put in place the answers we need, which is what we always ask for. It is also a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. You are looking extremely well this morning. Your choice of glasses excels each time I see you. Well done and thank you very much.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this important debate on malaria and neglected tropical diseases. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that climate change—the worsening climate crisis—has had an alarming impact on malaria and neglected diseases?

Locally acquired cases of malaria have now been found in the US, and a recent UK Health Security Agency report concluded that dengue fever could be transmitted in London by 2060. Does he agree that addressing the climate crisis is imperative in our fight against these diseases, and that this global challenge requires a unified global response?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I completely agree with his point. I said beforehand to my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), that in the past year there have been reports, in southern England anyway, of mosquitoes that we had never had before. The threat level cannot be ignored in this country. He is right to underline the need to address climate change. To be fair, the Government have a commitment on that. It is important to work together collectively politically across the United Kingdom, Europe and the world, to try to address these issues. He rightly says that we cannot ignore them.

Global aid funding cuts not only have affected developing countries, which need our help, but lead to a knock-on effect for British citizens travelling globally. Looking at the title of the debate—malaria and neglected tropical diseases—we must acknowledge travel is easier to achieve now, and with that comes the potential threat. For example, since foreign development aid was cut, there has been an increase in malaria cases globally. I have no empirical evidence that the two are linked, but I believe that is noteworthy and should be acknowledged.

Africa accounts for the majority of global cases of malaria. According to the World Malaria Report 2023, there were 249 million malaria cases in 85 malaria-endemic countries. The hon. Member for Glasgow North also referred to that. It is so important that we grasp the magnitude of this problem.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the frustrating part of this issue of neglected tropical diseases is that a straightforward partial solution would be the greater availability of clean drinking water, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa? That would not solve all the problems, but many of them.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the past, there have been debates on water aid in this Chamber. If the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) were participating in the debate, she would have brought her knowledge from her involvement with Christian Aid and other charitable organisations. Their advertisements on TV always mention clean water, so we have a massive role to play there too.

On 14 December 2023, the UK Health Security Agency published provisional UK case numbers for 2022-23 up to October that suggested that there were 250 more cases in the first nine months of 2023 than in the whole of 2022, and that the case total in 2023 was higher than the average between 2010 and 2019 of 1,612. That upward trend is discouraging. That is despite preliminary data from the Office for National Statistics suggesting that UK resident visits abroad remain lower than pre-covid-19 pandemic levels. Travel destination data for this year is not yet available. I am not sure whether the Minister is able to provide that, but it would be good to get some figures. If we cannot get them today, will she pass them on to those who have participated in the debate?

In previous years, the majority of cases where the travel history was known were acquired in Africa—particularly western Africa—by travellers visiting friends and relatives. In my constituency—I know this is true for my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry and others, including the hon. Member for Glasgow North—I have a large number of church groups and non-governmental organisations that work across Africa. Nearly every church has a missionary connection with Africa, so people travel there maybe once a year—certainly, every couple of years.

The rise in the number of cases, despite travel intensity lessening, is a worrying trend that must be addressed, alongside the reinstatement of our foreign aid. The hon. Member for Glasgow North referred to the 0.7% target, and I support that 100%, as others do.

I know the Minister is keen to respond positively. I am ever mindful that she is not in charge of the money, but I want to underline the issue. We need investment in malaria research, and we must make cheap and reliable medication available.

The last time I went to an area with high malaria levels—Nigeria—my wife was able to order malaria tablets online from the local Boots pharmacy. I am not promoting Boots; I just went there and collected the tablets. It is great to have that facility available. I only knew that the medication was necessary when one of my staff members looked up the area and told me. Information about the spread of malaria in certain countries is not readily available. Perhaps flight tickets should come with a warning. They could say, "Your bag must weigh under 23 kg and you really should get your malaria tablets." There are some things we could do from a practical point of view. There is no 100% effective vaccine for malaria, but there is medication that massively reduces its severity. The official advice is that a combination of preventive measures provides significant protection against malaria.

This is not solely an issue for travellers; we have a moral obligation to tackle malaria. I believe that is the motivation of the hon. Gentleman; it is certainly my motivation for being here. The restrictions on travel and aid due to the covid pandemic demonstrate halting those steps had a detrimental effect. In 2020 and 2021, there was significant disruption to malaria services, such as the distribution of bed nets, which the hon. Gentleman referred to. That caused a spike not just in malaria incidence but mortality rates.

In 2022, $4.1 billion was invested globally to fight malaria—far short of the World Health Organisation's $7.8 billion target. Before I look globally to ask other nations to step up to the mark, I look to my own Minister and Government and ask what else we can do right here, right now to assure others across the world that we will not simply increase funding but ensure that none of the funding is wasted and that it goes directly towards meeting the need.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that preventing and treating malaria and NTDs is within our grasp? They can be beaten, but progress is stalling. Does he agree with me that the UK aid funding gap from Government, the climate crisis, conflict and humanitarian crises all pose a serious threat to sustaining those lifesaving efforts?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It gave me time to get a good gulp of water. He is right again in underlining the issue and our role as this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and what we can do together. The use of non-governmental organisation partnerships that are charitable and faith-based will always be my motivation for being here. That is where I come from.

I think of the clinics in Malawi, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North referred to, as well as in Zimbabwe and Swaziland. I think of those three and of those in Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria that I know the churches back home are involved with. The Elim church and missions are active in my constituency. In particular, the clinics in the first three countries are supported through the Elim Relief Association, which has taken steps to deliver anti-malaria tools at a low cost with a big dividend at the end, purchasing nets in bulk and handing them out through the charitable hospital and clinics. That is replicated worldwide.

We have questions to ask about how much funding is wasted on unnecessary red tape. When we see images of a child wasting away with no proper care, suffering from a disease that could have been managed, it underlines how we must do better. I believe we can.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): To allow the hon. Gentleman to have a quick drink, I will make the following point. He is making a passionate speech on the importance of supporting the tremendous work to tackle malaria and neglected tropical disease. We often talk about this from an Africa or an international perspective. Does he agree with me that it is important we recognise that our work through the UK aid budget and international development also has an impact on UK citizens and the UK's reputation in many ways? It is important we do not lose sight of that.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is a good reminder that what we do here is appreciated across the world. There is feedback and a positivity that comes through that.

I support many organisations, as do others, whether they be church groups or charitable groups. One such organisation that I want to mention is the Christian Blind Mission, which I have supported for about 20 years. I had never met any representatives in person until I got to Nigeria and visited them and saw what and how much they do. One of our former Members, Jo Cox, was involved with that organisation. I did not know that until that day and it was interesting to catch up. We may donate to charity but may not always know all the good an organisation does.

Time has prevented me from going into other tropical diseases, but the trends are the same and so is the solution: joined-up thinking, working in partnership with the bodies that exist on the ground and a budget that can and does deliver compassionate aid. This debate is important. I believe we have an obligation to speak up for those who need help and be the ears and voice of those across the world. I thank the Government for what they do but urge them to do more.

10.3 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who contributes to so many debates and always brings a huge amount of commitment, passion and knowledge. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing time for this important debate on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, particularly ahead of the world awareness day. I have long been interested in the issue and my support continues. Malaria and neglected tropical diseases are embedded in UN sustainable development goal 3—good health and wellbeing—and under target 3.3, as I am sure hon. Members will know all too well, to end the epidemic of malaria and NTDs by 2030. The UK actively contributes to that target.

As a former FCDO global health Minister, I was pleased to launch the "Ending preventable deaths of mothers, babies and children by 2030" paper in December 2021. That paper highlights the UK's key achievements

[Wendy Morton]

to date in the fight against malaria and NTDs. It is worth just reminding ourselves of a few of those achievements. In 2019, UK aid helped to distribute 160 million mosquito nets, sprayed 8 million buildings with anti-malarial indoor spray, gave preventive malaria treatment to 11 million women and supported the development of seven new drugs for malaria.

But, all too sadly, as we know, malaria transmissions are concentrated throughout countries in sub-Saharan Africa, especially those close to the equator. In 2022, there were 249 million cases of malaria and 608,000 deaths, of which 95% were in Africa. I am very fortunate to have visited, and actually volunteered in, some of those sub-Saharan countries—for example through Project Umubano, with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and as a member of the International Development Committee—including Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Mozambique. Like most travellers, when I visited, I would take anti-malarial pills as a short-term preventive precaution. However, for people living in those countries, anti-malarial pills are either not an option or not a long-term solution.

Another preventive measure, which of course is more accessible and affordable—and often free—is the use of mosquito nets. When used properly, mosquito nets are very effective. However, an unintended consequence that we need to be aware of is that, when they are free or subsidised—which is a good thing—that can lead to some of those nets being used for alternative uses, such as for fishing.

I therefore urge that, when the Government are looking at these projects and at funding, we also insist that we accompany that with education of how to use mosquito nets properly. I think we all know that there is no point in having a mosquito net if it is not being used effectively. Otherwise, not only are we risking somebody's life, but we are risking our investment at the expense of the British taxpayer.

I was also very fortunate to visit the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine during my time as Minister for global health. That is, again, another organisation here in the UK that does absolutely incredible work, and I am glad to see that the UK continues to set malaria and NTDs as a priority on its agenda.

The UK's international development White Paper, published in November 2023, highlights the following achievements: the UK's contribution to the World Health Organisation's malaria vaccine implementation programme, the UK's Fleming fund for strengthening anti-microbial resistance surveillance systems in more than 20 low and middle-income countries, support for civil society advocacy groups such as Malaria No More, and both of the first two malaria vaccines in the world to be recommended by the WHO coming from British science and British expertise. Those are Mosquirix, developed by GSK, and R21, developed by the University of Oxford. I would like to give recognition to GSK and the University of Oxford's Jenner Institute for that incredible contribution to global health.

Mr Dhesi: Indeed, our battle against malaria and NTDs is not just a struggle for survival but a reflection of our collective humanity. Does the right hon. Lady agree with me that it is a global fight that transcends national boundaries and demands worldwide unity, that our actions today will define the legacy we leave for future generations, and that this battle is about saving lives and upholding our moral duty to the global community?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We often talk about budgets in terms of countries and regions; insects and diseases such as malaria do not see the boundaries that we do, so it is always important that we do as much as we can, working with our partners, to address the long-term issues and finding the solutions, but taking a holistic approach. I do not believe it is always that simple, but we must absolutely continue to work on it. That is why I think the UK has a very good reputation when it comes to international development, particularly now that that work is integrated within the Foreign Office. However, it is important that we continue to work on this, whether on malaria or many of the other diseases that we see around the world.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): As a vice-chair of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I have a great interest in this issue, and having spent a lot of time in Africa over the years, mainly with the military, I understand this particular field intimately. Does my right hon. Friend agree that even though the percentage of overseas aid fell from 0.7% to 0.5%, the Foreign Office should now be focused on maintaining at a consistent level the funding relating to life and death issues? With the overall funding headroom being reduced, the funding element for life and death issues—particularly malaria and NTDs—should be consistent in order for the UK to fulfil its global responsibilities.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and having been a Minister, I know how difficult some of these challenges can be. I am sure that the Minister may well pick up on that issue during her speech. It is important that we look at our priorities and seek to achieve the most effective outcomes for our spend. It does not matter whether this is about international development or any other Department. All too often we talk about the amount of money we are putting into a project, whereas I would like to see us look more at the outcomes alongside that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) acknowledges, we are discussing really important topics this morning that are often about the difference between life and death.

I was pleased that in May 2022, the UK launched its 10-year international development strategy, with one of its four priorities being global health. The strategy states that we will

"work towards ending preventable deaths"

by

"investing both bilaterally and through initiatives such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance; and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria."

I appreciate the great work of the Global Fund. I also gently remind Ministers—I am sure they are very aware—that there have been some issues with funding in certain parts of the world. That is why it is so important that there must always be the appropriate management and oversight capacity, as well as accurate inventory records checked by external auditors, so that we have overall accountability to British taxpayers.

That said, I absolutely acknowledge the positive results that have been achieved. The Global Fund's 2023 report states that in 2022, it treated 165 million cases of malaria, and gave preventive treatment for malaria to 14.6 million pregnant women. That is another example of the scale of the challenge we face, and how important this is.

The UK has contributed to those results as the third largest Government donor to the Global Fund, pledging £1 billion for the Global Fund's seventh replenishment for 2023 to 2025. It is also important to recognise that the funds are spent on some other very important areas, such as HIV and TB, which I know this House and some Members here take very seriously.

It is right that we continue to invest in malaria prevention and treatment if we are to meet our target of ending preventable deaths by 2030. I recognise that the total number of malaria deaths worldwide is falling. The statistics show a fall from 896,000 deaths in 2000 to 608,000 in 2022. By my calculation, that equates to a reduction of about 13,000 deaths a year. Even if we apply that rate between today and 2030, there will still be approximately 517,000 malaria deaths in 2030, which is obviously far from us being malaria-free, so we urgently need innovations to continue to tackle malaria. Perhaps we need to scale up the newly recommended R21 malaria vaccine as part of the solution.

Good international development is not all about spending money overseas to benefit developing countries, although we need the funds to do this. It is also about protecting and developing our interests as the UK: for example, through trade and the building of new trade relationships, and making a strong contribution to the UK's soft power and international place in the world. It is about honouring the UK's international commitments, but it must also firmly remain about making this more effective by improving openness, transparency, value for money and delivering. Today's debate is a very helpful reminder of that.

10.14 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Happy new year, Mrs Harris. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, as ever. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this debate, not least because it is timely and critical ahead of World Neglected Tropical Diseases Day. I also thank him for his continued commitment to speaking up for the most vulnerable and poorest people in the world, as well as for his constituents.

The fact that one child dies every minute from a preventable and treatable disease is not simply a tragedy, but a moral failure. As we have heard in this debate, malaria and neglected tropical diseases are preventable and curable, but a lack of political will and much-needed investment is resulting in the progress towards eliminating these diseases stalling. When minds are focused and resources are properly mobilised, successes can be achieved. Between 2000 and 2022, an estimated 2.1 billion malaria cases and 11.7 million malaria deaths were averted globally. Fifty countries have eliminated at least one neglected tropical disease, and 600 million fewer people require intervention against those diseases compared with 2010.

In 2022, however, the global tally of malaria cases reached 249 million. That is an increase of 5 million from 2021 and 60 million more cases than in 2019—well above estimates from before the covid-19 pandemic. Today, around 1.65 billion people are estimated to require treatment for at least one neglected tropical disease, resulting in devastating health, social and economic consequences. That is more than 20% of the global population.

Malaria and neglected tropical diseases have been exacerbated by climate change, conflict and humanitarian crises. Furthermore, drug and insecticide resistance, as well as invasive mosquito species, also hamper progress. However, the challenges can be overcome with the right investment. At the heart of this debate is a significant funding gap for malaria and neglected tropical diseases, as well as the shameful role of this UK Government, with their years of death sentence cuts, stepping away when they should be stepping up.

The funding gap between the amount invested in malaria control and elimination and the resources needed is dangerously large. Spending in 2022 reached $4.1 billion, which is well below the $7.8 billion required to stay on track to reduce case incidence and mortality rates by at least 90% by 2030, as highlighted in the SDGs. Similarly, neglected tropical diseases are preventable and treatable, often at a very low cost, yet they are neglected in terms of funding and research.

The UK was once a global leader in tackling those diseases, particularly in research and innovation, but that contribution has been fundamentally undermined by the reckless decision to cut ODA from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5%. For example, in June 2021, the UK Government decided to terminate the Accelerating the Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases programme—otherwise known as ASCEND—with no alternative funding offered to more than 20 beneficiary countries in Africa. That resulted in over 250 million treatments and over 180,000 disability-preventing surgeries being stopped. In Zambia alone, it resulted in the cancellation of 1,500 sight-saving trachoma surgeries and 1,500 disability-preventing lymphatic filariasis surgeries.

There is international acceptance of the hard facts that demonstrate that malaria and other tropical diseases are far from eradicated. In November 2022, the UK Government announced a pledge of £1 billion for the seventh replenishment fund of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and that is to be welcomed. Crucially, however, that commitment is £400 million less than in 2019, and £800 million short of the 29% increase in funding that the Global Fund called for to get progress against those three diseases back on track. Other G7 allies, such as the US and Germany, have met that call.

That money was and is needed to regain progress lost during the covid-19 pandemic and to save 20 million lives over the next three years, but that pledge by the UK Government is on trend with their theme of grandiose gestures and media splashes that may sound good, but have little meaningful impact. It is on track with the UK Government's morally corrupt insistence on finding loopholes in their international commitments.

For example, in the recent FCDO White Paper on international development, there was noticeably no recommitment to the 0.7% spending on ODA and no reinstatement of the pre-2021 projects or commitment to beneficiaries of cut projects. The UK Government must therefore, as a matter of utmost urgency, recommit to the UN-mandated 0.7% spending of GNI on ODA,

[Chris Law]

and they must go further and clarify that funds from that are available for research into tropical diseases including malaria.

My first question is: will the Minister tell us what tangible action the UK Government intend to take to make up the shortfall left by the ODA cuts? Do their Government colleagues feel any remorse for the beneficiaries of projects that have had their funding stripped due to the 2021 policy?

Over the past decade, the UK has led the way in research into global infectious diseases, and the thriving scientific research and innovation sector must continue to be world leading and supported through long-term, sustainable UK funding and investment. The lack of commercial drivers for anti-malarials and neglected tropical diseases requires not-for-profit solutions to help to develop new medicines through public sector and charitable sources.

I am very proud to say that the Drug Discovery Unit at the University of Dundee in my constituency is a world-leading drug discovery centre, focused on developing new treatments for neglected infectious diseases. I have had the opportunity to visit the unit on a number of occasions, and I give my personal thanks and gratitude to all those who use their skills and expertise to make such valued contributions.

The Drug Discovery Unit has collaborated with the Medicines for Malaria Venture on the discovery of a potential anti-malarial compound called cabamiquine—a single-dose cure that has also been shown to be effective in preventing malaria in trials and is currently undergoing phase 2 clinical trials with patients in Africa. That type of research does not fit nicely into typical funding body structures based around a specific scientific hypothesis and employing one person for three years. Rather, it requires large multidisciplinary groups and is focused not around a narrow research question, but a broader challenge. Are the Government looking at recommitting to longer-term multi-year funding?

Furthermore, the Drug Discovery Unit recognises the increasing need and desire to involve scientists from low and middle-income countries in partnership in this work, and it has been working to establish collaborations with scientists with particular focuses on Ghana and Brazil as part of the Wellcome Centre for Anti-Infectives Research. Do the UK Government intend to support partner programmes from countries that are most impacted by malaria and other tropical diseases?

Of course, to continue its world-leading progress on virus research, it is fundamental that Scotland and the rest of the UK continue to be able to attract the best talent from the European Union. The "make it up as you go along" approach to Brexit, which was not voted for in Scotland, has had one disastrous consequence after another for Scotland and the rest of the UK.

In that context, the inability to work effectively and efficiently with partners in the EU has hindered the UK's full potential in addressing malaria and tropical diseases. Despite the UK now rejoining Horizon, which I welcome, the years of missed opportunity, broken partnership and lack of EU funding have significantly set the UK back in the context of tropical disease research. Crucially, can the Minister explain how the UK Government intend to be a global leader or to continue to punch above their weight in global medical research without the collaboration or resources of one of the deepest pots of funding, and by limiting the information-sharing capacity and collaboration with our European counterparts?

The fight against malaria and neglected tropical diseases is global, requiring collaboration and for each of us to take all the necessary steps to help combat them. The existential global challenge of climate change should further focus minds on malaria and NTDs. We know that many of these diseases are driven by the environment. Changing temperatures, precipitation levels and increasing extreme weather events have the potential to change the distribution, prevalence and virulence of these diseases. For example, flooding in Pakistan in 2022 resulted in more than 2 million additional cases of malaria and a 900% increase in dengue fever.

One of the most meaningful ways in which the UK Government can be proactive in combating malaria and other tropical diseases is to acknowledge the nexus between climate change and the transmission of these diseases. Again, can the Minister outline how the UK Government intend to work with global partners to tackle malaria and NTDs as part of their work on reacting to climate change?

Finally, these diseases are referred to as "neglected" because they have been largely wiped out in more developed parts of the world, but they persist in its poorest, most marginalised or isolated communities. I cannot help but feel that we would be doing more if they existed here. Of course we would—we just have to look at the experience of covid-19 to see that, and the subsequent inequitable distribution of vaccines from high and middle-income countries to low-income countries as another example of the moral failure to protect the most vulnerable in our world.

The UK Government must restore their credibility and urgently scale up their contribution to the eradication of these diseases. Given the vast numbers of people affected across the world, there is no excuse for neglecting them. As I said, more than 20% of the global population is affected. The elimination of malaria and neglected tropical diseases is possible, and it will be a small step to a more equal world when it is achieved.

10.24 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this debate; he has a proud record of work, both in his constituency, with the University of Glasgow, and in Malawi itself. I also refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As hon. Members have said, we remain at a critical point in tackling malaria and neglected tropical diseases due to the pandemic; humanitarian crises as a result of conflicts, flooding and famine; rising biological threats such as insecticide and drug resistance; a decline in the effectiveness of core tools; a widening funding gap and resource constraints; and disruptions to already fragile health systems. We really must act now. Global malaria progress has stalled in recent years, with malaria incidence and mortality currently above pre-pandemic levels. In 2022, 5 million more people were infected than in 2021, and 16 million more than in 2019.

Despite malaria being preventable and treatable, nearly half the world's population remains at risk—particularly in African countries, as the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said. The global burden of neglected tropical diseases also remains significant and, as with malaria, continues to be a barrier to health equity, prosperity and development, with devastating health, social and economic consequences to 1.65 billion people worldwide, including over 600 million people in Africa.

Mr Dhesi: As a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I thank my hon. Friend for her leadership as chair of our APPG. I also thank her and Martha Varney of Malaria No More for their leadership in orchestrating our recent visit to Malawi. Their insights and the dedication of partners such as the Wellcome Trust have significantly deepened my understanding of the challenges at hand. Does the shadow Minister agree that malaria is a relentless barrier to development, thwarting educational progress, disproportionately impacting women and girls, and perpetuating cycles of poverty?

Catherine West: Indeed, and my hon. Friend pre-empts my point about the impact on women and girls. I know that you will be particularly interested, Mrs Harris, in the relevance of tackling what seems to be the disproportionate impact on women and girls, due to various biological, social, economic and cultural factors. Limited financial resources, time constraints, diminished autonomy, and stigma and discrimination create barriers that prevent women from gaining access to timely healthcare, education and employment opportunities. Due to their responsibility for home and family care, they often miss out on crucial treatments. Through close contact with children, women are two to four times more likely to develop trachoma, which is a neglected tropical disease, and are blinded up to four times as often as men.

