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11 January 2024

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 11 January 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRITS

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in the present Parliament for the County Constituency of Wellingborough in the room of Peter Bone, against whom, since his election for the said County Constituency, a recall petition has been successful.—(*Simon Hart.*)

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Kingswood in the room of Chris Skidmore, who since his election for the said Borough Constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham, in the county of Buckingham.—(*Simon Hart.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Grassroots Music Support

1. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of requiring venues to introduce a surcharge on large event tickets to support grassroots music venues. [900887]

11. **Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): If she will take steps to require arenas, stadiums and major festivals to charge a ticket levy to help fund grassroots live music. [900899]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for supporting my maternity leave. The chance to raise a tiny child is fleeting and precious, and his superb stewardship of my portfolio granted me that gift. One of my big worries on standing for election and then becoming a Minister was that it might prove incompatible with starting and now expanding my family. I simply say to other women who want to get involved in public life, "Do not be afraid. There is a lot of talk of barriers, but service and motherhood are compatible privileges." As my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) said so encouragingly to me, you can do it.

Grassroots live music venues are the talent pipeline of our music industry. We are supporting them with funds and rate relief. We have no plans for a Government-mandated ticket levy, but we encourage industry discussion.

Christine Jardine: I welcome the Minister back to her place. In Edinburgh, we benefit from a plethora of small venues that depend on the Edinburgh Festival to survive. We also have big events every year. At the moment all the excitement, even in my household, is about Taylor Swift coming to the city