It was particularly exciting, in the visit mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), to see old women, who are often neglected in developing countries, receiving crucial treatments and being enabled to feel that they were not a burden on their children. It was particularly special to learn that trachoma has been eliminated in Malawi. The World Health Organisation has signed that off, which is a really exciting development. Sometimes, these things feel very overwhelming, but when we see that trachoma has been eliminated in Malawi, it really is wonderful and encouraging.

The "Ending Preventable Deaths" strategy recognised malaria as a major cause of child deaths, and important tools such as bed nets and intermittent preventive treatment in pregnancy as examples of evidence-based health intervention and best buys. It was also welcome that the strategy recognised the critical importance of clean water, sanitation and hygiene. However, there is no way of ending these epidemics and meeting the sustainable development goals without working to empower and enable women and girls to succeed. I know that is very much at the heart of your work in Parliament, Mrs Harris.

James Sunderland: The shadow Minister and I, and many others here, went to Malawi, as we heard earlier, and we share many of the same views on the way forward. In fact, it is quite nice to have cross-party support on such a key issue. We have sought a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda. Does the shadow Minister agree that it is important for the league tables to be published, so that African nations can take a lead and have responsibility for a particular NTD? In Malawi, we have eliminated trachoma, and I welcome that noma has now been added to the list of approved—if that is the right word—diseases that the WHO is looking at and investing in. Does the shadow Minister agree that empowering African nations and ensuring that the UK can take a lead in thought leadership and education is really important?

Catherine West: Indeed, and it has been estimated that 500 million more people, rising to a billion by 2080, could become exposed to chikungunya and dengue, as these diseases spread to new geographies due to warmer climates—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough. As an example, the impact of flooding in Pakistan has also been mentioned, and in 2022 there was a 900% increase in dengue and a fivefold increase in the number of malaria cases. The Minister might be quite creative and see whether there is money in the climate funds to join up the health inequalities with the climate funding that will eventually become available through the COP28 process.

While countries in the global south will of course carry a disproportionate burden, tropical diseases are now becoming a growing concern in non-endemic countries. Will the Minister update the House on Government efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change on malaria and NTDs, and what steps they are taking to support lower-income countries to address climate-sensitive infectious diseases? Conflict and humanitarian crises are considerable threats to progress. Many countries have seen increases in malaria cases and deaths, and a few experienced malaria epidemics. Ethiopia saw an increase of 1.3 million cases between 2021 and 2022, and political instability in Myanmar led to a surge in cases, from 78,000 in 2019 to 584,000 in 2022, with a knock-on effect in neighbouring Thailand.

Last June, mycetoma services in Sudan were suspended due to a lack of safety, resulting in patients not receiving vital medication. We know that in refugee camps—as I am sure the Minister also knows from visiting refugee or internally-displaced persons camps—there is a particularly high risk of scabies due to overcrowding. Can the Minister reassure us that the UK is working to support countries affected by conflict and other humanitarian crises to ensure the safe delivery of medical supplies, which are the basics?

Despite the difficulties in surmounting the challenges we face, the elimination of these diseases is possible. Both malaria and neglected tropical diseases can be beaten, as we have seen. Azerbaijan, Belize and Tajikistan have been declared malaria-free by the World Health Organisation recently, and 50 countries, including 21 in Africa, have eliminated at least one neglected tropical disease, marking the halfway point toward the target of 100 countries set for 2030. As a result, 600 million fewer people globally require interventions against neglected tropical diseases than in 2010. Bangladesh, supported by the UK and other partners, is the first country in the world to be validated for the elimination of visceral leishmaniasis, which is the very complicated form of the disease that is fatal in over 95% of cases and has devastating impacts, particularly on women.

[Catherine West]

The Labour party is proud of the UK's contribution to date in this global effort, and of the legacy of Department for International Development, one of our proudest achievements of the last Labour Government. As part of that commitment, the last Labour Government helped to found the Global Fund in 2002. It is an incredible fund, and we saw the important work it does when visiting Blantyre. The results are staggering, with the malaria incidence rate decreasing from 164 positive cases four years ago to 36 at the time of our visit last autumn.

I know that you want me to wind up, Mrs Harris, but I have one final anecdote. I met Mirriam, an inspiring midwife and primary healthcare provider working in rural Zambia, when she visited the UK Parliament. She said that she encounters disease every day at her health centre, and spoke to me about her harrowing experience of caring for and losing pregnant women and young children with malaria. However, over the past few years the availability of high-quality, inexpensive, rapid diagnostic tests, insecticide-treated bed nets and preventive treatment for pregnant women, all provided by the Global Fund, are transforming how Mirriam and her midwife colleagues diagnose and manage cases of malaria. She also mentioned the important work being done on tuberculosis and HIV.

Many of the tools and medicines we need to beat malaria were also developed here in the UK, and a number of Members have outlined the important connection with our excellence in research—for example, at the University of Dundee, which the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) mentioned in his speech, and other important UK research institutions. It is important that we listen to what they say about what we need to keep that research going and maintain this country's leadership in research and development.

We have already talked about the Vaccine Alliance, Unitaid and the Global Fund, so I will not go into the detail. However, we have one specialism that I need to mention: the crucial research into snakebite. Many who may be watching parliamentlive.tv will not be aware that snakebite kills so many people in Africa, or aware of the important work being done at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine—I declare an interest as an unpaid trustee there. That work is very special and niche, but it is crucial to keep it going.

I will conclude on the important work that we need to do this month, given that World Neglected Tropical Disease Day is on 30 January. Can the Minister assure me that the UK is doing all it can to support the development of new medicines for neglected tropical diseases and look at re-committing to multi-year funding for product development partnership models? What is her view on manufacturing in Africa? If we look at the map, we see that expensive medicines are produced here in Europe or America and then sent to Africa and so on, so it would be wonderful to see more manufacturing, perhaps through the Serum Institute of India, for example, which did so much important work during covid. What is her thinking about collaborations there that we could lead and push different parties towards? Finally, as 30 January 2024 approaches—World Neglected Tropical Disease Day—the World Health Organisation argues that, for malaria, "business as usual" will simply not be enough. I hope that the Minister agrees that we now need to act, because there is no more time for us to lose.

10.37 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I apologise for the cough—I am apparently enjoying a three-month winter cough, so apologies to all for that. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this important debate and thank the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases for its really thoughtful contributions today and, more importantly, for its long-standing advocacy in this whole arena. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

Members will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) is the Minister in FCDO with responsibility for global health. He is unfortunately unable to be here, hence my presence. I am happy to respond; this is an area of both policy and personal interest anyway. When I was the Secretary of State for International Development before the merger, we spent a lot of time on this policy area, so I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Government. If I miss any questions, for which I apologise, I will ensure that my right hon. Friend picks up on them.

On the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), a number of colleagues touched on the wider question of the UK's focus on climate change, the impacts more broadly, and how the UK can assist, and is assisting, on the wider question of resilience and adaptation to the changing nature of communities, landscapes and healthcare. All the work that we do has health impacts at its heart. Women and girls are at the centre of every single piece of programming work that the FCDO does, but I will ask my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield to set out a few examples in his reply to help colleagues to see the broader picture, beyond the issue we are discussing today.

As colleagues have pointed out, we are at a critical point for the sustainable development goals. With COP's focus on the impact of climate change on global health, and with World Neglected Tropical Disease Day at the end of the month, this is a really important opportunity to consider the UK's role in helping to end those diseases. We know that the covid pandemic has taken a toll in so many ways on the pathway to the 2030 SDGs, and I can safely say that, across the world, we are all focused on trying to get back on track and thinking about how we can do that, using all the tools at our disposal.

As many colleagues have set out, the burden that malaria and NTDs place on so many countries is not geographical; it is about families and people. It is perhaps concentrated in some countries, not only by virtue of their geography and their landscapes, but because of the state of their health systems. As colleagues have said, malaria is still killing a child every minute of every day, and NTDs are causing devastating health, social and economic consequences for more than 1 billion people. We know that they fall most heavily on the poorest and the most marginalised.

In November, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield set out the Government's White Paper on development, which has at its heart the principles

underpinning the UK's ongoing contribution towards ending extreme poverty and combating climate change. A key focus of getting the world back on track to meet the 2030 SDGs includes targets to end the epidemic of malaria and NTDs. The White Paper reaffirms our commitment to ending the preventable deaths of mothers, newborns and children under five, which we cannot achieve without a particular focus on malaria. As I have mentioned, however, the White Paper also underlines the importance of helping countries to build health systems by working with them in mutually respectful partnerships and harnessing innovation and new technologies to help them to solve some of these problems.

On malaria, we are at a critical juncture in our fight against the disease. As a number of colleagues have set out, this year's *World Malaria Report* showed once again that progress has stalled. We are facing a perfect storm of challenges, including rising drug and insecticide resistance, the climate impacts we have talked about, the spread of urban mosquitoes, conflict and humanitarian crises, rising prices and funding shortfalls. This is, of course, a complex mix to try to get ahead of, but the UK continues to provide global leadership. We will continue to make the limited resources that we have go further and to think about how we can adapt our approaches to fit local contexts more closely, because it is not the same everywhere. How can we help countries to focus in a more targeted way on tackling their most difficult health problems?

The UK has long been a leader in the fight against malaria. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned, we have been the third largest contributor to the Global Fund over its lifetime, investing over £4.5 billion. It has three specific focuses—to eradicate malaria, TB and AIDS—which has enabled it to channel global energies into tackling those diseases. We provided £1 billion towards the seventh replenishment of the fund, and the mission to eradicate those diseases remains absolutely at the heart of the UK Government. The latest investment will help to fund 86 million mosquito nets and 450,000 seasonal malaria chemoprevention treatments, and provide treatment and care for 18 million people. Our funding continues to help drive scientific advancement—for example, the next generation of malaria bed nets, which were developed with funding from the UK and which the Global Fund is now rolling out. We have also long funded the Medicines for Malaria Venture, whose anti-malarial drugs are estimated to have averted nearly 14 million deaths since 2009.

There is further cause for optimism from new vaccines. As colleagues have mentioned, in October the WHO recommended the second ever malaria vaccine, R21. In November, just before Christmas, the first consignment of the RTS,S vaccine was delivered to Cameroon to begin roll-out across Africa. Both vaccines were developed through British scientific expertise, including the long-term commitments that we have seen from GSK, whose RTS,S vaccine has now been given to over 1.5 million children in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi. A further nine countries will receive the vaccine over the next two years, and the UK will continue to support roll-out through our £1.65 billion funding for Gavi and by further funding clinical trials.

Colleagues might not be aware that the UK led the replenishment of Gavi back in 2020, at the height of the covid pandemic, when its funding had never been more urgently needed. Gavi is the organisation that delivers vaccines to many hard-to-reach corners of the globe. It is an incredibly important organisation that is respected and welcomed in pretty much every country in the world. We were proud to bring $8 billion-worth of global commitments to Gavi, despite the challenges that everyone faced during the ongoing covid epidemic. The UK's commitment was the largest of all those made to that replenishment.

Of course, time goes quickly, and Gavi's replenishment for next year is coming round again; I know that the UK will continue to provide leadership on that. Gavi is one of the many parts of the machine that enables us to deliver. It does such important work to ensure that, whichever brilliant new technologies brilliant scientists come up with, they get to the places they need to be. That is so important. Indeed, through covid Gavi demonstrated—sadly, more urgently than ever—how effective it can be.

Colleagues have set out the impact of neglected tropical diseases across the globe. We have seen incredible progress, which has been due in part to the UK's contribution. It is encouraging that 50 countries have eliminated at least one NTD, in line with the WHO's ambitious target for 100 countries by 2030. Last year saw Iraq, Benin and Mali eliminate trachoma, Ghana eliminate a key strain of sleeping sickness, and Bangladesh and Laos eliminate lymphatic filariasis. In October, Bangladesh became the first country in the world to eliminate visceral leishmaniasis, which would not have happened without long-standing UK support.

Here, again, we face major challenges: climate change threatens to unravel so much of the progress that we have seen, and global funding falls short of what is needed to achieve our overall ambitions. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) highlighted the rise of dengue, which causes real concern and impacts too many places. The UK was pleased to sign the Kigali declaration on neglected tropical diseases at the 2022 CHOGM meeting, and towards that goal we committed to continued investment in research and development. Each signatory makes a unique contribution towards ending NTDs; it is very open and was designed to encourage countries, however small or large, to push on with tackling the challenges.

We are delivering on our commitment with our ongoing funding to the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative, or DNDi—I apologise for all the acronyms; there are lots of them—in which we have invested over £80 million so far. Through our and others' support, DNDi has developed 13 treatments for six deadly diseases, and those are already saving millions of lives. They include a first oral-only treatment for both chronic and acute sleeping sickness, which recently received regulatory approval; a treatment for mycetoma, an infectious flesh-and-bone disease that leads to amputations; new short-course treatments for deadly visceral leishmaniasis, which I mentioned earlier, that can replace treatments with severe side effects and growing drug resistance, which is a continuing challenge in this space; and the first paediatric treatment for Chagas disease, a complex tropical parasitic disease that can result in heart failure.

Some of the DNDi's incredible work takes place in the UK, where it has over 40 partners across industry and academia. To name but a few, we have the incredible leadership of global companies such as AstraZeneca

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

UK and GSK, which are well known and based across the world, through to some of the smaller developing companies such as BenevolentAI, DeepMind and AMG Consultants. Those smaller companies are using other modern technologies—not pharmaceutical technologies but wider technologies—to think about how we can solve these challenges. It is worth remembering that many UK industry partners threw their technical expertise into the scientific ring when covid-19 hit the world, for instance through the COVID Moonshot work. Continuing to focus on the incredible investments made by our world-leading life sciences, tech and pharma companies is part of the whole solution.

Catherine West: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. What assessment has she made of the possibility of promoting more African leadership in manufacturing? Developing really good partnerships may require investment at the beginning, but it could be a very effective way to work. How do we strengthen in-country leadership in Africa while avoiding a top-down approach?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I said earlier that the Government are focusing not only on how we spend our development budget but on how we invest in and give space to the private sector to use its research and development investment as effectively as possible in areas where there can be global solutions. The shadow Minister raises a really important point, and I spent a lot of time at the World Trade Organisation in 2022 discussing how patents and investment in expensive production facilities can be done more globally. The issue was not resolved at the WTO, but it is at the heart of the conversation, which is, as has been said, about trade. We must understand how to empower the countries that will potentially get the most immediate benefit from production domestically, which will then be able to export to their neighbours, and ensure that investment flows work securely for the pharmaceutical companies that are investing billions of pounds to solve these challenges. We must ensure that production is secure and that the vaccines and other medications reach those they need to. A lot of discussion is going on globally around those issues, and some of our largest pharmaceutical companies are already doing these things around the world. Particularly in South Africa, there has been a real shift in investments, and that country can be a hub from which to export to neighbouring countries. That ongoing area of global policy development sits within the world trade discussions, and it is really important to keep pushing it.

Jim Shannon: I and others mentioned the important role that church and charity groups play and the significant voluntary contribution they make. How can the Minister's Department work alongside them to encourage them and align partnerships so that things can go better?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. When I visited Malawi a few years ago, I was struck by the fact that almost every Scottish church and school has a relationship with that country. The history goes back to the Scottish explorers of the 19th century, and that fascinating relationship feeds into church and other community groups across Scotland working together to support religious hospitals in Malawi. That really interesting model has been built up over more than 100 years, and those connections continue to grow. I have visited schools in my patch where children want to be involved in these issues and understand them more closely. Strong relationships can be built, and there are some very good organisations—I will come back to the hon. Gentleman because I cannot remember their names—that try to develop links with schools, in particular, to help them understand each other better. We know, as Churches across the world do ecumenically, that that is the best way to share knowledge and develop better understanding.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is right to acknowledge the good work that has been done in Malawi. There are 94 churches in my constituency, and I know of only one that is not doing some work in Africa. In particular, the Elim church and the Church Mission Society do work in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. I would like to encourage those things, and I am keen to hear how we can do that.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will take that away and we can perhaps pick it up more fully.

As colleagues set out, this has been an important and positive debate. The UK plays a long-standing and leading role in the fight against malaria and neglected tropical diseases, both as a leading donor and with our world-leading scientific and research capability, which has focused on this issue for decades. Although, as a global community, we have made incredible progress in the last 20 years, we know that too many countries still face major challenges, not the least of which is the impact of climate change. As colleagues have pointed out, in many countries the most challenging health problems are across boundaries—diseases do not see a line in the sand. As we set out in the development White Paper, we will continue to lead the fight against poverty and climate change, including, very importantly, on global health.

If I have failed to answer any questions, I hope that the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, will pick up on them. We will continue to seek health solutions, alongside building health systems to help make these diseases history.

10.55 am

Patrick Grady: I am grateful to all Members who have taken part today. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) spoke about the return on investment. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the point that this issue is very important to our church communities and to many of our constituents. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) brought to bear much of her personal experience, as did the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland)—I will call him my hon. Friend, because I think we are all hon. Friends today. I thank the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West)—this is a bit of a reunion for those who went on the APPG's visit—and my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who provided a suitably robust challenge to the Minister. I also thank the Minister for her summation and her reflection on all the points that were made during the debate.

It is quite frustrating that there is a category of diseases known as "neglected" and that work has to be focused on them. One of the key principles of the sustainable development goals is that we leave no one behind. Nobody should be neglected, and none of the factors that keep people in poverty, including these diseases, should be neglected. That is a challenge for all of us as we come to write our election manifestos for the coming year.

I hope that today's debate has, at the very least, raised some awareness, meaning that these diseases will be slightly less neglected and that we can continue to unite and act and can, ultimately, eliminate malaria and other neglected tropical diseases so that they become eradicated tropical diseases.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role of the UK in ending malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

Financial Advice and Guidance: Consumer Market

10.58 am

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the consumer market for financial advice and guidance.

It is an absolute pleasure, Mrs Harris, that you are in the Chair for this debate on the consumer market for financial advice and guidance. I am very grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate, which follows up on a cross-party amendment I tabled to the Financial Services and Markets Bill a year ago. I am grateful for all the hard work done by officials from the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority over the past year under the leadership of the former Economic Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who championed this cause. I am also grateful to the current Economic Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), for taking things forward and for his support.

I welcome the proposals published in December for closing what is called the advice gap and completing the first part of the advice guidance boundary review. This morning, I want to cover three things. Why is this review important for our constituents? How will these changes help them? And what more can we do to help them? I will start with why this is important for our constituents.

Now more than ever our constituents need personalised help and advice about their financial situation, and when I say "help", I do not mean just the billions of pounds of financial support that was given through the energy price guarantee, the money off electricity bills and so on. I mean the kind of help that will make our constituents more financially resilient over a lifetime.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this debate forward, and I commend her for her work on improving facilities for providing financial advice and guidance in the consumer market—that has been noted in the House, and I congratulate her on that. I wholeheartedly support her view that we must give individuals and businesses the best possible opportunities to grow their wealth. Does she agree that we should particularly target help to smaller businesses that are looking to start up locally, to ensure that they can take advantage of high-quality and, most importantly, affordable services and advice to help them make informed financial decisions?

Harriett Baldwin: I want to limit my remarks today to consumers and their access to financial advice, but the Treasury Committee is doing an inquiry into access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to share with us any evidence he might have in that regard.

Our constituents need more personalised help to make them more financially resilient over their lifetime. We want them to be more prosperous, better informed and more able to prepare for the inevitable highs and lows of financial life. With the success of auto-enrolment, we now have millions more people taking personal

[Harriett Baldwin]

decisions about saving for their retirement, possibly across a multitude of different pension schemes over a full working life. They need an expert hand to help them to make good decisions and yet, despite our world-leading financial services sector, it is surprisingly difficult to get help. That is because of the advice/guidance legal definitions.

Mrs Harris, I want to try out an analogy on you. Imagine a supermarket where, if you pay an up-front fee of several hundred or perhaps even several thousand pounds to join, you will, over your whole lifetime, be allowed to go into a section where you have a full choice of delicious, healthy food and other goods, offered at competitive prices. Someone will ensure that you are buying things appropriate for your age and dietary needs; they will suggest some terrific, easy-to-cook, healthy recipes and wonderful meal plans.

However, to make it worth paying the up-front fee, you have to buy exceptionally expensive goods or sufficient quantities, and only 8% of our constituents would in fact choose to pay the fee; everyone else in the supermarket chooses to avoid it. They wander round the generic aisles of the supermarket. They may see some generic NHS advice about healthy eating or something on the supermarket website. They pay much higher prices for the same range of goods and often choose the unhealthy and expensive options. They even find scam and rogue options that scam them out of their shopping money altogether, because anyone can set out a stall in the supermarket I am describing.

It is a slightly stretched analogy, but I know that you know what I am getting at, Mrs Harris. The quality and cost of financial advice in this country mean that we have created a marketplace where only the richest 8% of the population choose to shop and benefit from the healthy financial choices that our excellent financial services firms can give.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on this very timely and important debate. She is now moving into the important area of providing professional, impartial, independent consumer advice to ensure that people avoid making bad choices and to steer them in the direction of making good, effective choices.

Harriett Baldwin: That is exactly right. I am using this analogy to make us realise what a scandal it would be if we had supermarkets like the ones I have just described, but that is sort of what we have in our financial services supermarket. It is a slightly stretched analogy, but the quality and cost of financial advice means that we have created a marketplace where only the richest 8% of the population shop and benefit from the healthy financial choices on the menu that our excellent financial advisers can give.

The remaining 92% of our constituents end up unadvised. If they are lucky, they might find out that there is state-sponsored guidance such as Pension Wise and the Money and Pensions Service, perhaps through a newspaper article or a Google search. A small number do find that advice, but it is very generic. It can be useful and helpful but, more often than not, it leaves them with more questions than answers; it offers some very simple thoughts, which perhaps leaves people not knowing how the advice relates to their personal circumstances. Without urgent Government action to explore solutions for the unadvised, I fear that we are creating terrible long-term consequences for the nation's savings health and for the prosperity of our constituents in retirement.

At its best, that generic guidance and the personalised guidance available through the Money and Pensions Service and Pension Wise is a bit like the generic advice from the NHS to eat five pieces of fruit and vegetables a day: it is useful but it is not going to help anyone make an informed investment choice. Yesterday, I did some mystery shopping on the Money and Pensions Service website to see what advice my constituents would get if they had received a small lump sum—perhaps an inheritance, a redundancy payment or some tax-free cash they had taken from their pension. I followed a link on the website's landing page to an article labelled, "Types of investments", which I thought might be helpful. That page then asked,

"Do you need help making smart investment choices?"

which I thought was probably the right page. I was then directed to the Financial Conduct Authority's InvestSmart website. On the landing page of that website, the first article is called, "Crypto: The basics". That is on the FCA's website. The third article on the landing page is called, "Investing in crypto". The website then said that, if I wanted advice, I needed to see a financial adviser, so I was back to square one. Those crypto pages are probably there prominently to warn people not to buy those products, but the prominence ends up looking like an endorsement.

There used to be a network of bank branches in this country, where people could go to talk to a human being who might be a bit more helpful, albeit that they would focus on their own-brand products. However, there have been so many bank closures that most people would not know where to start to find anyone to speak to face to face about savings and investment choices. Yet, we have asked millions more people to invest in their own pensions through auto-enrolment and have left them with a default provider—the National Employment Savings Trust—which charges an up-front load of 1.8%. We have given people pension freedoms, which means some very big decisions can be taken at the age of 55 that will have long-term consequences for people's financial health.

As you can tell, Mrs Harris, I am not happy with this outcome for my constituents, and I am sure you are not happy with the outcome for yours. When I was Economic Secretary to the Treasury in 2015-16, I commissioned the financial advice market review, which tried to make financial advice and guidance work better for consumers. It came up with some good recommendations, including allowing consumers to redeem a small part of their pension pot against the cost of retirement advice in certain circumstances. However, at the time, it was constrained in what it could do by European regulations. Now that we are under way with the Edinburgh reforms and there is scope for a more UK-centric regime, I have been raising the problem once again.

In addition, Parliament has legislated for a consumer duty on financial services firms, which began to be implemented last July. We have a world-leading financial services sector with many excellent firms serving consumers well, but they are held back by regulations from offering their consumers any helpful advice from their own

expertise. That could even contradict their consumer duty—if they can see their customers making poor decisions such as leaving long-term savings in taxable, low-interest accounts when they could perhaps be in an individual savings account or earning higher rates. Even Martin Lewis, whom many people turn to for financial wisdom, has told me he feels he is held back from recommending certain sensible things because it might be considered financial advice. So I very much welcome the proposals that the Government and the FCA have published jointly to address the advice gap. I think they go in the right direction.

There are three elements. Further clarifying the boundary between advice and guidance would give FCA-authorised firms greater certainty that they can give more support to consumers without providing a personal recommendation. It would help firms give consumers greater levels of support with more confidence to operate closer to the boundary. That is a necessary element, but on its own it might not surmount the cautious behaviour that we see from some compliance departments.

The second proposal is targeted support. The new regulatory framework will enable firms to provide broader support without up-front charges based on the limited information that they have on their consumer, and enable firms to suggest products or courses of action. That will be a key proposal to close the advice gap.

The third proposal is for simplified advice for consumers with smaller sums or simpler needs at a price that is commercially viable for both consumer and firm. With the development of technology, more powerful artificial intelligence tools and more data out there, innovators will find ways to give consumers more customised, less generic, financial advice—something like coaching or help—at a commercially viable price. Whatever we call it, such changes will help our constituents by giving them better and more personalised information to make their choices.

Some consumer groups worry about allowing our financial services firms more leeway to help their customers. To go back to the supermarket analogy, there are some bad apples even in the premium aisles of the supermarket. Last year the Financial Services Compensation Scheme paid out millions to those who were badly advised, but doing nothing about the advice gap is also a choice. I believe consumers are being harmed much more in the generic aisles of the supermarket, where often there is no regulatory redress.

The proposals are to be welcomed and should be brought in as quickly as possible. Let us also agree to do more for our constituents by making sure there ia much higher awareness of services such as Pension Wise and the financial advice money that people can take from their pension to pay for financial advice at key moments. I wish my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary well in implementing this important change. It will cost taxpayers nothing. It will harness the expertise of a range of excellent financial services firms and get much more personalised advice to our constituents when they take key financial decisions. I give power to the Minister's elbow in bringing the changes forward.

11.14 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) for securing today's debate. I recognise her long-standing commitment to the issue that she has outlined to the House. I am mindful that, as one of my predecessors and Chair of the Treasury Committee, she is watching me keenly to make sure that I do the right thing. I am very glad that she broadly supports the proposals and strongly supports the Edinburgh reform. I want to make it clear that I, as Economic Secretary, share her ambition to ensure that consumers can access the support they need to make good financial decisions. I welcome the opportunity provided by this debate to outline how I intend to achieve that.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of the timing of this debate and the proposals. This has never been more important. Too often, people in this country, particularly younger people, feel as though they do not have enough of a stake in our economy and society. They want to make their money work hard, but they do not know where to start.

On the changes to our pension system, she mentioned the success of auto-enrolment. Advances in technology and the cost of living instabilities abroad are just two of the reasons why we increasingly need a financially savvy population. She also mentioned pension freedoms for older people, which give them a lot of economic freedom to make these financially important decisions.

Before I get on to the changes, it is worth recognising the support that current guidance and advice services can offer consumers; those should not be ignored. The Government established the Money and Pensions Service in 2019 to simplify the financial guidance landscape and provide support to consumers on important issues such as benefits, budgeting and pensions. The Government work closely with the FCA to ensure that the financial advice market works well for both firms and consumers. There is always more to do, but I believe that we have made significant progress.

In 2012, the retail distribution review drove up the quality of financial advice, and in 2016, when my hon. Friend was the Minister, the financial advice market review helped firms to support more consumers. However, she is right that further action is needed. Despite the progress made, I share her concern that many consumers still struggle to make critical decisions about saving and investing or accessing their pensions, and to access the right help and support. That is why, in 2022, the Chancellor announced that the Government and the FCA would commence a joint review to examine the regulatory boundary between financial advice and guidance. The review provides a key opportunity—probably the greatest opportunity in the last decade—to rethink the way support is delivered for consumers and to help close the advice gap.

In December, as part of the review, I was pleased to announce that the Government and the FCA had published a joint policy paper setting out the three initial proposals, which it is worth saying can be taken either alone or together. We are still thinking about these proposals. We are developing them and we hope to get them delivered as best we can. They represent real regulatory reform, and we need to act.

First, the paper considers whether changes to the FCA's regulatory guidance or new rules would allow regulated firms to move closer to the boundary and provide more support for their consumers. One difficulty is that we need to be able to, within the existing rules, give firms more confidence that they can move closer to

[Bim Afolami]

this boundary and give advice and support in ways that do not require legal changes; they just need to be given the confidence to do that. For example, we need to give greater certainty to firms that want to contact a customer holding savings in cash to warn them of the detriment of inflation, and to pension providers that want to proactively warn customers at risk of receiving an inadequate income in retirement. We need to help firms to give better support to customers in such ways.

Secondly, the paper explores a new and innovative type of support that would allow firms to suggest a product or course of action to their customers. That suggestion would be tailored to targeted group of customers and would be presented as appropriate for "people like you". Take again, for example, a customer who is saving into a pension at a low rate that could lead to an inadequate income in retirement. Under the second proposal in the paper, based on simple and limited data points such as age and size of the individual pot, the pension provider could offer a straightforward piece of advice that the customer could increase their contributions to a specific rate, depending on their personal circumstances. I am glad that my hon. Friend said that this second proposal was a key proposal.

The final option explores a simplified advice regime that would allow consumers with a specific need to access low-cost financial advice. It is worth saying again that the cost of advice is prohibitive for a lot of people. What we are proposing is not just a regulatory change; we need to make sure that all the options are commercially viable for more people. This final option would provide consumers with a recommendation personalised to their individual circumstances, based on a more limited approach to fact-finding than full holistic advice.

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the Minister for summarising the three proposals again. Could he clarify which of them would need a vote in Parliament, and will he commit to bringing forward any necessary legislation with urgency?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I will need to come back to her on whether a specific vote on primary legislation is required. I think secondary legislation would be needed to deal with certain aspects of the proposals, but I will follow up and write to her on the detail, and I commit to moving forward as quickly as I can. With a year left of this Parliament, I want to get this moved forward as far as possible. I am passionate about doing that.

Under the third proposal, for example—it is important to get these examples on the record—a consumer who has just inherited a small lump sum of, say, £10,000 or £20,000, and wants to invest it but does not know where to start, could receive simplified advice that includes a suitability assessment and a personal recommendation as to how they should invest that sort of inheritance.

The paper will allow us to receive input from stakeholders to inform the details of each proposal as we progress this year. Other things are going on in this area—for example, the NatWest share sale that the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement, which will hopefully be taken forward later this year. With that sort of retail offer to the public, it is very important that we have as good a provision for support, guidance and advice for ordinary people as possible.

I am committed to using my time in office to build the skills and trust of UK consumers to bring back the confidence in our financial system that so many people lost following the financial crash. I am confident that with further input from industry, the hon. Lady, Members of this House and consumer representatives, this paper can help to lay the groundwork for a new regulatory framework that will help firms manage risk, help consumers make good decisions and ultimately build a thriving and healthy financial services sector for us all.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Antisemitic Offences

[Valerie Vaz *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of increases in anti-Semitic offences.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I will begin by reminding colleagues that 7 October saw the biggest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the holocaust. The number of Jewish people currently displaced within Israel is the largest since the holocaust. In response to this, antisemitic incidents worldwide have soared.

Since 7 October, Auschwitz-Birkenau has been called an "embarrassment to humanity". "Heil Hitler" has been shouted at Jewish students in the UK. Protests have included shouts to "burn the Jews" on the streets of London. The hats of Jewish men have been thrown off them in our capital, and menorahs have been attacked. We have seen threats from a professor to blow up the Jewish Labour Movement conference. University societies have championed "the resistance", glorified Palestinian "martyrs" and denied the murder and rape of Israelis at Nova music festival. Synagogues have been targeted and threatened, Jewish schools have been attacked, and Jewish businesses have been vandalised.

In Bristol, "Free Palestine" was shouted at visibly Jewish men walking to a Sabbath lunch. In Leeds, a Jewish university footballer was called a "big nose Jew" by a member of the opposing team. In Manchester, a Jewish school was sent a letter saying

"warning your school is being targeted, No one is safe, no one should support killers, Palestine forever".

In London, the Wiener Holocaust Library, a great organisation named after Lord Finkelstein's grandfather, who escaped the Nazis, had "Gaza" spray-painted on its sign. In my area of the west midlands, a swastika was painted on a bridge, and a curry house announced its full support of Hamas. I thank West Midlands police for its support over the last few days in dealing with localised incidents incredibly fast.

That is by no means an exhaustive list; rather it is just a small insight to the Jewish experience in Britain over the last few months. Dr Dave Rich of the Community Security Trust describes antisemitism as a

"light sleeper lying just beneath the surface of society, ready to raise its head whenever the opportunity arises".

These worrying statistics make clear the disturbing reality of the current situation.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on the timeliness of her debate. Does she agree that there is not much that unites the far right and the hard left, but what does seem to unite them—for whatever reason that mystifies me, and possibly her as well—is their innate hatred of Jewish people?

Nicola Richards: The hon. Member is of course right.

Around the world, we have also seen arson attacks on synagogues in Germany, Tunisia and Armenia. In Canada, Jewish buildings were firebombed and Jewish religious schools were shot at. Terrorist plots against Jewish targets have been foiled in Germany, Cyprus, Denmark, the Netherlands and Brazil. Israeli flags were burnt outside synagogues in Spain and Sweden. In Vienna, part of the Jewish cemetery was set alight and swastikas were painted on walls. Jewish homes were marked by antisemitic graffiti in Paris and Berlin. In the US, a man fired shots outside a synagogue, and declared "Free Palestine" to the police who arrested him. In Russia, a mob stormed an airport looking for Jewish passengers to attack. A Jewish American, Paul Kessler, was killed by a pro-Palestinian protester in Los Angeles. A holocaust memorial in Berlin was defaced.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she share my concern that so much of the work done in this country by the CST and Tell MAMA to build bridges and understanding is being undermined by what is happening across the world and, frighteningly, in this country? Does she share my fear that there are people up and down this country—students, schoolchildren and the elderly—living in fear in a way that we never envisaged in this century?

Nicola Richards: The hon. Lady is right. We see some great examples of communities working together. A few months ago, I visited the Jewish community in Birmingham, who told us about the support they had had from the mosque in Birmingham and faith leaders across the board. This by no means describes everything that is happening at the moment, but there are plenty of examples. We have a chance on Thursday to debate some of the more positive aspects of community relationships, but sadly today's focus is on what is going wrong at the moment.

Across the UK, in the days following Hamas's barbaric massacre on 7 October to 13 December, the Community Security Trust recorded 2,098 antisemitic incidents. That figure is expected to rise and 2023 is expected to be the year in which the highest ever number of antisemitic incidents was recorded in the UK. The figure of 2,098 dwarfed the 800 or so incidents recorded up until 7 October and was the highest ever number reported to the CST across any similar period, even during other conflicts in the middle east. To clarify, that is 2,098 incidents of antisemitism as a result of a massacre of innocent Jewish men, women and children in Israel. The impact of this is massive and should not be underestimated.

Whereas the police require only for victims to say that they have been the target of a hate crime, the CST requires evidence of antisemitism. The CST logged at least another 1,288 incidents, which have not been classed as antisemitic. Those include criminal acts affecting Jewish people and property, suspicious behaviour near Jewish locations and anti-Israel activity that is not directed at the Jewish community or does not use antisemitic language. Many of those potential incidents involve suspicious or hostile activity at Jewish locations.

The 2,098 incidents included hateful comments, threats of violence and death threats. Among them were 95 assaults, 165 direct threats, 127 instances of damage and desecration of Jewish property, and 1,677 incidents of abusive behaviour. One hundred and thirty-three incidents related to schools and included the abuse of schoolchildren and teachers; I will talk about universities later.

[Nicola Richards]

Meanwhile, some of the focal points of the recent rise remain a source of concern. Rallies have taken place across our nation weekly. Of course people have a legitimate right to protest, but that is not the same as feeling free to support terrorist groups or attack Jewish people. The Select Committee on Home Affairs recently investigated the protests, and I think that it will be helpful to highlight some of the contributions from the CST's Dr Dave Rich.

Dr Rich explained that 7 October left the Jewish community in the UK "completely traumatised and grief-stricken". He explained that within 24 hours of that largest murderous assault on Jews since the holocaust, the first pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel demonstrations were beginning—some of them while the attack was still continuing. The protests appeared supportive of the barbarism: for example, the announcement on Facebook about one such march called the attack "heroic". More people have been on these marches than there are Jews in Britain. The CST has had impact statements from British Jews explaining that they feel unsafe living in this country and are changing dates of hospital appointments, forbidding their children to get on the train, and so on.

There have been some 300 arrests at protests—instances where the police have identified, located and arrested someone. There have been antisemitic placards and expressions of support for terrorism, which the organisers are not doing enough to stamp out. Their communications about a rally must include warnings not to engage in antisemitic conduct or support for terrorism, and the communications of the police during the rally must prioritise accuracy over speed. It would be helpful if my hon. Friend the Minister set out what the Government are doing to ensure that the rallies are not hotbeds of antisemitism, and how much it has cost to police them effectively.

Social media platforms must act too. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has been holding meetings with the companies, asking them to set out their actions and policies. Despite that, the companies are failing in their duty of care to the users. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue found a fifty-fold increase in antisemitic comments on YouTube immediately after the 7 October attack. It found a major rise in threats made against Jewish institutions and individuals, as well as posts on X supporting and glorifying Hamas's terror attacks. By 12 October, this content had been viewed more than 16 million times on the platform. TikTok has insufficient systems for monitoring live-streamed content, including antisemitism voiced at rallies. The Antisemitism Policy Trust and the Woolf Institute have already demonstrated a number of trends across social media platforms, including antisemitic supply rather than demand on Instagram. There are two antisemitic tweets for every Jewish person in the UK per year on X. It would be helpful if the Minister set out in detail the work that Ofcom is doing in relation to not just the platforms that I have mentioned but small, high-risk platforms such as 8kun and Rumble, both generally and specifically with regard to hate being spread by technology systems during the current middle east conflict.

The situation on university campuses, no doubt compounded by social media, is dire. Since the 7 October attacks, antisemitism on campus has risen sixfold, with 157 recorded incidents according to the CST. Jewish students have been the victims of death threats, physical assaults and violent abuse. There has been explicit support for Hamas and calls for an intifada. The Union of Jewish Students has provided examples, including a student in Scotland being pelted with eggs, graffiti on a poster in Manchester encouraging students to kill more Jews, and participants in an online lecture at Queen Mary University of London joking about Hitler's gas bill and about getting a Hitler reboot card. The result is that some students remove visible signs of their Jewish identity, while others simply avoid campus altogether.

The Union of Jewish Students has been running training for thousands of union officials up and down the country. Are Government willing to support that effort? Last year, we witnessed what many had hoped would not be possible: three grown adults unable to clarify whether calling for the genocide of Jews was problematic, arguing that it depended on context. Those were not uneducated women; they were university leaders, and not just any university leaders; they were leaders of some of the most respected universities not just in the US, but in the world.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for for introducing this very important debate, as we see the oldest hatred in the world resurfacing so badly. Should we also deal with the argument about free speech? Free speech and discussion is vital in a democratic society but, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes of the US Supreme Court, it is not

"the right to shout fire in a crowded theatre".

Words have consequences. Should not universities and public authorities be cracking down on this and taking determined action?

Nicola Richards: I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Just in the past few days, I have been alarmed by the responses I have received on Twitter, having reported an antisemitic incident to the police, and by the support for Hamas, but also by the number of people who do not understand why hate speech, tweets and what they call freedom of speech are being reported to the police. They do not understand the consequences. The statistics I have read out today about the number of Jews living in the UK and the number of antisemitic tweets—two antisemitic tweets per year for every Jewish person in the UK—show why it is important to crack down on it.

Since 7 October, the call for an "intifada until victory" has been plastered up and down campuses, and a model motion calling for that was passed at University College London and the University of East Anglia students' union. Does the Minister agree that motions passed that call for an "intifada until victory" are disturbing, and that calls to globalise the intifada are extremely worrying? Perhaps we could have some clarity on the legality of the term in those contexts. Will he say something about the role of the prevent duty in relation to speakers and other activity on campus? Will he make it clear that support for Hamas, whether voiced by individual students or groups such as the Socialist Workers party, must be investigated by the police, because support for proscribed terrorist organisations, including Hamas, is illegal?

As we begin 2024, let us be clear. Policing must be robust, with zero tolerance. Sentencing must not be lenient. Education must be improved and widespread. Relevant authorities, whether they be universities, councils or companies, need to work to support Jewish colleagues, employees or students, and ensure that they recognise their duty of care.

This is my message to those engaged in antisemitism in response to a conflict in a place they are unlikely to have visited or know much about. Last week, I met people my age who had survived a massacre at a music festival purely because of their immense courage and chance. I met heartbroken but determined families of hostages and people killed. I witnessed a nation still overcome with grief. For those who diminish what happened on 7 October—or worse, seek to justify it—I hope they will never witness what those strong and brave people did. I watched 47 minutes of the gleeful spree and slaughter by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as civilians. Nothing will erase those images from my mind: the look of fear in their eyes that I did not know was possible. Nothing will ever be the same again for Jewish people around the world following that dreadful day in October last year, so have some humanity, recognise the impact of your language and ask yourself what you stand for.

Antisemitism is centuries old, but it still persists. It does not give up, so neither should we. We must remain unwavering and uncompromising in our efforts to challenge it, and I thank all colleagues present for doing so. I hope this debate will play its part in doing that.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I propose to take the first Opposition spokesperson at about 3.28 pm.

2.45 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing this very important debate.

It has been the most horrific time since the attack in Israel. I was in the country with a delegation from Labour Friends of Israel almost three weeks to the day before the attack occurred, and I visited the Kfar Aza kibbutz. Luckily for the young lady who showed us around, she was with her husband and family further up, near Tel Aviv, at the time of the attack, so they survived. Sadly, her parents did not, and she is having to deal with that grief. Having seen the close proximity to Gaza, I just cannot imagine the fear that they must have all felt for the hours and hours that the attack went on, and the horror and atrocities that occurred. I am someone who witnessed the footage that the Israeli embassy shared with some of us, and there are things in it that I will never, ever forget.

As the hon. Member for West Bromwich East has outlined for us today, the wave of antisemitism we have seen across the country since 7 October is shocking and appalling. We have heard "Burn the Jews!" shouted at protest marches. Jewish children have been advised not to wear their school blazers. Swastikas have been graffitied in public places, and Jewish schools vandalised with red paint. Jews have been harassed, intimidated and assaulted in the street and as they leave their places of worship. The roll call of incidents is both long and shameful. It is shameful that in Britain, in 2024, our fellow citizens are subject to such racism and hatred. Sadly, however, it is not surprising.

As the Community Security Trust suggests, whenever Israel is at war there is an increase in antisemitism incidents, and an acute rise is usually reported specifically in and related to educational establishments, as the hon. Lady spoke about with regard to universities. None the less, the Community Security Trust suggests that, even compared with periods of previous conflicts involving Israel, the current statistics are unprecedented. This is grimly ironic, given that the state of Israel was established to provide the Jewish people with a safe haven, after centuries of persecution which culminated in the Nazis' attempt to annihilate Jewish history and the Jewish people of Europe. The persecution continues to this day.

Let us be clear: these antisemitic attacks are nothing less than the latest iteration of the oldest hatred. In the charges levelled against Zionists—that they control the media and the Government, that they are disloyal, greedy and bloodthirsty, and that they are ideologically akin to, and collaborated with, the Nazis—we see the repetition of classic antisemitic tropes and smears. Our country, which rightly prides itself on its tolerance and its rejection of extremism, cannot allow antisemitism to go unchecked and unchallenged. We need swift, tough and comprehensive action to tackle anti-Jewish racism.

First, as the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), has rightly argued, we need an increase in policing and stronger action to tackle and monitor antisemitism, and we must ensure that the police have the powers they need to tackle to hateful extremism. Secondly, it is appalling that Jewish venues and institutions need extra levels of security and protection, but as long as that remains the case, it is imperative that the Community Security Trust receives the funding it needs to do its vital job. Thirdly, what is said online rarely stays online. The hateful conspiracy theories and lies about Jews and Israel that are peddled on social media by antisemites directly contribute to racism on our streets. Social media companies must enforce their own rules against hate speech, and where crimes are committed, they must co-operate with the police to ensure that the guilty are punished.

Fourthly, in relation to universities, the National Union of Students and student unions must do more to fight antisemitism and to ensure the safety of Jewish students. At the same time, surveys indicate shocking levels of ignorance about the holocaust, and strong public support for greater holocaust education. The work of organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust is of paramount importance; they are on the frontline of the battle for hearts and minds.

Finally, Iran is a leading purveyor of holocaust denial, antisemitism and extremism. Its terrorist proxy armies slaughter Jews, while its ideological arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, attempts to incite and perpetuate violence and spread disinformation globally, including throughout Britain. As Labour has argued, we must proscribe the IRGC and begin to turn off this pipeline of hatred.

In two weeks' time, we will mark Holocaust Memorial Day. This year's theme is the fragility of freedom, and that is especially relevant in the light of the antisemitism

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

that we have seen on our streets over the past three months. Without security, there can be no freedom. Freedom from fear and violence is the prerequisite of any civilised country. We cannot allow Britain's Jewish community to be denied that freedom.

2.52 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing this important and very timely debate.

According to the Metropolitan police, in my constituency of the Cities of London and Westminster, we have sadly seen an unprecedented 1,350% increase in the number of antisemitic incidents since the awful scenes on 7 October in Israel. I received an email from a Jewish constituent who is in her late 70s, I believe, and was born and bred in the United Kingdom. She says:

"Some of my non-Jewish friends ask me if I feel safe now. The answer is generally yes, but I would not want to wear my necklace with its star of David when it can be seen. I would not feel safe walking past the pro-Palestinian protests if they knew I was Jewish. I love this country. I cannot think of living anywhere else. I have never been to Israel, but Palestine supporters, when I spoke to them in the street a couple of years ago, said I had no business being here, and a neighbour told me I should not be living in Belgravia; I should go to Golders Green or Stamford Hill."

Over recent months, my constituency has been the location of protests in solidarity with Palestinians. I support peaceful protest, and always will. It is important to recognise that the vast majority of people taking part in these protests do so peacefully, but I fear that a minority are using them for antisemitic purposes. I am glad to see that these protests no longer tend to end at the Cenotaph, and that the protest organisers have been more sensitive about moving start times and locations to reduce clashes with Shabbat services in nearby synagogues in my constituency. I really hope that that will continue.

As I said, the majority of those on the protests are peaceful, and that has been the case across the country, but we have seen too many incidents of antisemitism on these marches. The police were slow to react initially, but they have got better, and hundreds of people have rightly now been arrested. We cannot live in a country where we shrug our shoulders when somebody is antisemitic. We would not do it if someone was being racist towards a black person or somebody of Muslim heritage; equally, we must not allow it to happen to the Jewish community.

The incidents are wide-ranging, and include the use of intimidating language, physical abuse and criminal damage to property. They have all been reported. One of the biggest issues raised with me as the local MP is abuse on university campuses—places where students should feel free to express themselves and their identity without threat of intimidation.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady is making a very salient point. I was frightened by a recent conversation with a University of Glasgow student who went to a meeting about the war in Gaza. He thought it would be a wide-ranging discussion, but he suddenly found himself at the centre of a meeting that was very antisemitic. He did not feel comfortable; he felt under threat. Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the problem is that the public are not aware of this? They do not see it, and the media is not expressing the danger of growing antisemitism in this country in the way that we would like.

Nickie Aiken: I absolutely agree. One of the most important books I have read over the past couple of years is David Baddiel's "Jews Don't Count". I have always been a supporter of the Jewish community—I have spoken about going to a kibbutz when I was 18, and I have been to Israel several times—but I had never really thought about the cultural antisemitism in this country. None of us really thinks it is racism—well, many of us do, but it is seen as, "Oh, they are Jewish; it's fine." As I said earlier, if the target was a black person or anybody of colour, it would be considered completely differently. Those involved in that type of "humour" would be cancelled, and might even be prosecuted for hate crimes.

According to the Union of Jewish Students, there has been a staggering 500% increase in antisemitism on university campuses. I heard about that at first hand soon after the 7 October attacks, when a group of Jewish students from my constituency, from King's College London, the London School of Economics, the University of Westminster and Imperial College London, came to visit me. One young man of Jewish heritage, British born and bred—from north London—experienced his first antisemitism on the tube coming to visit me. That was shocking for both of us. Those students, who are part of the UJS, have been doing absolutely fantastic work to support Jewish students over the past few months and before that. They informed me that they have received more than 400 calls to their hotline reporting antisemitic abuse over the past few months. The UJS not only supports students but provides training to thousands of people on campus to help them spot antisemitism and root it out before it can harm students. As has been said, one of the big points is understanding that antisemitism is racism, and that we need to call it out.

After I met the UJS, I wrote to all the vice-chancellors and their equivalents at King's College London, the University of Westminster, Imperial College London and the London School of Economics and Political Science. I highlighted that, although of course it is critical to protect freedom of speech, there is a fine line between speaking freely and causing harm to groups of people and minorities. I reiterated in my letters that we must have a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism and Islamophobia on campus. I also asked the vice-chancellors to inform me whether they were providing additional support to Jewish staff and students after the 7 October attacks. I was encouraged by their responses, which were far more rigorous in their condemnation of antisemitism than some US college presidents have recently been.

Initiatives such as the LSE's "Report It, Stop It" allow students to safely and anonymously report abusive or threatening behaviour. However, that sort of mechanism is effective only if the reported abuse is met with swift repercussions for the offenders, which I hope the vice chancellors of the universities will continue to provide. University campuses are rightly hotbeds of debate, sometimes on contentious topics and views, but as I say, there is a fine line between the protection of freedom of

speech and the protection of people's rights. People need to feel safe and welcome on their campus, at lectures and elsewhere.

It is not only Jewish students who feel intimidated. Unfortunately, Jewish primary school children are being targeted as well. Some feel so uncomfortable that they cannot show their true identity when on school trips. This struck me so clearly in November last year, when a group of Jewish primary school children visited me. They were from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer). He could not make their meeting, so he asked me to meet them. They were boys, about 10 years old. The first thing I noticed when I met them was that they were all wearing baseball caps. I asked their teacher why, and it was to hide their kippahs. British children in the House of Commons were hiding their identity for their own safety. How have we come to that? That has to stop.

I have heard from rabbis across my constituency. I am blessed to have so many synagogues in the Cities of London and Westminster, but I have been told how fearful and scared their communities are. We must do all that we can to protect them. I am pleased that the Metropolitan police in Westminster borough have taken that very seriously. They have increased the number of patrols around synagogues, and now liaise with rabbis. I thank the Westminster borough command and the neighbourhood teams for their work.

I hope that through today's debate, and the continuing hard work of organisations such as the Union of Jewish Students, the Antisemitism Policy Trust, the Community Security Trust and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, we can continue to support those impacted, and slowly and surely rip out any form of antisemitism in this country. We should celebrate and thank the Jewish community for the amazing contribution that they have made, and continue to make, in our country.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): We have three more speakers. The wind-ups will start at about 3.28 pm. I call Jim Shannon.

3.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Thank you for calling me. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for leading today's debate. She and I spoke in the Members' canteen today. She said, "I suppose you will be there," and I said, "I certainly will." I ran the whole way from Horseferry Road, where I was meeting the Transport Minister, to be here on time, because I told the hon. Lady that I would do my best to be here. For a guy of a certain vintage, I am not sure whether that was a good idea.

It is good to see the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety in his place. I look forward to hearing what he will say. He has always been positive in his response to these debates, and he encapsulates our concerns and requests. I also look forward to the contributions of the shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), and for Blaydon (Liz Twist), two hon. Ladies with whom I have had many debates. Their contributions will mirror what we all say; I am positive about that.

When we look at this important issue, especially this month, in which we celebrate Holocaust Memorial Day and recognise the devastation that the Jewish community has been subject to in the past, it saddens me—it saddens us all—to see that across the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland, we have seen a torrent of antisemitic attacks, more recently throughout the war on Israel. It is great to be here as a friend of Israel, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I were when we were both on the Northern Ireland Assembly. We were in the Friends of Israel group there, and we are pround and privileged to be friends of Israel today in the House of Commons.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) was absolutely right in what she said, and I agree with it—I was nearly going to start cheering, so I was. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. We speak up for those of the Christian faith, those of other faiths, and those with no faith, because we believe in our hearts that everyone who has a religious belief has a right to express it. The Jewish people have a right to express theirs, without any fear of threat or hindrance whatsoever.

Mr Campbell: On the issue of freedom of religious belief, does my hon. Friend agree that the protests, which get out of hand more than occasionally, are based on a false premise, and on misinformation peddled on social media? For example, in Israel there are hundreds of mosques, and freedom of religion for Muslim people to go to them. That is in sharp contrast with the very low number of synagogues in some of the adjoining Arab nation states. Those facts need to be spelled out, so that people have correct, factual information before they embark on any type of protests, which sometimes end up being violent.

Jim Shannon: Often—indeed, always—my hon. Friend brings forward very serious points. In my major town of Newtownards, we have a mosque. My second son grew up with the young boys from the mosque. We welcome that, and we speak up for them, and I am pleased to have the mosque in my town of Newtownards.

I attended an event in the synagogue in Belfast some time ago. I will speak about this issue quickly, because others have referred to it. There was a full house of people there, including some students. I sat beside a young student, and I said, "Tell me this: how are things in Queen's University in Belfast?" That was where she attended. She told me that she felt threatened by some elements, but not by Queen's University staff members—its policy is absolutely clear that there is to be none of that. However, there were threats, and I focus on them, from students of a different political opinion. She clearly felt threatened.

At times of conflict between countries, there are always religious and cultural tensions, with some communities feeling threatened and frightened to live in their own country. At the outbreak of the Israel-Palestine conflict, I received calls and emails in my office about an incident that occurred at the city hall in Belfast. There were pictures and videos going around on social media of Lasair Dhearg activists—those of a nationalist opinion—projecting on to city hall an image of Hamas fighters paragliding into Israel, alongside the words "smash the Zionists". I want my police service, the Police Service

[Jim Shannon]

of Northern Ireland, to make those people accountable for their actions. A section of the Jewish community contacted local representatives stating that they felt frightened—I felt frightened for them—and that the antisemitic language used threatened them. We reported that to the police as a hate crime, and thankfully the projections stopped, because the police acted properly and without much more correspondence from me.

Further to that, in North Down, a neighbouring constituency, a local Bangor Central councillor had incidents of antisemitic hate language scribbled on a local park bench reported to him. That is completely unnecessary and threatening, and it gives the local area such a bad look. It could have been left for children of all ages to see. There are those who think that they can do things and get away with them—no, they cannot. Let us make them accountable.

We usually see a string of attacks, or certainly an increase in them, when issues are going on across the world, but those attacks are often inflicted on minorities in our communities, further isolating them and causing a feeling of fright. I have heard of so many attacks recently, especially on the mainland. I am so sad to hear of the antisemitic attack on the office of the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark)—that is disgraceful. There is absolutely no place for that kind of behaviour in our society. I am so pleased that the police took swift action in response. I am quite sure that the Minister encouraged the police to take that strong action.

Antisemitic crime in the UK has risen sharply amid the renewed conflict in Gaza, with 1,000 incidents logged by the Jewish charity Community Security Trust. What is taking place is just astounding. The trust works closely with police at local, regional and national level on joint patrols in Jewish areas, training classes and exercises, and exchanging antisemitic incident data, and in numerous advisory roles. As many will be aware, regional integration is so important to me and my colleagues.

I conclude with this, Ms Vaz, because I am conscious that you asked me to be fair to the other speakers, and I will be. There is no place in society for racially motivated groups who use threat and terror to achieve their aim. A just and harsh punishment must be implemented to ensure that these crimes do not go by with a mere slap on the wrist. I thank Members for their correspondence, for their comments today and for all they have done on behalf of my constituents in Newtownards and my constituency of Strangford. I support what the hon. Member for West Bromwich East has said, and I look forward very much to what the Minister will say to encourage us on behalf of our constituents.

3.10 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Thank you, Ms Vaz, for your chairpersonship. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for raising this important issue. I thank all those who work in Jewish community groups—the CST, the Antisemitism Policy Trust, the Union of Jewish Students, the Jewish Leadership Council or others—who do so much to bring attention to this appalling issue and to keep the Jewish community safe.

We know that a survey conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research found that 30% of the public hold at least one antisemitic view, so it is fair to assume that up to a similar percentage of people who attend some of these marches, which have been deeply distressing for Jewish people, also hold some of those views. It may be true that the majority of people who have attended the marches have been peaceful, but if they find themselves marching alongside people who call for jihad, display symbols in support of terrorism and call for an intifada, perhaps they should consider whether they should be keeping that company. Certainly, if I ended up on a march where there were neo-Nazis, I would exit it fairly swiftly.

I will say more on the marches at another opportunity. This afternoon, I want to focus specifically on the issue of Israelophobia, which is really just a new and updated form of antisemitism, and particularly on what I think is institutionalised Israelophobia in parts of our media. When, in 2017, I had the privilege of responding to the Holocaust Memorial Day debate as the Minister, I said:

> "Unfortunately, there has been an increased Israelification of anti-Semitism, using Israel and Zionism as a proxy for Jews. I have seen that and been on the receiving end of it, particularly on Twitter. There are pictures of the Star of David represented as the Nazi flag—that is unacceptable and a form of anti-Semitism."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 1168.]

That is exactly what we have seen displayed on the streets of this country in recent weeks. I have become increasingly concerned about the tone and what I believe is the one-sided nature of the coverage of this conflict in parts of the media, and about what that is doing to fuel Jew hate in this country. As has been said, it is bad enough that we already have people on the streets of Britain calling for an intifada. Let us remember what the last intifada involved: the bombing of a pub, the blowing up of buses and the murder of a nine-year-old Israeli child whose head was smashed between a rifle butt and a rock. That is what an intifada means, yet people are on the streets of this country marching for that and are not arrested for it. Indeed, at times, it has looked as though the Metropolitan police in particular have been the public relations arm of some of the protests.

My fear is that this Israelification of antisemitism—this Israelophobia—is now engrained at every level of British society. As Members have mentioned, we find it today in academia among university lecturers; it seems that it is tolerated in schools; it is promoted by ignorant football pundits, senior professionals and actors; and I am sorry to say that it is given succour in parts of the British media. Behind it sit age-old but updated antisemitic tropes, which include that Jews are too powerful and that they are untrustworthy, sneaky and greedy. That Israelophobia has been on display in recent weeks. It is a poison that has dripped into every aspect of western life and has been promoted by very clever activists who, over decades, have created a false history and a false narrative about Jews in the middle east, have smeared Zionism and, in so doing, have played on the victimhood of Palestinians which, itself, has taken away agency from Palestinians.

What is this Israelophobia—this updated antisemitism? As the editor of *The Jewish Chronicle* put it, it has three elements: demonisation,

> "smearing Israel as evil and a threat to the world";

weaponisation,

"exploiting social justice movements as a Trojan horse for hatred of Jews and their national home"—

how we have seen that on the streets of Britain; and falsification,

"echoing the lies and canards of the Nazi or Soviet propaganda."

That is what we have seen on the streets: people marching with banners and saying things about the state of Israel and this conflict that are directly drawn from Nazi and Soviet antisemitic propaganda. Never mind that Hamas want to murder all Jews. Never mind that the majority of Palestinians in recent polling reject co-existence with Israel. It is Israel, or rather Jews, who are the problem. As the late and great rabbi, Lord Sacks, said:

"In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were hated because of their race. Today they are hated because of their nation state, the state of Israel."

A Jewish banker of the past antisemitic tropes is now the Israeli lobby. Never mind the truth of how much other countries spend on lobbying, which is far more than anything spent by the state of Israel, the medieval bloodthirsty Jew, who drank the blood of Christian children, is now the bloodthirsty Israeli. There is nothing new here. Israelophobia is antisemitism, pure and simple.

Sadly, we have now seen that ingrained in parts of the media. I am a big supporter of the media and the BBC, and I have never bought into the Defund the BBC campaign. However, I have serious concerns about some of the coverage we have seen—about how Israel has been singled out for special treatment, which is directly putting Jews in this country at risk. It plays into those tropes of bloodlust. Hamas' figures on civilian casualties are reported without qualification or reference to the BBC being unable to verify their figures. The imagery of this conflict, as it would have us believe, is a well-armed Israel Defence Forces soldier versus a civilian of Gaza, never mind that the IDF is obviously seeking to destroy a despotic, terrorist death cult. For example, we are told by Jeremy Bowen that

"Israelis have hardened their hearts".

That was in a report without any evidence, any reference to polling to back it up, or any reference to the Israelis who, even in this conflict, work hard for peace between Palestinians and Israelis to this day.

Where the reporting suggests that Israel's claims are untrustworthy, they are treated differently to those of Hamas. We are repeatedly being told of the BBC being unable to verify claims. When the BBC reported on witness statements of Israeli Jewish women being raped and murdered, not only did it challenge those statements directly to the people making them, it included within its reports that it had been unable to verify those claims. I do not remember that appearing when we had reports about the awful rapes of Yezidi women by ISIS. It certainly was not included in BBC reporting of alleged incidents involving released Palestinian prisoners, some of whom not only owe a debt to Hamas but are convicted or accused of very serious offences. They were released and allowed to tell their story, with the BBC choosing not to mention in its reporting that it had been unable to verify the numbers.

Then, of course, we had the reporting of the "strike" on the Al-Ahli Hospital. Hamas propaganda immediately reported that there were 500 deaths and that it was an Israeli strike. We know that is untrue. It was a smear, it was a lie, and it remained on many media outlets and still remains on some of issues now. But when the IDF uncover a hospital that has weapons inside or is being used to hold hostages, what are we told? Once again, that the BBC has been unable to verify those claims, yet an unverified claim about a strike that never took place was push notified on social media. It is no wonder that 75% of British Jews consider the BBC biased in its coverage of this conflict. We have good reason to feel that.

I am conscious of time, and I think another Member wants to speak, but I would like to give a couple of other recent examples in the media that need calling out. On 23 December, Sky analyst Sean Bell said that Hamas's strategy may prove to be "prudent". The rape, murder and torture of Israeli women, the cutting off of children's limbs and the slicing off of women's breasts may prove to be a prudent strategy—Sky News. On 28 November, Dominic Waghorn of Sky said in a series of tweets that Yahya Sinwar had assured hostages that they would be well treated, and, indeed, that some hostages had said the only thing they feared was Israeli bombardment. His exact words were:

"They were held in reasonable conditions, reportedly, though those held above ground lived with the fear of being killed in Israel's bombardment."

Let us consider the facts. Never mind the mental health impact on these people; never mind the fact they were taken against their will; never mind that Mia Schem, one of the released hostages, described living in constant fear of rape and being operated on without anaesthesia; never mind that hostages were held in cages; never mind the reports of sexual assault on the hostages that have come out since 17-year-old Agam Goldstein-Almog was released. Never mind any of that. It is okay, according to Sky: the hostages were treated well because Yahya Sinwar, the leader of a terrorist death cult, assured them they would be okay. These are the things that are going on in our media. Is it any wonder that Jew hate is being fuelled in this country? We have institutionalised Israelophobia in the BBC and other parts of our media, and it needs to be called out.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East on securing this debate, as well as other Members present on their contributions. I know that another Member wishes to speak, so I will end on those numerous examples—all of which, I must add, I have made complaints about beforehand. I believe in making those complaints privately; the reason I mention them today is that none of them has been resolved properly. On that, I shall end.

3.21 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for bringing forward this important debate at such a critical time. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who is a member of the same synagogue as me, and with whom I have enjoyed mixing Hanukkah cocktails in the past.

As a proudly Jewish parliamentarian, this is an issue that has significance both to my constituents, of all faiths and none, and to me personally. The devastating attack on 7 October had a far-reaching impact on the Jewish community in the UK, not least because its scale

[Charlotte Nichols]

means that most of us are only one degree of separation from someone killed, taken hostage or otherwise impacted, as well as the huge surge in antisemitism that has so shamefully followed the attack. The war in Ukraine has also led to an uptick in the conspiratorial filth I have received and seen online, in part due to the Jewish faith of Volodymyr Zelensky, but also the offensive denazification pretext for invasion by Russia. I had wrongly thought that this sort of conspiratorial nonsense was on the wane after covid and the George Soros and 5G conspiracies, but they have now been replaced by nonsense about Rothschilds, satanists and Putin propaganda.

I pay tribute to CST, which is such an invaluable resource to our community and to me personally, providing practical and moral support when things are at their most difficult. I also pay tribute to Warrington Borough Council, which has always acted speedily in clearing up the incidents of antisemitic graffiti we have reported, including the swastikas recently daubed on local playparks.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich East made specific reference to antisemitism online, which it is vital to mention. Twitter, or X, in particular, has mainstreamed antisemitism. The number of times I have reported objectively antisemitic tweets, with posters and names that specifically reference nazi ideology, only to get an email back saying the tweets have not broken any of the website's rules since Elon Musk's takeover is, frankly, staggering. More must be done to hold tech companies accountable for the hate that is peddled on their platforms.

Antisemitism online is bad enough; it not only has an insidious impact on the individuals to whom it is directed, but poisons the overall atmosphere of those sites. However, the online sphere does not stay online. Recently, I was accosted by a man on the street. While he was filming me—he later posted the video online—he made repeated references to me being part of a Jewish and Masonic conspiracy to commit genocide against Catholics and Muslims and shouted at me that I was a murderer. Thankfully, my team intervened and the police were nearby, so things did not escalate to where they so easily could have. Nevertheless, it left me shaken on that day and has led me to feel less safe when out and about, and to take additional measures for my physical safety.

Ultimately, hatred is only defeated by solidarity. We have some incredible local initiatives to build relationships between communities, which are more important now than ever, but constraints on local government finance mean that some of the more targeted support that can make the most difference is under-resourced. I welcome the additional funding for the CST as a result of the latest increases in antisemitic incidents, but there is much more that the Government could do here. There is also more that we can do with schools around education about the Jewish community. With the Jewish community as small as we are, it cannot be left to us to educate others about Jewish life and our common humanity to build that understanding.

I hope and pray that we will see peace in Israel and Gaza speedily, but ensuring that our vibrant and multicultural society is one in which all our constituents can feel safe is something that we must be proactive about. Our interventions and focus as Parliament in this area cannot be led by events overseas.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I know that my hon. Friend shares my concerns about antisemitism on university campuses. I recently spoke to Jewish students at Leeds University, where there have been a number of antisemitic incidents. One of those was when Moazzam Begg, who has diminished the role of Hamas in the 7 October massacre, was invited to speak. Jewish and other students raised concerns, but the student union did not cancel the room booking, citing the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which my hon. Friend and I both warned would create scenarios that could unleash antisemitism on campus. It appears that we have been proved right, as the horrific events in October and the misguided aim of allowing freedom of speech on campuses have unleashed a wave of antisemitism. Is it not time that we looked at the legislation again, to protect Jewish students on campus?

Charlotte Nichols: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct that there have been some unintended consequences from that legislation, which were warned about. The very people that it sought to stop from coming on to campus have in fact been protected on campus. That is something we need to look at again.

Hon. and right hon. Members have picked up on a number of points in this debate, which I hope will help us to ensure that, as we tear antisemitism out of our society by its roots, we plant something better and more hopeful in its place. This is a good place to start.

3.27 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing today's debate. This is obviously an issue of great importance to her, as it is to me and others here. She spoke powerfully about the worldwide phenomenon and about the nature of this concerning upturn in antisemitism. She also spoke powerfully and clearly, as did the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), about the online space, which is often just a cesspit. I am keen to hear more from the Minister about how Government see the role of artificial intelligence in this space, which I agree is a serious cause for concern. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) talked about the conspiratorial nature of much of this material, particularly online, and the need to tackle it. I would also be keen to hear more about that.

My constituency of East Renfrewshire is, on the face of it—and indeed under the surface—a very nice but perhaps unremarkable place. But scratch the surface even slightly and we are very much more than that. East Renfrewshire is one of the most diverse communities in Scotland. We have a fantastically active and growing Muslim community locally, which enriches the life of our area in many ways. We have a thriving and broad spectrum of Christian congregations, which are also all doing good work, and, similarly, significant Hindu and Sikh communities, which are all contributing brilliant things to our area. Our Baha'i community does so much to improve our local environment, and we are home to a significant Jewish community also. In fact, the majority of Scotland's Jews have their homes in East Renfrewshire, and we are very much the better for that. We are the better for the contribution that the

Jewish communities and these other faith and non-faith groups make locally. We are fortunate as well to live in a community where we respect, value and work with one another, and where we support each other in difficult times. That has never been more important, and it has never been clearer to me, than at the moment.

We have all watched in horror as events have unfolded in the middle east. Like the hon. Member for Warrington North, I have constituents with family members and friends in Israel and Palestine. People have been heartsore and so worried, and the wider community has worried along with them and continues to do so. Of course, these worries are now amplified by the spectre of hatred and the scourge of antisemitism, which has been described eloquently today. Some who have expressed concern to me locally have actually been members of other faith communities, troubled by the worries their neighbours face. I visited an excellent local Muslim centre recently to discuss the worrying rise in Islamophobia, and was struck by the sincere concerns raised by the people I was speaking to about the impact on the Jewish community locally and the increase in antisemitism.

The headlines might not always reflect that kind of thing, but there is a deep and broadly held concern about the impact of the terrible stain of antisemitism on our communities. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) spoke well about the issues with neighbours and people's worries. This is a real stain on our society; and it is increasing, and alarmingly so. We have heard today that antisemitism always rises at home when there is conflict in the middle east. We have seen overt threats. We have seen the horrible denial, the stereotypes and the tropes online, but not only online. The Community Security Trust, which does hugely important work, reflects all that in its output. It has shared eye-watering figures, which we have heard today, that should give us all pause for thought. I was struck by the description we heard earlier of antisemitism as a "light sleeper", according to the Community Security Trust. That is true, and there is no excuse, no justification and no reason why antisemitism should ever raise its head or be accepted. Conflict somewhere else can never justify hatred here.

No one's identity should ever be a reason for hatred. That is never acceptable. There is no place for antisemitism or hatred in our communities. Nothing can justify expressions of racial or religious hatred—nothing at all—and history has surely shown us the peril of not standing up and rejecting intolerance and prejudice. That rings particularly true today, and we need to heed the lessons of history.

Andrew Percy: I hope the hon. Lady will allow me to use her as a conduit to the Minister. She is talking about people holding particular views, and I mentioned the Institute for Jewish Policy Research's previous study, which showed that up to 30% of British people hold at least one antisemitic trope. Does she agree that now is perhaps a good time to update that, and for the Minister to look into whether we can fund another piece of research in the area?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. The more we can do to shine a light on the realities of people's lives, the realities of communities and the issues people face, the better. We are all the better—Scotland is the better, and I am sure that others would agree that the UK is the better—for our diversity and for the different contributions that communities make to that plurality of cultures.

Jim Shannon: We're always better together.

Kirsten Oswald: I am ignoring that contribution from the hon. Gentleman! *[Laughter.]*

Scotland's Jewish community plays a very important part in our country and civic life, along with other faith communities. It was right that the Scottish Government formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, as did my own party, and the continued dialogue and solidarity is particularly important at the moment.

I was privileged to speak alongside our First Minister, Humza Yousaf, at a moving and profound service at the Giffnock Newton Mearns synagogue in October, and the mutual sorrow, concern and respect between the Muslim First Minister of Scotland and the Jewish hosts of the ceremony was clear. We have to stand collectively. The joint statement of solidarity issued by the First Minister and faith leaders in Scotland is really important; that joint commitment to working to foster cohesion and good will across Scotland really matters. I am grateful for the meetings between the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities and the First Minister, and for the exemplary ongoing work of those organisations. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) mentioned a number of other organisations that are similarly doing important work.

It is really important that, as elected representatives, we have zero tolerance of hate crime and Islamophobia. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who is no longer in her place, spoke about the worry that antisemitism creates, and it is really important that we accept that in our roles. Like others, I have spoken to students and parents who feel vulnerable, anxious and unable to express their identity. That is unacceptable. Again, I am grateful to the First Minister, who has committed to meet those students to hear their concerns, and to ensure that they are well understood and can be dealt with. Our universities are there for all our communities, and everyone must feel safe and able to be themselves in them.

When I spoke to my constituents about Remembrance Sunday events, I was very sorry to hear some of them express a reluctance to wear medals or carry wreaths that showed their Jewish identity. Nobody should fear laying a star of David wreath or wearing a star of David medal. The irony that they were fearful at that event should not be lost on us. We have heard about incidents at such occasions and in day-to-day life. We heard about the young pupils who wear baseball caps over their kippahs. People's identities are not to be toyed with; we absolutely must respect them. We all matter, and we must all feel safe.

It is not just the horrible spectre of antisemitism—we have heard some terrible examples of antisemitism—but the cumulative worry, the build-up of concerns and the impact on people's general confidence about going about their business that matter. We need to seriously take

[Kirsten Oswald]

account of the anxiety that people experience about the prospect of antisemitism. There is obviously considerable anxiety at present.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government recently published their hate crime strategy, which was informed by communities with lived experience of hate crime and sets out strategic priorities for dealing with hate crime, including antisemitism. That really matters. I also thank Police Scotland, which has been outstanding and constructive in my local community; it is very aware of communities' worries.

I am heartsore that we have to have this debate, but I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East for securing it. I am deeply concerned that a creeping intolerance has evidently ramped up over recent times. Scotland is a safe place, but it is important that we are clear that we are not immune from this old hatred. We need to stand collectively against antisemitism. We have a particular responsibility here, and I am keen to hear further how the Minister believes the Government can support that work.

3.37 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair in this important debate, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing it, and my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for their important contributions.

The horrific attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October have caused and continue to cause widespread grief within the Jewish community here in Britain. On top of that, the substantial increase in antisemitic incidents and offences in the months since has created an environment in which many members of our Jewish community feel threatened, vulnerable and unsafe, as we have heard.

We thank the Community Security Trust for its tireless efforts alongside the police to protect and support the Jewish community across Britain. Between 7 October and 13 December, the CST recorded more than 2,000 incidents of antisemitism, including 95 assaults and 165 direct threats. That is the highest total number of incidents it has recorded in that kind of time period since its records began 40 years ago. Police forces around the country have similarly recorded spikes in antisemitic offences in the months since 7 October. We know that many hate crimes go unreported, so those figures by no means reflect the full picture, and nor can they fully capture the deep and tangible impact that these incidents are having on the Jewish community as a whole.

Of course, events unfolding internationally have had alarming repercussions on many facets of community life. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, some of the most shocking incidents have included graffiti on a holocaust library and a Jewish primary school vandalised with red paint. We have also seen unacceptable words on placards at protests and rallies, and a steep rise in antisemitic incidents at schools and on university campuses. Threats have been made against Jewish institutions and individuals across major online platforms. All those disturbing developments have heightened feelings of vulnerability among British Jews, a sizeable majority of whom have said that they have felt less safe in this country since 7 October.

Sadly, the appalling spike in antisemitism over the past few months has been paralleled by rising antisemitism across the world. In Russia, a mob stormed an airport looking for Jewish passengers to attack. We have seen arson attacks on synagogues in Germany, Tunisia and Armenia. Jewish homes in Paris and Berlin were marked by antisemitic graffiti. It is essential that we stand together in condemning such horrifying attacks.

Urgent action must be taken to prevent antisemitic hate crime, as well as all categories and strands of hate crime, which have soared over the last decade in Britain. We must take steps to ensure that incidents are reported, investigated and prosecuted, and be clear that we mean business in tackling antisemitism. Labour stands totally and wholeheartedly with the Jewish community in that vital task. That is why we are grateful for the reassurance policing work that has been taking place across communities, and why we supported additional funding for the Community Security Trust. However, we remain concerned that the Government are taking too little action, and that the monitoring of antisemitism and Islamophobia has been downgraded by the Government in the last 12 months. Specifically, incidents that do not cross the criminal threshold are no longer being recorded by the police, despite the Home Office's assessment that such data is vital for targeting resources and preventing serious crime.

Over the past decade, the staggering year-on-year rises in hate crime have laid bare the Conservatives' decade of failure to keep our communities safe. More than 145,000 cases were recorded in 2022-23, and violent crime rose sixfold in the 10 years prior. Hate and division have surged in response to conflict in the middle east, and we desperately need reassurance from the Government that they take hate crime seriously and that perpetrators will face the full force of the law. We cannot and must not accept this hatred, which corrodes our communities. Will the Minister back our calls to strengthen monitoring requirements around antisemitic and Islamophobic hate incidents in response to the current tensions? There has not been a refresh of the hate crime action plan since it expired in 2020. A refresh is vital. Do the Government intend to refresh the plan? If so, when?

Between 7 October and 13 December, the CST recorded 133 incidents of antisemitism related to the schools sector and 157 incidents related to universities, and there have been similarly shocking reports of Islamophobia in the education sector. Has the Minister, or any of his colleagues, issued full guidance on how schools should respond to such incidents? Does he support calls for secondary schools to teach about contemporary antisemitism?

At a time when antisemitism and Islamophobia divide our communities, cross-community and interfaith activities can bolster community cohesion. What action have the Government taken to promote positive, long-term projects to support community cohesion, and have they sought to identify and share examples of best practice at local authority level? Based purely on incidents that have been proactively reported, the CST recorded 625 incidents of antisemitism online between 7 October and 12 December last year. Does the Minister agree that, as colleagues

have said this afternoon, the Online Safety Act 2023 was stripped of its powers to effectively monitor and challenge online safety incidents? What steps are the Government taking to tackle antisemitism online? Finally, can the Minister say when the last meeting of the cross-Government working group on antisemitism was held, and will the Government arrange for an urging meeting of the working groups on antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred?

It is essential that swift and firm action is taken to prevent antisemitic crime. In government, Labour will take firm action to do so.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I will call the Minister next, but I remind him to finish his remarks by about 3.58 pm to allow Nicola Richards to wind up.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): I am genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for giving us the opportunity to speak about this hugely important subject, and to almost all hon. Members for their contributions. To the hon. Members who have sought to politicise this, I would just say that there are times and there are places, and this was neither the time nor the place.

It is customary to start debates like this by saying that it is a pleasure to serve—and, of course, it is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz—but in truth, it is not a pleasure to be here today. It is not a pleasure to have listened to some of the absolutely outrageous stories that we have heard over the past half hour. It is not a pleasure to be sat in a debate that should not be needed at all. There is no pleasure to be had in this discussion, and I know that all colleagues here and outside this place share in that.

This debate is not a pleasure, but it is most definitely a necessity. It is a necessity, because in this seat of democracy there is an opportunity to call out the appalling acts of a tiny minority in recent months. It is a necessity for us to shine light on unacceptable behaviour, and to speak and articulate what we have sadly seen in recent months from a tiny group of people—that is, pure antisemitism. It might be dressed up as something else: it might be shrouded in a plaintive sense of emotion; it might be a preamble of obfuscation or confusion; it might be an inaccurate reference to fighting for something else; it might be the imposition of a horrifying hierarchy where Jewish deaths, Jewish injuries and Jewish blood appear to be less important than any other; or it might be the extraordinary insertion of context into the deaths of 1,200 people on 7 October. In truth, some are not even that subtle, and are now explicit about it, but whatever it is—whether implicit or explicit—we see it: it is present. If it walks, talks and acts like what it might be, then it probably is. It is antisemitism.

I want to be clear that no one in this room, nor the Government, seek to close down debate. No one here seeks to conflate legitimate criticism of one actor, one country, or one situation with explicit discrimination and prejudice. No one does not acknowledge the horror of war and the inhumanity of conflict—any conflict, anywhere, anytime, in any part of the world. No one is saying that we should not hear hard things; that is the mark of a civilised, educated, compassionate and curious society. But the other mark of a civilised society is calling out when things have gone too far, both implicitly and explicitly.

Part of the answer is law—you cannot incite violence—but another part is personal responsibility. There is a term that I hate; it is massively overused and I never thought I would be saying it. That term is "gaslighting". But with the "From the river to the sea" chant, there is the most incredible abdication of responsibility for those who have used it casually, willingly, publicly—even, for some, joyfully. It may not be the case that everyone who has said it is antisemitic, but it absolutely is the case that all antisemites would be happy to use it.

There may also be a staggering misapplication of emotion via the trusted, weird logic of post-modernism that has taken root in so many of our universities, which abolishes the agency of the individual, dismantles the principle of the nation state and sees society only through the prism of a power dynamic where everyone either holds no power whatsoever, or holds all the power; and it follows that, as a result, anything that those without power do is virtuous and everyone who may have some semblance of power must be disregarded, ignored and dehumanised.

Charlotte Nichols: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will not give way. Postmodernism is an insidious, regressive and depressing call to all our worst selves, relying on false binaries and erroneous arguments. Most of the time, it sits in front of us without incident, in weird ideologies and daft PhDs. Yet occasionally it pops to the surface and the utter baselessness of it is revealed. At its heart, it needs to be ripped out of our society. This is not Britain. It is not supposed to be like this. This debate should not have happened; we are supposed to have moved on from this. It is clear that we have not.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will not, if I may.

Like so many others in this debate, I have seen examples as a constituency MP. Individual one: an employee at a Russell Group university who raises money for charity in her spare time. She started to email me on Saturday 28 October to ask whether it is donations to my party or the selling of weapons to Israel that influences my stand. She tells me that she does not agree with me about "from the river to the sea" being a call for a race to be wiped out. She tells me that groups such as Hamas will continue while Israel does what it does.

Next, individual two: a nurse practitioner just over the border in Sheffield, who lives in my constituency. She asks me how I sleep at night, tells me there is collective punishment, that there is a war crime and that there is genocide. Then individual three: an ex-civil servant, an economist and a volunteer at a children's society, who decided to debate with me on Facebook how much terrorism would be acceptable. Or individual four: a retired nurse who posts sunsets on Facebook and talks about a plan to free up land, with some rubbing their hands together for oil deals and expansion. It is just incredible.

[Lee Rowley]

If someone had told me on Friday 6 October that within three months we would have seen Jewish schools vandalised, missing persons posters torn down, a massive rise in crime, Jewish friends telling me they sometimes no longer feel safe in this country and words that have real meaning being casually tossed around, I would not have believed them. If they had told me on Friday 6 October that the apparent genesis of that hatred was the execution of 1,200 innocent Jewish people simply for the crime of being Jewish, that would have been doubly shocking.

Recently, I spent a few days on holiday in America. When I was there, for the first time, I visited the site at Dallas. One of my favourite, although lesser known, quotes of John F. Kennedy said that history

"is the memory of a nation."

Just as a memory enables the individual to learn, choose goals and stick to them, it prevents them making the same mistakes twice. That is exactly what we need to do here and that is what the Government and all decent people in society need to do.

The Prime Minister and a senior set of Ministers have already met Jewish community members and key organisations to listen to their concerns. As has been outlined by colleagues here already, we have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism and we encourage other bodies to adopt it and consider its practical implementation. The Community Security Trust, which Members on all sides have referenced, has reported that incidents often occur near Jewish community buildings, such as synagogues and schools. The Government are providing protective security, such as guarding, CCTV and alarms at schools, colleges, nurseries, synagogues and community sites through the Jewish community protective security grant, which has provided more than £110 million since 2015.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East, I should say that we continue with efforts to reduce radicalisation through the network of Prevent practitioners, who provide training to school staff on radicalisation and empower teachers to challenge extremism in the classroom. The reporting extremism online form allows concerns to be raised directly with the Department for Education. Since 7 October, the Government have engaged with schools, colleges and universities to offer support and guidance. The Education Secretary wrote to the sector urging them to respond swiftly to hate-related incidents and to actively reassure Jewish students so they can study without fear, harassment or intimidation, as hon. Members rightly said they must.

At the opening of the autumn statement, the Chancellor made clear his deep concerns about the rise of antisemitism, underscoring the Government's commitment to tackling it. His commitments were backed by a further £7 million in funding over the next three years to help tackle antisemitism in education. I will take away the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) about research. I would be happy to do that, and, if we can, I am sure we will try. The autumn statement will ensure that support is in place for schools, colleges and universities to understand, recognise and deal with antisemitism effectively.

It was absolutely right and reasonable for the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) to ask about the online space. Ministers from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology recently convened social media companies and community voices to discuss online antisemitism and to understand the impact of this abhorrent content on communities. As part of the implementation of the Online Safety Act, we will remain in contact with social media platforms, and we have been clear that they need not wait for regulation before taking action.

I want to end with something that a Jewish friend once told me many years ago, long before the recent challenges. We were in conversation about our backgrounds, childhoods and families. In truth, I thought I would educate her, as the working class kid from Derbyshire talking to the posh girl from London. I told her about my background, and I waited for her to contrast it with her Twickenham upbringing, her gilded life at private school and her middle-class comforts, which she did. At the end, she turned to her Jewish heritage. It is something that she has always been hugely proud of, and she spoke about it with verve, passion and a reverence for history.

Casually, right at the end, my friend said one of the most arresting things that I have ever heard. "Of course, Lee," she said, looking at me right in the eye, "I always keep a bag packed under my bed." Confused, I did not immediately catch on. I had no knowledge, no background, no experience—I do not think I had met a Jewish person until I was 18. I am not saying that this is indicative of everybody in the community, but she said, "For me and my family, it is something we have done for decades. History taught us that we needed to be ready in case something ever went wrong, as it did for my forefathers and their forefathers before them. I don't think it will ever be necessary, but it's there in case it is—in case this country ever stops being my home."

That must never ever happen. We are proud of our Jewish communities, just as we are proud of every single other community that makes up this rich patchwork of the United Kingdom, and we stand with them today. The United Kingdom is so much more than the isolated ugliness that we have seen. This Government and this Parliament—all parties here—and this country will continue to do whatever we can to build a stronger foundation to support our Jewish community in the months, years and decades ahead.

3.57 pm

Nicola Richards: I thank all Members for taking part today. I want to quickly plug the debate on Thursday, when, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), the House will be debating the contribution of the Jewish community to the UK. I hope that the Jewish community in the UK and around the world will be reassured by the warmth that the debate will create, in contrast to the very sad statistics and incidents spoken about today.

I thank all hon. Members for being here, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who ran here—no Westminster Hall debate would be the same without him. I thank the Minister for his incredibly powerful response. The commitment from this Government to stamp out antisemitism has always been a priority, and I am very proud of that.

The Minister also mentioned that he was asked how he sleeps at night given his support for Israel. As other Members—my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—will know, having visited Israel last week, I have not slept very well. I watched 47 minutes of innocent Jews—children, women, men—being slaughtered; I saw evidence of rape. I have not slept very well. No person at the moment in Israel, or any Jewish person around the world, is sleeping well.

It is impossible to get one's head around the evil displayed that day, so it is hard to explain how disgusting it is for people to blame 7 October on Jews or on Israel, or try to use what happened as a springboard for their own antisemitic beliefs. A rise in antisemitism in the UK in 2024, in response to the 7 October attack in particular, serves as a national embarrassment. I am pleased to hear the commitment from colleagues today to do all we can to reverse that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of increases in anti-Semitic offences.

Cost of Living in Scotland

4 pm

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call David Linden to move the motion. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for him to wind up.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of living in Scotland.

My ability to wind up the Minister is never going to be in question, Ms Vaz, but in all seriousness I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship. I would like to open by reminding everyone that this debate takes place against the backdrop of a truly dire situation—one characterised by emergency food parcels, poor mental and physical health, parents and children having to cut back on meals, households putting the heating on less, and people relying on insecure pay-day lenders just to make ends meet. The situation I am referring to is one that we as MPs, with much regret, have become all too familiar with: the cost of living crisis.

The crisis as we know it today has shown no sign of abating, and as a result people continue to suffer. The reality is that our social security system, as it stands and at its most fundamental level, no longer prevents hunger and destitution. The British Government show no sign of taking the drastic action needed to reform it. We are witnessing a deafening silence and a lack of action that speaks louder than any words could. From social tenants, those in and out of work, parents, carers, students and disabled people, to the over-50s, the cost of living crisis knows no bounds. It will continue to run rampant through our communities unless tangible policy is put in place immediately.

As the eyes of the electorate narrow on Westminster as we creep closer to a general election, the policy and spending decisions made by the British Government are all the more pertinent. From eye-watering energy bills and excessive food costs to soaring mortgage bills, we must be in no doubt that we face a cost of living crisis made right here in Westminster.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. It is an incredible subject matter that applies not just to Scotland but all the United Kingdom, in particular Northern Ireland. I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand about property prices, which have increased again this year. Does he agree that what we and the Government need to do as we go into 2024 is all we can to address the housing crisis, which I know he is deeply concerned about, so that the first-time buyers have a real chance to get a mortgage at an affordable rate and have a property, as we all do?

David Linden: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, I was referring to that particular issue with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) earlier on, who was outlining some thoughts about how the economy has suffered as a result, frankly, of the UK Government's rather reckless approach during last year's mini Budget.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) *rose—*

David Linden: Given that I mentioned my hon. Friend, I am happy to give way to him.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting this debate. To the critical point about the cost of living crisis in Scotland, I wonder whether he agrees that the Minister, when they rise to their feet, will undoubtedly try and devolve their Government's catastrophic economic policy to the devolved Administrations, whether in Edinburgh, Cardiff or, if it were sitting, in Belfast. I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that responsibility for the impact on my constituents in West Dunbartonshire, in his own constituency and across Scotland lies fairly and squarely at the door of Westminster, with the UK Government.

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on, and that is the reason, I believe, why when the general election comes the best opportunity to make Scotland Tory-free is to vote SNP. That includes in his constituency in West Dunbartonshire, because his constituents, who are paying higher mortgage prices, will know that the cost of living crisis that they face at the moment has been made in Westminster.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose—*

David Linden: I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) is seeking to catch my eye as well.

Drew Hendry: On the subject of reserved matters, energy policy is entirely reserved. The current cost of energy and electricity is particularly painful for people in the highlands. It is exceptionally galling in an area that produces six times more electricity than it needs to use. Highlanders pay a higher unit price, we have to use more electricity to heat our homes, because of the climate, and we have the highest level of fuel poverty. This Government should have taken the opportunity to do something to help people in the highlands and yet they did not.

David Linden: I absolutely agree. As somebody who represents the highlands—I think the constituency he is seeking to contest at the next election is even more rural than the one that he represents at the moment—my hon. Friend is right to make reference to the challenges in relation to energy, particularly for constituents who are off-grid. Fundamentally, he is right to highlight the fact that Scotland is an energy-rich nation but that far too many of our constituents are living in fuel poverty, particularly those in his constituency and that of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), to whom I am happy to give way.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I know from personal experience that the hon. Gentleman is speaking from the heart and that he means what he says. Further to my colleague's intervention, is it not terrible that people are faced with making the invidious choice of keeping the heating on and running into debt or putting it off and risking ill health or something far worse? That should not happen at a time when we think of ourselves as being civilised.

David Linden: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman is spot on. Of course, he previously served in the devolved Parliament in Scotland, where there is responsibility for health policy. One thing that he and I would share a concern about is that, as a result of some of those decisions around poverty, we find that there is a knock-on effect for many of our constituents. If someone is living in fuel poverty, that has an impact on their health, which in turn has an impact on other aspects such as employment; all of these decisions are linked up. That is a pressure that our colleagues in Scotland face.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he feel, as I do, that the Tory Government here in Westminster have absolutely forgotten disabled people? They announced a social energy tariff consultation, which has not happened. Many people across these isles, and especially those with disabilities, cannot afford to heat their homes.

David Linden: Absolutely. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who I know does a power of work on this issue and is an active member of the Lanarkshire forum on poverty. She is right. We know that there is evidence suggesting that people with a disability experience £950 a month more living costs, not to mention the fact that the UK Government so cruelly overlooked the 2.5 million legacy benefit claimants during the pandemic, who did not get their £20 uplift.

I know that my hon. Friend did not see my speech in advance, but she touched on a point that I want to come to next, which is about the impact on physical and mental health. That is an issue that impacts people across all of these islands. Indeed, the Mental Health Foundation found that almost one third of Scottish adults reported feeling anxious about their financial situation in the last month, with one in 10 feeling hopeless about it. I guess that that goes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross: in one of the richest economies in the world, people feeling hopeless due to financial precarity is simply unacceptable.

These statistics are only reinforced by the findings of the charity Pregnant Then Screwed, who revealed in their recent survey that over half of parents reported experiencing high levels of anxiety relating to money. That is in addition to the almost two thirds of mothers with a child under 12 months who reported that they either have cut short or will cut short their maternity leave due to cost of living pressures. From the Scottish Women's Budget Group, we know that women are the shock absorbers of poverty; during a cost of living crisis, I am afraid that that problem is only exacerbated.

If we take a look at the impact across demographics in Scotland, we also know, from Age Scotland, that 43% of over-50s identified as living in fuel poverty, with 9% of over-50s skipping meals. The very fact that so many people are living in fuel poverty and that that has an impact on many constituents in the Easterhouse area of my constituency is, I know, a huge area of concern for my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), who I think was seeking to catch my eye to make an intervention on this point.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I was waiting for the appropriate moment. I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, but also for allowing

me to make a couple of points. I wonder whether my hon. Friend shares my absolute horror at the yesterday's news that Ofgem has said that Scottish Power are fit and proper persons to force-fit prepayment meters once again. We know that there was a consultation and that Ofgem said, "Well, okay, you can all do it if you meet these criteria and follow these rules"—one of the rules being that you cannot do it to somebody over the age of 75. My hon. Friend and I both represent the east end of Glasgow, where in some areas the life expectancy is considerably lower than that, so that is a real concern. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is never a reason to force somebody onto a prepayment meter simply because they are poor?

David Linden: Absolutely, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work on this particular issue. She and I have the privilege of representing the community of Carntyne, both north and south. It will be bittersweet for me, but after the boundary changes, I very much hope that she will be able to take on the south Carntyne part of the constituency. We should be aware that it is an area with a lot of older residents. The forced fitting of prepayment meters was in the news yesterday, which I know is an issue of huge concern for constituents there. The only thing I would say is that they should take heart that in my hon. Friend they will have a doughty champion to continue campaigning on that.

It cannot be the case that so many people are affected to the point of hunger, anxiety and destitution, when the Government hold the power to shield people from those very things. The most recent report from the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, titled, "It's Your Life's Opportunities", makes a number of recommendations. It talks about how this cost of living crisis is impacting social tenants in Scotland, who are amongst the very hardest hit by this crisis. Due to the nature of the social housing sector, people on the lowest incomes, with varying needs—for example, refugees or those who were previously homeless—came into the cost of living crisis already struggling. I regularly seek to make the point to Ministers that for many of my constituents the cost of living crisis is not necessarily a new thing. It is a continuation of an already challenging circumstance that they found themselves in.

As of September last year, less than one in 10 social tenants felt as though the cost of living crisis was easing, as we headed into the winter period. Looking particularly at West of Scotland Housing Association tenants, some of whom are my own constituents, 44% reported missing meals because of the crisis, with 65% stating that the price of food limits the extent to which they can buy healthy foods for their households.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

David Linden: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), because she is a Glaswegian, and then I will come to spare Glasgow, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands).

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward this debate. He represents the east end of Glasgow, but many of the issues he is talking about could equally apply to my constituency in the north west of Glasgow. One of the things often thrown at people in poverty is, "They just need to get a job," but my hon. Friend will know, like me, that 61% of people experiencing poverty are in households where at least one adult is working. These are working people, and in-work poverty has become far more acute as a result of the actions of this Government.

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is spot on to draw the comparison on an issue that impacts both my constituents and hers. I think that probably the two places in Glasgow that are most often twinned are Easterhouse and Drumchapel. She is spot on to refer to the fact that in-work poverty continues to be a massive blight on our communities. She actually raises this at just the right point, as I approach talking about universal credit, which is an in-work benefit.

Ending the five-week wait for universal credit, scrapping the two-child cap and lifting the benefit cap are all measures that can be taken to reduce the significant long-term effects that the cost of living crisis is having on people. That is why we need action now. Before I come to that action, I will give way to the Member for spare Glasgow, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend forgot about spare Glasgow, even though my new constituency will have 10,000 voters in Glasgow at the next general election. When I sought to intervene earlier, he was talking about food, and he is absolutely right that food inflation over the last few years has been horrendous, particularly for staples: pasta is up 31%, bread is up 33%, and even beans are up 66%. Even if someone is skint and making beans on toast, it is up more than 50% from three years ago. We have seen cost controls proposed by Governments throughout Europe, and yet we have seen this Government have a cosy fireside chat with supermarkets, and no action. Does my hon. Friend think that is acceptable?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is spot on. We hear this far too often. I know that great work is being done in local food banks and the pantry network as well, but food poverty continues to be a massive concern. There are a number of things that can be done there. We in the SNP have been consistent in our calls to the Government to introduce practical measures to alleviate the financial pressure facing households. Mortgage interest tax relief should be introduced, the £400 energy bill guarantee scheme should be reintroduced, and action should be taken to tackle soaring food prices, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North. However, I will not hold my breath over the last call. Only a few days ago we saw the amusing spectacle of a Conservative Member, the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry), frothing with outrage, filming a video outside Tesco, complaining of Easter eggs on the shelf. Bear in mind the context that, when the SNO called for action on food prices, we were accused of perpetuating communism in the House of Commons.

The reality for many of my constituents is that they are struggling to put food, let alone hot food, on their kitchen tables. I strongly urge Members to muster a

[David Linden]

modicum of empathy before complaining about trivial matters, such as supermarkets displaying Easter chocolate. As always, I am left wondering how things might be different in an independent Scotland, where politicians would understand and empathise with the reality that households face, rather than out-of-touch Westminster Governments.

While the Scottish Government and local authorities take action with one hand tied behind their backs, we see the direct impact of an inadequate social security system from Westminster, and an inadequate energy policy during this crisis, over both of which the British Government have control. Instead, the British Government sit firmly on their hands, ignoring SNP calls to tackle the cost of living crisis, which continues to plague all our constituents' bank balances.

The UK social security system, once hailed as a safety net for those who needed it, now resembles nothing more than a frayed rope, unable to bear the weight of the individuals who rely on it as a lifeline. Despite that, I remain hopeful for the future, because in November the Scottish Government published a paper on social security in an independent Scotland, outlining bold and ambitious plans to build a fairer, more just system that places fairness and equality at its heart. That includes scrapping the two-child cap and bedroom tax, removing the benefit cap, ending the cruel sanctions regime and deductions scheme, ending the young parent penalty in universal credit, and doing more to encourage uptake of full entitlement. Those are all outlined in the prospectus, which offers hope to the most vulnerable in our communities.

Unfortunately, for as long as the majority of decisions about Scotland are made in this royal palace by a Government we did not elect, we are at the mercy of a Westminster establishment, which at best can be described only as asleep at the wheel, failing families when they need the Government most.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): We are expecting a vote shortly, but I think there is time for the Minister. I call the Minister.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate on the cost of living in Scotland. The United Kingdom Government fully recognise the challenges and pressures facing households due to the higher cost of living. We are have taken decisive action to protect struggling families, with the largest support package in Europe.

In total, Government support across the UK to help households with higher bills has been worth £104 billion, an average of £3,700 per household, including households in Glasgow and across Scotland. The UK Government reacted quickly to protect energy consumers, maintain continuity of supply and stabilise the markets, when unprecedented increases in wholesale energy costs from mid-2021 caused significant volatility in energy retail markets. The energy price guarantee and the energy bill support scheme covered around half of a typical household energy bill over winter 2022, and by the end of June 2023, had saved a typical household around £1,500. Businesses across the UK have also received support through the energy bill relief scheme and the energy bills discount scheme.

Wholesale energy prices have now significantly fallen, with the average annualised household energy bill in quarter four of 2023 falling from EPG level of £2,500 in 2022, to £1,834 in 2023, under the Ofgem price cap. The price cap will increase by 5% to £1,928 in the first quarter of 2024, and is expected to fall back to around £1,800 for the rest of 2024.

Hon. Members will be aware that tackling high inflation remains a core priority for the Prime Minister and the UK Government. At its peak, inflation was 11.1%, and that hit families and businesses alike. We remain committed to the challenge, and the latest Office for National Statistics data shows that we have reduced inflation to 3.9%, which is good news for everyone in Scotland and across the UK. When inflation is low, it helps people and businesses to better plan their spending and investments. In turn, that helps the economy to grow by creating jobs and prosperity, which is a key priority for the Government.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): So many of my constituents are concerned about the cost of living and how they are going to afford it. Age Scotland says that 50% of people over 50 in Scotland have seen their standard of living decrease. Does the Minister agree that the answer is not constitutional change, but a change of Government?

John Lamont: The hon. Member will have heard about the measures that the UK Government have put in place to support all households with the rising cost of living, including the older groups that she identifies. As Members of Parliament, we all recognise the challenges that our constituents face with rising bills, but what they do not need is the reopening of the constitutional debate in Scotland. They do not need independence for Scotland; they want both of Scotland's Governments to focus on the challenges that households face not just in her constituency in Edinburgh or in my constituency in the borders, but across Scotland.

This Government passionately believe that the best way to improve living standards in the long term is to get more people into higher-paid jobs, which is why it is so encouraging to see the employment rates in Scotland. The number of payrolled employees in Scotland hit a record high of 2.45 million in November 2023, and the unemployment rate remains below the UK average. This includes the area represented by the hon. Member for Glasgow East, Glasgow city, where the number of people in employment has increased by nearly 18,000 payrolled employees since the start of the pandemic to a new record high of over 275,000.

It is not just about getting people into work, but about ensuring that it pays to work. That is why the Government will increase the national living wage by 9.8% to £11.44 an hour and increase the national minimum wage by 14.8% to £8.60 an hour, benefiting around 200,000 people in Scotland. However, we recognise that short-term cost of living pressures remain and particularly impact on vulnerable groups. In addition to UK-wide support for all households, the Government have deployed specific, targeted financial support and tailored interventions

to help those most in need. For example, around 680,000 low-income and vulnerable households in Scotland have received additional support through the cost of living payment scheme, with millions more households also benefiting in other parts of the country.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

John Lamont: As you have already pointed out, Ms Vaz, we are expecting votes shortly. I am keen to cover the key points in response to the points already made during the debate, so I am not going to give way.

In the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow East, around 21,200 means-tested cost of living payments have been made to date, with about 18,200 individuals already eligible for disability payments. Nearly 12 million pensioners across the UK have received additional financial support of up to £600 to heat their homes over the winter. We are also supporting pensioners by maintaining the triple lock. The basic state pension, new state pension and pension credit standard minimum guarantee will be uprated in April 2024 by 8.5%, in line with the average earnings growth between May and June 2023[1]. We have also introduced new local housing allowance rates, which will come into force in April this year. That will help to boost those who are most in need, with more than 92,000 households in Scotland £800 better off per year as a result.

Overcoming the cost of living pressures facing our communities requires collective action from us all in Government, which is why we have provided the Scottish Government with the necessary levers to play their part. The UK Government have topped up the record block grant from the previous spending review with an additional £2.4 billion as a result of the decisions taken across three fiscal events. The Scottish Government receive about 25% more per person than equivalent UK Government spending in other parts of the United Kingdom, and that translates into about £8.5 billion more per year on average. The renewed Scottish fiscal framework, as agreed by both Governments, provides the Scottish Government with greater certainty and enhanced budget management flexibility to meet the expectations of devolved public services and local communities.

It is also important for us to remember the tools the Scottish Government have at their disposal under the devolution settlement. As well as control over local taxes and most rates and thresholds of income tax, the Scottish Government have responsibility for stamp duty land tax and landfill tax. About a third of their budget is self-funded, so they have significant control over their income generation and spending. Although this is a matter for the Scottish Government, I encourage them to use the tools and levers at their disposal to complement the existing cost of living support delivered by this United Kingdom Government.

I am confident that the measures that the UK Government have put in place have helped millions of people across the length and breadth of this country, including in Scotland, to deal with the cost of living pressures—*[Interruption.]* I have no idea why SNP Members find this so funny. My constituents are feeling the cost of living crisis, and yet SNP Members come here, barrack Government Members and laugh at a subject that is very difficult for many households in the Scottish Borders and, indeed, across Scotland.

We cannot be complacent, which is why this Government remain vigilant to any future challenges that risk diminishing household budgets. As the Prime Minister said, inflation is the real cause behind the increasing living costs, and our responsible plan for controlling inflation and reducing debt is working.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

1.*[Official Report, 15 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 8MC.]*

Great Western Main Line

4.30 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a great pleasure to start the new year by talking about something that this Parliament helped to create and establish all those years ago. We approved the legislation that enabled private railways such as Brunel's Great Western to exist and to flourish. However, we have not had much debate recently about what has effectively been a creeping nationalisation since the pandemic. Recent rhetoric has not really recognised the success of the private railways that were created, or indeed the success of the privatisation of those railways more recently, which led to a 107% increase in passenger journeys, a 32% increase in passenger services, and a 145% increase in passenger revenue. At the moment, the situation is that the Department for Transport is really in control of the railway operators, including Great Western, and His Majesty's Treasury takes the risk, with passenger frustration over the last few months increasing during a long period of train driver strikes.

But let me start at the beginning. All of us here share being part of the Great Western geography; we are linked by our constituencies to Paddington station, that railway cathedral graced by statues of the founding genius, Isambard Kingdom Brunel—what a name—Paddington bear, and a soldier in the trenches, symbolic of the 3,312 employees of Great Western who died in two world wars. We surely all recognise the engineering achievements of the Box tunnel, or even Kemble tunnel, the architecture of Bristol Temple Meads, and the social vision of the Great Western Railway's village in Swindon, which led to the opening of the main line from Paddington to Bristol in 1841, and the fastest trains, such as the Flying Truro, which reached 100 miles an hour 30 years before the Flying Scotsman—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes for a Division.

4.32 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.50 pm

On resuming—

Richard Graham: As I was saying, the network of Great Western Railway today stretches from Pembroke Dock to Falmouth Docks, from Portsmouth to Gatwick and to Hereford. The GWR railway network now runs more than 1,600 services a day, with more than 80 million passenger journeys. That, of course, is significantly down on the pre-covid figure, which was almost 100 million.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing today's debate. I recently met the GWR managing director Mark Hopwood and his team because many of my Slough constituents were angered and frustrated by the reduction in the number of fast trains going to and from Slough. Given that Slough is a huge business hub, does the hon. Member agree that it is incumbent on the Government and GWR to ensure, for the benefit of the local, regional and national economy, that we have a large number of fast trains so that commuters can go to and fro? If he cannot comment on that Slough-related topic, does he agree that it is about time the Government built the western rail link to Heathrow, having committed to it more than a decade ago and given that it is the No. 1 infrastructure priority for the whole Thames Valley region?

Richard Graham: The hon. Member touches on one of the themes of this debate: the importance of Members of Parliament working very closely with their railway operator, the Department for Transport and Network Rail to try to achieve the services that their constituents most value. I will not comment on the business of commuter traffic from Slough to Paddington—it is not my specialist area. On his second point, constituents all over Gloucestershire and Wiltshire would relish the opportunity provided by opening Great Western Railway services to Heathrow. I am sure the Minister will want to touch on that, and I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

Of course, there have been constant improvements to the network in recent times, although there have also been some real difficulties—as *The Sunday Times* focused on at Theale over the weekend—and colleagues will no doubt highlight those successes or failures. Since he cannot be with us, I highlight for my neighbour, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), the improved forecourt, interchange cycle hub and 70 additional car park spaces in his constituency that he and Great Western Railway have worked successfully on together. There is also the fourth platform at Bristol Parkway, the delivery of the MetroWest network, the new Portway park-and-ride station, and the new Ashley Down station coming soon. All of those are helpful in the west country. In all this, the Department has played its part, as have successive Ministers, including this one, who is a great supporter and champion of railways, which is important.

Inevitably, I would like to highlight what has been achieved in Gloucester since 2010. Gloucester railway station is an extraordinary animal. It has the longest platform in the country, but it is on a spur off the main line between Birmingham and Bristol, and therefore there has always been a lot to do. Since 2010, we have managed a significant number of improvements, including a covered walkway between platforms 2 and 1, the new waiting rooms, and a new accessible station footbridge with the lifts and eventually the canopy. That also led to a remodelled station booking office, and we have introduced additional car parking on the south side of the station, which was a major business. It is difficult to transfer an asset from the Ministry of Justice to the city council—that took about three years, but we got there eventually.

The new hourly direct services between Gloucester and Paddington also benefit all my colleagues in Gloucester. The new pay-as-you-go smartcard has been helpful in a number of ways not originally anticipated, particularly when the station underpass has been closed to access. Work is going on as we speak to deliver further improvements, particularly on the underpass, which is a sensitive bit of infrastructure that links the hospital to the city centre and which Great Western has gallantly taken on. There will also be a big improvement in the electric vehicle charging stations, the forecourts, bus services and so on.

I want to highlight for the Minister that although the journey time to Paddington has been reduced by 15 minutes since electrification, there is an opportunity to increase the speed of the services simply by renegotiating how long the trains stop at Gloucester. That time is currently 10 minutes, to allow the driver to walk from one end of the train to the other, but even at a slow amble that journey could not possibly take more than a minute and a half.

It is also important to recognise some of GWR's community contribution and community projects, such as the Getaway project for independent rail travel. Its biggest contribution to community, however, comes from station staff, who are coping, calming and carrying on. When strikes happen, no one shouts at a train driver, because they are not there. It is Steve, Mike, Alan, Naomi and all their colleagues who cop it at Gloucester and all the other stations along the line. They deal with the drunks, the drugs and even the MP who left his bag on the train. I salute them all.

This debate has to touch on problems as well. I will highlight four. The first is the continuing strikes by train drivers, which damage trust and confidence, and put a lot of strain on other Great Western Railway employees. The second is the extraordinary feature that train drivers do not have to work on a Sunday. I cannot think of any other transport system—I was an airline manager once—where the driver or pilot would be allowed to decide whether they rock up on a Sunday. That ruins many weekends for families.

The third problem is the business of Network Rail's infrastructure, particularly the failures in the Thames valley. It is easy to criticise Network Rail, but there are some real problems and anything the Department can do to improve the infrastructure in the Thames valley will make a huge difference to all of us. The last problem is the taxpayer subsidy. We must let managers manage and civil servants hold them to account. That is the only way in which we will get the railway operators to innovate and to continue to improve with better rolling stock and low-carbon operations that support travellers and help families and growth.

All those things matter. There are opportunities for big projects ahead. The Filton Bank electrification promoted by the western gateway to electrify and speed up journeys between Bristol and Birmingham in particular would be a very good project for the DFT to support. Just before coming into this Chamber, I heard from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) that Great Western Railway has decided to open the line from Swindon to Oxford, which will have a lot of advantages for many travellers.

I see the opportunities and the improvements at Gloucester station that have happened and are happening. I will certainly continue to work closely on all those, because ultimately, railway stations and railway operations are in danger of being an orphan. They are not well managed by county councils. It is up to us here both to hold them to account and to encourage them to innovate. I hope that I and all my colleagues in Gloucestershire and elsewhere will continue to work closely with Great Western Railway to achieve the necessary improvements.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I expect to call the Opposition spokesperson at 5.31 pm, the Minister at 5.36 pm and Richard Graham to wind up at 5.46 pm, and that the debate will end at 5.48 pm.

4.59 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing this debate. As it states in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I am a member of the GWR stakeholder advisory board. I represent the Thames Valley on that board.

I want to pick up the point that my hon. Friend made about the advantages we saw from privatisation of the railways. In my experience of dealing with companies covering services to my constituency—to Maidenhead, to Twyford, and the branch lines to Wargrave, Furze Platt and Cookham—there have been significant improvements when the companies are private and we have been able to work with them to improve railway services. The companies—predominantly GWR, recently—understand the importance of providing for the needs of customers. That is why I echo my hon. Friend's comment that it is important that the Government examine the current situation, because there is a strange dichotomy between the cost risk taken by the Department for Transport and the revenue risk taken by the Treasury. The two need to be brought together if decent decisions are going to be made about the services that will be provided to customers.

Sadly, despite my overall experience of working with GWR, I have to say that in the last month, the experience of my constituents has not been good. I want to read out the problems that they have experienced. On 7 and 8 December, there was damage to overhead electrical wires, with delays and cancellations between London Paddington and Reading. On 9 December, industrial action resulted in delays and cancellations. On 10 December, damage to the overhead electric wires between Slough and London Paddington caused delays and cancellations. On 11 December, a points failure in the Slough area resulted in delays and cancellations. On 13 December, defective track between London Paddington and Reading meant trains having to run at reduced speed on some lines. On 14 December, due to a fault with the signalling system between Paddington and Heathrow and between Heathrow terminal 5 and Reading, some lines were blocked. On 15 December, due to a fault with the signalling system between London Paddington and Reading, all lines were blocked. The lines were closed on 24, 25, 26 and 27 December because of work at Old Oak Common. On 28 December, emergency services were dealing with an incident between London Paddington and Reading, and all lines were blocked.

On 2 January, an object was caught on the overhead electric wires. On 4 January, travel was disrupted when the police took control of the line and closed it because of an incident. On 5 January, there were disruptions from flooding. On 7 January, damage to the overhead electric wires between Paddington and Reading meant that some lines were blocked. On 8 January, urgent repairs to the track between Reading and London Paddington meant trains having to run at reduced speed. On 9 January—today—there was a speed restriction between Reading and London Paddington. Frankly, from the point of view of my constituents, this is not good enough.

What hon. Members and the Minister will have seen from this is that the vast majority of those incidents were about Network Rail and its response to problems with overhead wires and on the track. Just before Christmas,

[Mrs Theresa May]

I held a meeting with GWR and Network Rail. Everybody understands the issues, but the question—and what I will look for from the Minister—is whether we can ensure that we will get sufficient support from Network Rail to resolve these problems such that my constituents can continue to have the service they expect and deserve.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned the economic importance of Slough. Maidenhead is also an economically important place and is important to GWR in terms of the footfall from Maidenhead. My constituents need to know that they can rely on the train service. Sadly, with the way that Network Rail is behaving at the moment and how it has been dealing with the track and overhead lines, we are not seeing the service that they need.

I hope the Minister will be able to give me some confidence and comfort. We want to get people out of their cars and on to the railways. Sadly, if they see disruptions and cancellations, they will go back into their cars. That is not good for the planet—it is not good for any of us—so, Minister, over to you.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Members have roughly five minutes. If they stick to that, everyone should get in.

5.4 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I congratulate my near neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing this important debate. I have regular contact with the Rail Minister, who is absolutely excellent.

I will just run through some of the projects we have locally. We are trying to reopen the Bristol Road Stonehouse line, which was closed under the Beeching cuts, to make sure that we have access into Bristol. This is a 25-year dream of my constituents. I grasped it, and we managed to get investment from Government to do a proper feasibility study. I am waiting for the Minister and Government to give us information about the next stage for the outline business case. I understood that it was going to come before Christmas, so it will be helpful for my constituents to hear a little more about that. Stonehouse Town Council is working particularly hard on that.

On step-free access at Stroud railway station, there is a lasting image—a picture is better than a thousand words—of me dragging up a toddler, a buggy and trying to balance a baby and all sorts of different things. I have huge sympathy with people who tell me that they are struggling to get around the station, or are disabled, have luggage or are elderly. We are really hoping to be in the Access for All pitch. I am just putting that underneath the Minister's nose.

On the Cam and Dursley station, I have made a pitch, speaking to GWR and others about the reality. It is a really popular station, and we have a lot of homes being built around the area. We think there needs to be improved shelters for rain and all weathers, and I know that some constituents would like to see the frequency of services increased as we go along.

I do want to echo colleagues' comments about GWR. They may disagree, because I know I am a total pest about the railway on behalf of my constituents, but I feel I have a good relationship with the organisation, and indeed Network Rail. I have had cause to contact them many times, sometimes just for run-of-the-mill, day-to-day things, but also sometimes on sad occasions, when there have been deaths on the lines. We have had good responses, and they are responsive, so I am pleased about that.

I do want to mention costs. Constituents of Stroud are talking to me about the difference between the cost of travelling from Stroud to London and other lines. At the moment, a single peak one-way fare is £95. That is absolutely prohibitive for people who want to travel to work. I know many more people are working at home, but there should be more choice. For off-peak it goes down to £46, then down to £33 at 10.30 am. A ticket on the Worcester to London line, which is a longer journey, at 7 am—when I had my £95 ticket for—costs £50. I understand that there are historic boundaries drawn up for Network Rail, and I have written to the Minister, who has kindly written back and talked to me about writing to the Rail Delivery Group, but I do think these historic boundaries and the unfairness that is built in for my constituents do need to be looked at.

One gentleman wrote to me:

"I'm really concerned by crippling rail costs; it's proving more and more difficult for me as a freelancer to be able to commute into London because the costs are just astronomical. If areas such as ours aren't going to be cut off from the rest of the country, a cheaper rail network is vital. FGW could operate within the rail network allowing people like me to take advantage of a rail network card that would greatly improve the costs for rail fares within the south of England. Currently, this is only reserved as far as Reading".

It does not stretch to us, so I urge the Minister to have a look at that, and I urge all of the companies to do so, too. If it is prohibitive to get on the trains, we will lose it as a service and it will become the preserve of the rich. That absolutely should not be the case.

5.8 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on bringing forward this debate. I represent Truro and Falmouth, which is in the heart of Cornwall, so I have the opportunity to experience the rail network myself on a weekly basis, as I often go all the way from Paddington back to my constituency. My constituents and I all have tales of unreliability on GWR's longer-haul services. My inbox has received several complaints from those who have to commute out of Cornwall for work and from plenty of students who go to and from Penryn back to their families each term. Any additional support we can give to these rail lines would be appreciated.

However, it is important to acknowledge the improvements that have been made to our railways since 2019. I always try to make this point to remind our really talented students at the University of Exeter and Falmouth University that their journeys today are actually an awful lot better than they were about five, 10 or 15 years ago. It just would not have been practical for many of them to come and enjoy being a student in my constituency at all.

Since May 2019, we have had a half-hourly service between Plymouth and Penzance, which has greatly boosted passenger numbers and had a positive impact on the Cornish economy. GWR has also worked to

improve reliability with its new rolling stock of inter-city express trains. There is also the Night Riviera Sleeper service, which I have used many times. The sleeper lounge at Truro station in my constituency has encouraged more people to travel to London by train rather than plane. We have seen an exponential rise in passengers since covid. Many people have now moved to Cornwall and can commute to London for a couple of days a week using the Riviera service. I believe it is out of service for refurbishment at the moment, but it is very popular.

I know that my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), will come on to this in greater detail, but I am proud that the Government are working with Cornwall Council, and its delivery partners GWR and Network Rail, to build the Mid Cornwall Metro. It will do exactly what it says on the tin: ensure that people can commute from Newquay via Par and Truro down to Falmouth, so that students do not have to live close to the university; we can all spread out and enjoy both coasts. We will see £50 million of levelling-up funding injected directly into Cornwall's rail links. Hopefully, we can expect to see that up and running in 2025-26.

Our communities in Truro and Falmouth are incredibly mixed, with a large number of car owners. It is incumbent on the railways to recognise that we are dualling the A30 all the way through my constituency. That means that at the moment, with the service unreliability that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) has just set out, more people will choose to use their cars, which is not the direction of travel that we want. The dualling project will be completed early spring, and we want to ensure that the railways remain competitive. Getting the Mid Cornwall Metro over the line will transform connectivity for the groups—students, tourists and communities alike—who are most reliant on public transport, and hopefully alleviate pressure on parking in our town centres, particularly during the summer months.

I will not go on for too long, but changing our infrastructure for the better and levelling up our communities in the south-west is always going to take time. However, if we do not do it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) said, we will get cut off. The sheer amount of investment from the Government, Cornwall Council and Network Rail into the railway lines in the south-west has given us a real leg-up in the last few years. It is our job now to continue to work with those partners to keep the current projects on track, and to promote other value-for-money schemes that can help our towns and villages get that little bit closer. We are very precarious, and if we do not keep investing, it is easy for Cornwall to fall off the map.

5.12 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on bringing the debate to this Chamber. I will concentrate on green transport because I am the climate change spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats. Talking about transport and climate change together is what I always do. To meet our net zero targets, we must make it easier to travel by train. Rail should be a lifeline for our communities that connects every part of the country through green public transport.

Before I discuss issues with our rail lines, I will mention that in November, I joined members of the Bath community and representatives from the armed forces and emergency services at Bath Spa station to hand over poppy wreaths, which were transported by train to the war memorial at Paddington station. The "poppy trains" began during covid lockdowns when local memorial ceremonies were not always possible. The initiative has been so well supported that GWR has now made it an annual tradition. It allows those who cannot make a long journey to London to be part of the commemoration, and it shows the benefits that the railway can bring to communities well beyond our regular services. I commend GWR for that wonderful event, and I echo that it is important for all of us as MPs to work well and have good working relationships with GWR. I am looking forward to doing so in the future.

However, public confidence in the railways and our net zero targets are linked. Transport is the larger emitting sector in the UK. Rail produces over 70% fewer carbon dioxide omissions than the equivalent road journeys, yet the current state of our railways is having the opposite effect because people have been dissatisfied with the service for a very long time.

I regularly use the train from Bath to London on Sundays, and there is not a single journey where there is not an issue. It affects anybody who uses the railway to get to work. The number of delay repay claims for GWR train journeys more than doubled between November 2022 and November 2023, and passenger rail performance is on the decline. Over 40% of trains were not on time between January and June last year. I hear constantly from rightfully angry constituents whose trains are late or cancelled, and the constant disruption impacts on people's daily lives. Why should people feel confident about using the railway if every journey is a gamble? As we have already heard today, if people cannot rely on the railway, they will go and use other forms of transport, particularly their cars.

This debate comes as the Government oversees the largest increase in rail fares for a generation. The UK already has some of the highest rail fares in Europe, and fares are still set to rise by nearly 5% in March. The public are paying more for less on our rail network, and commuters are particularly affected. The short journey between Bath and Bristol was previously the most expensive rail journey per mile in the world, and Ministers cannot continue to turn a blind eye to these issues. I recognise that a lot of what we are talking about this afternoon is not just GWR's problem, but a Government problem, and we have the Minister here to answer some of our concerns.

Ticketing is also complicated. Last year, GWR charged £46 for a peak return from Bath to London on 17 November. For the same journey on 30 November, the cost shot up to £94—more than double. We need a fares and ticketing system that makes taking the train simpler and more affordable, and I hope that we can get some answers from the Minister this afternoon. We in Bath are lucky to welcome so many foreign visitors, but it can be particularly confusing for tourists to use unfamiliar apps or ticket machines, and it needs to be a lot easier for them.

We also need to make our trains greener, and electrifying our railways is an essential step. I know that this is not GWR's problem; it is basically about having a commitment

[Wera Hobhouse]

from the Government, and I would like to hear more on that. However, the overall pace of electrification is lagging. Bath has a big air pollution problem. The electrification of the line through Bath has been on hold for years, and dirty diesel trains are still going through the city. Air pollution kills. Not getting on with electrification is a complete dereliction of duty not just to our net zero plans, but to public health.

The Treasury blocked a £30 billion plan to electrify Britain's railways over the next 30 years. I have an ally in GWR who wants to see that happen. The Government said that Great British Railways would produce a 30-year plan to electrify the railways. However, that organisation is not expected to be fully up and running until later in the year at the earliest. I would like to know about the plans to finally establish Great British Railways, which has had cross-party support. Why the delay?

Strong public transport will take us to net zero and connect our country. Passengers deserve to feel confident in their railways, and people need access to clean, green and affordable trains. Only then will we build the sustainable, modern and affordable railway that we are all looking forward to.

5.18 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing the debate.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Great Western main line to Cornwall. It is one of our absolutely critical transport links to the rest of the country, and I regularly travel to and fro London on it. Overall, the service is very good, although I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) about some of the problems over the last month or so. Many constituents have been in touch with me about that, and I have experienced the unreliability myself. However, we have seen significant investment in the railway in Cornwall in recent years, particularly the upgrade to a modern signalling system, which has enabled us to increase capacity on the train line. That has resulted in the new half-hourly trains between Plymouth and Penzance, which have been really welcomed and greatly used. Passenger numbers have grown as a result.

GWR also operates the Night Riviera Sleeper that, again, is really important to the Cornish economy, enabling people to travel overnight for work and for business. I know there have been questions over its future recently, and I put on the record just how important that service is to Cornwall; we really must do everything we can to maintain it.

We have seen some great investment, but there is still more to do. The one thing constituents often raise with me is that they would like to see better and more reliable mobile and wi-fi signals on the train to enable them to work. If we could do more to improve the reliability of the wi-fi signal particularly, that would be very welcome.

In the time I have left, I want to refer to the significant and exciting Mid Cornwall Metro project, which I have been working on since 2018. It will connect the middle part of Cornwall: from Newquay, through Par, St Austell, Truro and down into Falmouth. It will use the capacity on the existing main line, but will also utilise the two branch lines between Newquay and Falmouth to connect four of the biggest towns in Cornwall. Around a third of the Cornish population will be connected, offering direct trains from Newquay right through to Falmouth. About 50% of the economic activity of Cornwall will be able to utilise this line.

It is a really exciting opportunity that will see investment into Newquay itself: a second platform will be built that will open up more investment to improve that part of the town, and that will be really welcome. One of the things most exciting to me is the linking up of many of the smaller villages through what we in Mid Cornwall call the clay country—the china clay villages—with the four biggest towns in Mid Cornwall, and the opportunities that will bring for education, training and work, particularly to young people who do not have a car. I can imagine a young person living in the village of Roche being able to get to Falmouth to go to university, or an apprenticeship at the docks there, or being able to get to Truro for a job. This will open up such opportunity for young people, and that is what excites me about this project.

I know we are close to being able to announce the final funding agreement, and I ask the Minister to do all he can to make sure that the announcement comes forward as quickly as possible, because I know that GWR and Network Rail are desperate to start work. They want to start work next month so that we can deliver this project by 2025. I ask him to do all he can just to get that final push, so we are able to make that announcement. I know he came down to Cornwall last year, but perhaps he would like to come to see work begin on this new project. I genuinely believe it is a really exciting opportunity to improve the rail connectivity through Cornwall, and all the benefits that will bring.

Finally, I want to place on record my thanks to the Minister, the Department for Transport, Network Rail, GWR and Cornwall Council—we have all worked incredibly well together. It has been difficult at times, but the amount of work and collaboration that has gone on to get us to this point has been a real example of working together for the good of Cornwall. Thank you to everyone who has been involved, and I look forward to that positive announcement as soon as possible.

5.23 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to contribute to this debate, Ms Vaz. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), a constituency neighbour, for securing this debate. I am glad to see that Gloucestershire is extremely well represented in this debate—the premier county well represented.

The Great Western main line serves two directions in my constituency: it serves the north Cotswold line from Oxford to Hereford via Moreton-in-Marsh, and it also serves the south Cotswold line from Kemble, through my constituency and through my neighbour's constituency, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), eventually to Swindon with some direct trains to Paddington. Rail travel did drop over covid, but it is coming back quite nicely now. I therefore welcome the Government's investment of £5 billion into the Great Western route, including £2.8 billion to continue improvements on routes, as passengers return to travelling by train in their millions.

The service provided by train lines and train stations is important. I welcomed the news that the Government have scrapped their proposals to close all ticket offices; I received a considerable number of objections from constituents to this proposal. More and more people these days do use websites and apps to plan and book their journeys, but having someone who is able to help on the platforms and at ticket office can often make a huge difference to a journey, especially for elderly constituents and those with additional needs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester alluded to, we are trying to encourage more people to use trains where they can. Many have no choice: only one in four of our under-21s and fewer than two thirds of our under-30s have a driving licence. For those reliant on the Great Western line for work, school, hospital and appointments, the reliability of the service is essential. Since the end of the pandemic, regrettably, train cancellations have been at the highest level since records began 12 years ago. More than 30% of trains were cancelled late last year.

The performance and reliability data from National Rail, the independent website that automatically processes data from the rail network and the Association of Train Operating Companies, shows the following: 90% of trains were on time in 2017, compared with 78.8% last month; 8% were late in 2017, compared with 11.3% last month; and—the worst statistic—just 2% were very late or cancelled in 2017, compared with 9.9% last month. That shows a significant deterioration.

I have to tell the Rail Minister that up until recently I always regarded GWR's service as being among the best, but in the last month or so it seems to have deteriorated significantly. If one relies on the railway to get to an appointment, it is really quite a difficult thing for it to be late or cancelled. Problems on the Great Western line have included extremely delayed or cancelled trains due to flooding, signalling issues, trains waiting at Reading station, which have caused issues further up the line, and a broken rail crossing. We have heard all that in the debate. That should have been avoided by a proper preventive maintenance programme. They surely ought to be fairly easy issues to fix. A particularly easy issue to fix is that Kemble station has a Rolls-Royce of a waiting room and Rolls-Royce facilities, but they are permanently closed. That causes annoyance to my constituents.

The rail line dualling that I initiated some years ago on both Kemble to Swindon and at Moreton-in-Marsh cut journey times significantly. If we could resurrect proposals to dual more of the railway from Oxford to Hereford, we could cut the journey time considerably.

Finally, I praise the staff, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester did. In particular, the staff at Kemble are delightful. One of Kemble's delightful services is the wonderful coffee and buns that can be purchased there. I congratulate the lady there, who is incredibly nice, always reliable and always there. That makes rail travel a great deal more pleasant.

Thank you, Ms Vaz, for allowing me to participate in the debate. I hope that the Rail Minister will be able to give GWR a bit of a poke, so that we can get the poor service of the last month greatly improved.

5.27 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for opening this important debate. As he said, the Great Western main line, engineered by Brunel nearly 200 years ago, continues to play a vital role in linking towns and communities, spurring economic growth and connecting our country.

This has been a good-spirited debate, with speeches and interventions of note on both sides of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) never misses an opportunity to speak up for his constituents and rail passengers, and I thank him for his tireless work in trying to improve connectivity between the south-west and Heathrow airport. A number of hon. and right hon. Members have raised a number of issues with regard to the cancellation of services and the delays affecting their constituents, and I thank them for that. It is clear that a key theme of the debate is giving passengers confidence in the reliability of services.

Of course, this is a very timely debate, given the disruption that we have seen on the line of late. It was caused most recently by a broken rail crossing and damaged overhead electric cables between Reading and Paddington. Perhaps more worryingly, there were four incidents of damaged rail found on the Great Western line within just eight days in November. There has been a flurry of incidents that raise concerns about whether enough is being done to ensure that our rail infrastructure is fit not only for the future but for the present.

To add to those concerns, last summer a Network Rail presentation leaked to *The Independent* revealed that current funding would not let Network Rail operate, maintain and renew its tracks, bridges and earthworks infrastructure. That leaked presentation said that there will be fewer repairs over the next five years and that there could be more obstructions that cause delays and accidents due to an inability to clear them. At a time of record cancellations and delays, as well as rising fares, that is the last thing that passengers deserve to hear.

Across the country in the 12 months up to September 2023, just two in three trains were arriving at their station stops on time. Those poor performance figures are no different from those of the Great Western main line: just 61.7% stops at Great Western railway stations arrived on time. I believe that that lack of reliability is driving people away from the railways at a time when we should be encouraging their use.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Stephen Morgan: I am conscious of time, so I will carry on.

A couple of months ago, I sat in on a focus group made up of young men living near Exeter who were being asked about their use of public transport. It was disappointing but sadly not surprising to hear that they rarely use rail services, as they view them as being too unreliable and too expensive. They said that they were surprised when their train arrived on time, and that longer journeys were impossible to plan because they could not account for the expected length of delays.

[Stephen Morgan]

As we look to the future, it is vital that the Great Western main line continues to evolve and improve. Key to that is making it fit for the net zero Britain of the future, but sadly successive Conservative Governments since 2010 have failed to deliver on that. According to the Government's own figures, the 2013 cost estimate for the electrification of the 221 miles of the Great Western main line between Heathrow Junction station and Cardiff was £1.7 billion. The work, which was due to be completed in 2017, was part-finished in 2020 at a cost of £2.8 billion—a whopping £1.1 billion over budget—at a much reduced scope, with the removal of the 45 miles between Cardiff and Swansea, the 30 miles between Chippenham and Bristol Temple Meads via Bath, and the five miles between Bristol Parkway and Bristol Temple Meads.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Will the hon. Member give way?

Stephen Morgan: I will carry on, because I am conscious of time.

As we know, coming in over budget and over time, and only partly delivered, has become the norm for rail infrastructure projects under this Government.

We need to ask why Britain has fallen so far behind other European countries when it comes to getting things built. The Government seem to be of the view that the country that created the railways can no longer build them; that other countries can do it, but not us. Labour wholeheartedly rejects that view. We are working with local leaders, mayors, businesses and unions. Labour in government will deliver a credible and transformative programme of rail transport infrastructure by replacing the current Victorian-era infrastructure, and building connectivity and capacity to improve performance, which will reduce congestion and put our railways back on track.

It is clear that there are many issues affecting the Great Western main line. I believe they are emblematic of the issues that are affecting our wider rail network. Therefore, I hope that the Minister will outline what steps he is taking to tackle the chronic delays and cancellations on the line—we have heard about that from many Members this evening—and to confirm whether he agrees with the Network Rail presentation that said that, over the last five years, there were fewer repairs, which led to even more delays for passengers. I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks and I would like, once again, to thank the hon. Member for Gloucester for securing this important debate.

5.33 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for securing this important debate on the future of the Great Western main line and for his engaging and positive speech this afternoon. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions; if I do not touch on the matters that they asked me about, I will be sure to write to each and every one of them to ensure that they get a full response.

I also applaud my hon. Friend's positive work campaigning to improve transport infrastructure for his constituents in Gloucester. Like him, this Government are committed to supporting investment in rail. The commitment to the vital role of the railway in connecting communities and supporting the economy is something that we share.

The last decade has seen major transformation across the Wales and western region, culminating in May 2023 in the full roll-out of the Elizabeth line services, a once-in-a-generation investment that now carries one in six rail passengers. However, there is now significant pressure on the Thames valley network and indeed the entire Great Western Railway network, where there are competing demands from commuter traffic, airport passengers, long-distance leisure passengers and freight users.

Performance on the Great Western main line has not been good enough in recent times. Too often, passengers are unable to complete their journey as planned. Hundreds of passengers were caught up in disruption at London Paddington when the overhead lines failed in early December, as many hon. Members mentioned, which forced many members of the public to stay in hotels or make complex alternative travel arrangements.

Last Thursday, flooding and a tragic incident in Pangbourne meant that passengers from London and Reading could not travel further west, once again leaving passengers no option but to stay overnight in Reading. Since then, the railway has seen further disruptions, including an electric line failure on the overheads on Sunday and two track defects yesterday and today, which were mentioned in the debate. Last year, the closure of Nuneham viaduct caused major disruption to passengers in Oxford and the Cotswolds for a prolonged period. This is not good enough. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) asked whether there will be Government support. That will be the case, and that will also be the case with regard to Network Rail.

Between October 2022 and 2023, 67% of delays were attributed to the asset and therefore to Network Rail matters. I am committed to improving performance in the western region. I recently met Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail—we meet regularly—to allow us both to reflect on some of the challenges. He is very straight and open about those challenges—we both are—and I have every confidence in Andrew and his team in their delivery of the required improvements. I am also meeting my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead and other members of the Great Western Railway stakeholder advisory board tomorrow.

Turning to performance, on 29 November, the Office of Rail and Road launched an investigation into poor train punctuality and reliability in the Network Rail Wales and western region, with particular focus on the Thames valley area, which affects all GWR services between London and Reading. Network Rail has committed to work with the Office of Rail and Road to identify causes and take steps to address them. The ORR's investigation will assess whether Network Rail is complying with its licence obligations in the Wales and western region. There have been several operational and personnel changes on the Network Rail western route in the last year, and I am confident that the new appointments will start to bear fruit. I thought it important to set that out. It demonstrates that we recognise the challenge and that we are going to do something about it.

The Government are investing and re-investing in the network. On my summer rail tour, I visited the south-west of England, and many of the right hon. and hon. Members present today. I had the opportunity to see at first hand the great work delivered as part of the south-west rail resilience programme to complete the £82 million sea wall that protects the coastal Dawlish rail route, which has brought the total investment on that project to £165 million. We have also reallocated funding from HS2 to ensure that the final phases of the programme can be delivered. I also spent time with the managing director of Great Western Railways, his staff and his inspiring apprentices from Oxford, as they joined me on that journey to Devon and Cornwall and all the way back again. As part of the MetroWest programme, the number of services between Bristol and Gloucester doubled to half hourly in May 2023. I thank the West of England Combined Authority, which has worked in partnership with Great Western Railway to make this possible.

Turning to matters in Gloucester, I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester was fundamental to initiating the multimillion pound redevelopment of Gloucester station. In addition to the Gloucester local enterprise partnership funding, this Government and GWR provided an additional £1.7 million to take the project forward, and we are committed to working with my hon. Friend to see what can be done to complete the redevelopment. He will be reassured to know that our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is also a Gloucestershire representative and therefore has an interest. My hon. Friend made a point about dwell time improvements at Gloucester station. I will investigate and get back to him on that.

In 2023, three new stations were opened on the GWR network, all supported by Government funding. Passengers in Reading, Exeter and Bristol have benefited from the new Reading Green Park, Marsh Barton, and Portway stations. In May 2023, GWR introduced 65 new services each week between London Paddington and Carmarthen, thereby strengthening connectivity between England and Wales.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister will know that in my part of the world, in west Wales, the bone of contention is that electrification stops in Cardiff. With the scrapping of HS2's northern leg, does that free up capital money to electrify to Swansea, and even beyond to Carmarthen and further west?

Huw Merriman: The projects have been listed in the Network North programme from the Prime Minister, but there is additional funding going to regions, which can then decide how they wish to spend monies. That actually applies to the Filton project mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester.

Let me turn to Cornwall, because it was put to me: will Cornwall fall off the map? Never will Cornwall fall off the GWR map or the map of this Government. The Government allocated £50 million of levelling-up funding for delivery of the Mid Cornwall Metro project, which my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) has worked hard on. The joint venture between Cornwall council, GWR and Network Rail will boost connectivity and the economy in all parts of Cornwall. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who has tirelessly promoted this project. Whether calling me on my phone or chasing me around Parliament, he never ceases to push this matter, and I am grateful to him for bringing everybody together. I will of course come down and visit him and I hope we will have something positive to announce. I can tell him that the Cornish riviera is also a priority for me.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester about the need for a truly seven-day railway, and the damage that strikes on the railway cause. Leisure travel at weekends is a huge growth area, and it is disappointing that ASLEF refuses to engage on this issue of having a seven-day railway. Indeed, with Sunday falling on 24 December and 31 December, I found a submission at the beginning of December requiring more money for the workforce if they were going to work Sundays, because Sunday is not part of the seven-day week. Now, we had to comply with that because tickets had been sold and British Transport police were concerned, but we cannot be barrelled over. We need a seven-day railway, and I am committed to delivering that.

I will visit my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) in Stonehouse. She and the town council have done a great job, and when I visit we will look at the business case, because there has been work inside the Department.

I will be perhaps a little more realistic with the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The UK taxpayer has invested £31 billion during and since the pandemic. Previously, money was put in by the train companies from the franchising process to the tune of a profit of £200 million for the UK taxpayer. We have to be realistic about the funding of the railway, and therefore fare increases, when we are asking the taxpayer to pay such a burden. It should also be noted that only half the fare increases that one would usually expect from inflation have been borne by passengers; the rest has fallen on the UK taxpayer. We have that balance.

To my shadow, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), I gently point out that more than 1,200 miles of railway line has been electrified between 2010 and 2023. I do call that investment in the railway, when I consider that during the 13 years when Labour were in government, it was just over 60 miles.

To wrap up, I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester can see the Government's ambition to improve journeys for passengers and freight users on the Great Western main line. I am grateful for the work that GWR does, and I recognise that the managing director shows an interest. He is here today, which tells us everything. I am grateful for the work done by Network Rail and for the work to come. I will personally be involved in bringing those matters together to give a better performance to the railway. Those running this railway, and that includes me, recognise that performance must improve. We are committed to ensuring that it does.

5.43 pm

Richard Graham: This has been a very useful debate. We have heard widespread enthusiasm for railways; recognition of the new services, such as those 174 extra Gloucester-Bristol services a week; reassurance that the Minister shares our views on Sunday services; recognition of the partnerships, perhaps particularly in Cornwall, that do happen between Great Western and other parts of the country; and of course, most importantly, a lot of frustration about reliability of services. I think we are

[Richard Graham]

all happy to hear the Minister's comments on performance and his commitment to improvement. We look forward to seeing that improvement in performance and reliability delivered during 2024, so that all our constituents can enjoy the pleasures of travelling by rail on Great Western Railway.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the Great Western main line.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 9 January 2024

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Long-Duration Electricity Storage: Consultation

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): Today I am announcing the next steps the Government are taking to create a policy framework to encourage investment in long-duration electricity storage. This delivers on commitments we have made in the British energy security strategy and "Powering Up Britain: Energy Security Plan".

The Government have today published a consultation which proposes a cap and floor investment framework to address the barriers to the deployment of long-duration electricity storage. The consultation seeks views on our approach, including the eligibility criteria for assessing applications, the design of the cap and floor mechanism and our proposed options for delivering the scheme.

Long-duration electricity storage technologies will be central to a secure, cost-effective and low-carbon energy system. External analysis indicates that deploying long-duration electricity storage could save billions of pounds for consumers, making sure that we reach net zero in a proportionate and pragmatic way.

Pumped hydro storage is the most mature example of long-duration energy storage. Novel technologies including hydrogen, liquid air and compressed air storage, are also emerging. The Government's £69 million longer-duration energy storage competition, part of the £1billion net zero innovation portfolio, is supporting the commercialisation of these technologies.

In "Powering Up Britain: Energy Security Plan", we committed to put in place an appropriate framework to enable investment in long-duration electricity storage which will contribute to balancing the electricity system. The consultation follows a call for evidence in 2021 to understand the barriers to the deployment of long-duration electricity storage.

A copy of the consultation will be deposited in the Library of the House.

[HCWS171]

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Equinor New Energy Ltd for the extension of two offshore wind farms with associated onshore electricity connections, located respectively 15.8 km and 26.5 km north of the Norfolk coast.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report, unless exercising the power to set a new deadline under section 107(3) of the Act. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Sheringham and Dudgeon extensions offshore wind farm projects application is 17 January 2024.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 17 April 2024 for deciding this application. This is to ensure that there is sufficient time for the Department to consider further information and to conduct any necessary consultation.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS170]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Diplomatic Passport Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): This statement updates the House on forthcoming changes in respect of the issue and use of diplomatic and official passports.

Diplomatic and official passports were first issued in 1994 to UK civil servants accredited, under the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations or the Vienna convention on consular relations, whilst on overseas postings at one of our diplomatic missions or consular posts. Their accompanying dependants also received them when the receiving state also agreed to accredit them. The intention was to clarify the holder's diplomatic status and remove scope for misunderstanding, while ensuring that the privileges and immunities of our accredited staff and their families were respected by their host state. Diplomatic and official passports have been issued on this basis ever since, with only a few case-by-case exceptions agreed, for example to allow their use on security grounds and in relation to countries operating restrictive visa regimes.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has recently conducted the first in-depth review of diplomatic and official passport policy, in the light particularly of the needs of modern diplomatic families, who reflect our increasingly diverse UK society and workforce, and the values we hold in respect of that diversity.

The findings of that departmental review recognised challenges faced by some families in certain countries and the practices of like-minded international partners, and argued for greater flexibility in the issue of diplomatic and official passports. Accordingly, while the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will maintain the fundamental link between a diplomatic or official passport and accreditation, the department will introduce some important exceptions, where accreditation by the receiving state will no longer be a prerequisite for issuing diplomatic or official passports, namely:

> all same-sex established partners and spouses accompanying an accredited civil servant on an overseas posting, whether the partner or spouse is accredited by the receiving state or not;

unmarried opposite-sex established partners accompanying an accredited civil servant on an overseas posting, again whether they are accredited or not.

These changes will ensure that all spouses and established partners of those accredited to serve the UK overseas will have the same access to diplomatic and official passports. This ensures that the issue of these UK passports will more closely reflect UK values, rather than being limited by the policy of the receiving state in respect of accreditation. Diplomatic and official passports remain travel documents and do not confer the privileges or immunities associated with accreditation under the Vienna conventions.

As a rule, Ministers and other parliamentarians will continue not to be eligible for diplomatic and official passports, reflecting the original controls and limitations stipulated at the time of their introduction. However, where Ministers are required to conduct Government business involving travel to a country operating a restrictive visa regime, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will consider whether issuing a diplomatic passport is necessary to facilitate that business.

These changes will be implemented with immediate effect.

[HCWS173]

Global Refugee Forum 2023

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I am pleased to inform the House about the outcomes of the second Global Refugee Forum (GRF), co-hosted by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Government of Switzerland in Geneva on 13 to 15 December 2023.

We are living in a time of unprecedented international challenges, ranging from conflict in Ukraine and the middle east to flooding and drought caused by climate change across parts of Africa. As a result, estimates suggest that the number of people forced to leave their homes has risen to over 110 million people this year. In recent years, we have seen countries rally around to support the growing number of refugees across the world. The UK Government believe that collective action is needed to meet these growing challenges.

Four years after the first GRF, over 4,000 representatives from member states, UN agencies, civil society, financial institutions, the private sector and over 300 refugee leaders came together in Geneva to mark progress and pledge further efforts to deliver the Global Compact on Refugees, signed by 181 member states in 2018. More than 10,000 individuals from 120 countries participated online.

I led the United Kingdom delegation. Representing a whole-of-society approach, our delegation included two refugee representatives, as well as UK and devolved Administration officials. Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Edinburgh held a number of productive meetings and attended a reception for representatives to highlight the UK's co-sponsorship of pledges on education and gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. Additionally, UK local authorities were represented by the Mayor of Bristol, in his capacity as part of the leadership of the Mayor's Migration Council.

During the forum, the international community collectively reaffirmed and pledged towards the four objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees: ease pressures on host countries; enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.

All these objectives are, of course, aligned to the UK's wider migration policies. We continue to regard the Global Compact on Refugees as the best framework for addressing rising global displacement, and for ensuring that refugees are supported to remain in the regions where they are currently hosted and return home safely and with dignity, when conditions allow. To drive forward work initiated at the first GRF, as well as the commitments set out in our international development White Paper, the UK announced 15 pledges:

A £4 million pledge to support inclusive refugee education—better educated children living through displacement and crises;

A contribution of £2 million new funding to the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women's special window on crises;

Support for meaningful refugee participation in policymaking and high-level meetings affecting displaced populations;

A contribution to ending statelessness multistakeholder pledge;

Working with the global community to drive greater action on conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding;

Action to help build the resilience of refugee, internally displaced and host communities to climate and associated impacts;

Support refugees to access cleaner sources of energy that meet their basic needs, reduces deforestation and improves security for women and girls;

Support for inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in national statistical systems;

A reaffirmed commitment to supporting the Rohingya and their hosting states;

A continued effort to provide safe and legal routes to the UK as well as support for those who arrive through these routes;

Continued resettlement of refugees through community sponsorship;

Continued provision of work routes for skilled displaced people;

Continued support around the integration of refugees in the United Kingdom;

Improving refugee self-reliance by supporting refugees with recognition of their professional qualifications in the UK; and

Support from the British Council to meet the language needs of refugees and displaced people.

As the UNHCR has recognised, the challenge now is to maintain momentum and translate the international community's pledges into substantive outcomes.

To this end, we will work to fulfil our own pledges, continue to work to ensure that all countries are playing their part in supporting refugees, and pursue the related measures identified in the Government's response to the International Development Committee's eighth report of Session 2022-23.

[HCWS172]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Social Housing Quality

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): On 21 December 2020, just days after his second birthday, Awaab Ishak died having suffered a severe respiratory condition. The coroner's inquest, in November 2022, concluded that his death had been caused by mould in his social home in Rochdale. His parents had repeatedly raised concerns with their landlord about the poor state of the one-bedroom flat. Others, including health professionals, also raised the alarm on their behalf. Not only were these requests for help ignored but the family was blamed for causing the lethally dangerous conditions in which they were forced to live. Social landlords like Rochdale Boroughwide Housing are not altruistic amateurs but professional organisations providing a service; it is their responsibility to meet basic repair requirements to keep residents safe in their homes.

In order to enforce this responsibility, and to ensure that no other family suffers such a tragic bereavement owing to a landlord's failure to address health and safety risks, the Government introduced Awaab's law as part of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023. This landmark legislation, which entered the statute book on 20 July last year, will improve the quality of social housing accommodation and redress the balance between social landlord and tenant, giving residents a stronger voice.

Today, I am pleased to announce that the Government have launched our consultation on how Awaab's law should operate in practice, including the specific requirements it will place on social landlords. For the first time, landlords will have to meet regulatory requirements on how quickly they must act to address hazards such as damp and mould in their tenants' homes. The new requirements will form part of all social housing tenancy agreements, so that landlords who fail to fulfil their duties and miss timescales for repairs can be held to account by law.

The proposed requirements, which have been drawn up with the support of Awaab Ishak's family, include:

> exacting timescales for investigations and repair works when hazards in social homes are reported;
>
> robust recording by social landlords of actions taken in response to hazards, and the issuing of written summaries of investigation findings to residents;
>
> and the offering of suitable alternative temporary accommodation in circumstances where it is unsafe for residents to remain in a property.

Following the consultation, we will introduce secondary legislation as soon as possible to bring Awaab's law into force.

I wish to pay tribute to Awaab's parents, Faisal Abudullah and Aisha Amin, for their courageous and tireless campaign for justice, not only for their son but all residents of social housing. It was my honour to introduce Awaab's law in their son's name. I would also like to put on record my thanks to the *Manchester Evening News* and Shelter for supporting this cause, and to the 177,820 members of the public who supported the family's petition.

Finally, while Awaab's law is at the heart of the Government mission to improve the quality of social housing, this is just one part of the biggest Government reforms to social housing in a decade. Since 2010, there has been a steady improvement in the quality of social housing with a reduction in the proportion of non-decent social rented homes from 20% in 2010 to 10% in 2021. We are committed to taking further action on a number of other fronts, including consulting on a new minimum energy efficiency standard for the social rented sector; consulting on a competence and conduct standard for social housing staff, including professional qualification requirements for senior housing managers and executives; publishing the Government response to our consultation on new electrical safety requirements for the social rented sector; and we have also consulted on new directions to the regulator of social housing relating to the provision of information on tenants' rights and complaints. This Government continue to be committed to naming and shaming social housing providers who have failed their residents and breached regulatory standards, including Camden Council's fire safety failures across thousands of their homes. Collectively, these measures support our ambition to halve the number of non-decent rented homes by 2030, drive up standards across the social rented sector and rebalance the relationship between landlord and resident.

[HCWS174]

Petition

Tuesday 9 January 2024

OBSERVATIONS

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Definition of Islamophobia

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that a formal, government-backed definition of Islamophobia is needed; further declares that the definition by the APPG on British Muslims is more appropriate, which defines Islamophobia as "rooted in racism and a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness;" notes that this definition recognises that Muslims are subject to a system of discrimination, control and socio-economic exclusion, alongside hate crime, harassment and abuse; further notes that adopting this definition is an important first step towards tackling hatred against Muslims in Britain.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to formally adopt the APPG's definition of Islamophobia and take further steps to tackle Islamophobia in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Afzal Khan, Official Report,* 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 426.]

[P002871]

Observations from The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley):

Anti-Muslim hatred, just like any other form of religious-based discrimination, is completely abhorrent and has no place in our society. No one should ever be a victim of hatred because of their race or religion and the Government continue to work with police and community partners to monitor and combat it.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales, which provides estimates of the volume of hate crime incidents, shows a long-term decline in hate crime, with a 38% fall in incidents reported between surveys in 2007-2009 and 2017-2020. This is in keeping with a similar percentage fall of 39% in crime overall over the same period.

Tell MAMA have recorded 1,202 incidents of anti-Muslim hatred since 7 October (7 October - 30 November). This figure demonstrates a sevenfold increase in cases from the 2022 figure of 172. We are concerned with this sharp rise in anti-Muslim hatred, which comes alongside a very steep increase in antisemitic incidents as well as wider community tensions. Anti-Muslim hatred remains at an elevated level compared to the same time last year (October - November 2022) and the weekly average for 2023.

We are proud to have funded Tell MAMA, a service that supports victims of anti-Muslim hatred, with over £6 million since their inception in 2012. Tell MAMA's work has been recognised internationally as a good practice model in recording and monitoring anti-Muslim hate. In light of the rise in anti-Muslim hate incidents being reported, the Government has increased Tell MAMA's funding to £1 million this year. This funding will provide additional resource to the service they are providing to support victims of anti-Muslim hatred. The Government will also make available an additional £4.9 million to Muslim community groups for the protection of mosques and Muslim Faith schools-this uplift will also be maintained into 2024-2025. This takes total funding for Muslim communities to £29.4 million, available in each year 2023-2024 and 2024-2025.

This funding can be used to provide protective security at mosques and Muslim faith schools, which can include physical protective security measures, such as CCTV, intruder alarms and secure perimeter fencing.

Alongside the increase in funding for mosques and Muslim faith schools, the Communities Secretary hosted a roundtable with Tell MAMA and counter-extremism experts in late November 2023, to hear their experiences and feedback. With regards to the petition on the definition of Islamophobia, it is an issue to which the Department has given careful consideration.

The definition of Islamophobia as proposed by the APPG is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines race in terms of colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins. The proposed definition could also unintentionally undermine freedom of speech, and prevent legitimate criticism of Islamist ideology, or of unacceptable cultural and/or religious practices.

The term anti-Muslim hatred is a more precise term which better reflects UK hate crime legislation. It also allows better space for critical debate about theology, culture and religious practice, while acknowledging this should typically be done in a way which affords people respect. We want to make sure that the terminology we use does not engender divisions and tensions between British Muslims, and that our language responds to the various forms of hatred experienced by Muslims. This includes people who are Sunni, Shi'a, Ahmadi or part of any other Muslim group, as well as those of Muslim heritage who may express their faith in diverse plural ways or not at all. This approach also encompasses the experiences of those perceived to be Muslim and targeted as a result of this.

This is a topic we continue to explore more broadly as we look at tackling all forms of religious hatred. The department is currently seeking the views and perspectives of domestic and international experts in this field to explore how religious hatred is experienced by British communities, and how it affects different faiths and individuals.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 9 January 2024

DEFENCE

Women in the Defence Sector

The following extract is from Defence oral questions on 8 January 2024.

Dr Murrison: As at October 2023, 55.4% of civil servants are female—a rise of 0.7 percentage points compared with 1 October 2022—and 11.7% of the UK regular armed forces and 15.9% of Future Reserves 2020 are women, up by 1.2 percentage points and 1.4 percentage points respectively in the past five years. That means that the trend is in the right direction, but we can do better, and I am confident that we will do so across the defence enterprise.

[Official Report, 8 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 7.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence People and Families, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke).

The correct response should have been:

Dr Murrison: As at October 2023, **45.6%** of civil servants are female—a rise of 0.7 percentage points compared with 1 October 2022—and 11.7% of the UK regular armed forces and 15.9% of Future Reserves 2020 are women, up by 1.2 percentage points and 1.4 percentage points respectively in the past five years. That means that the trend is in the right direction, but we can do better, and I am confident that we will do so across the defence enterprise.

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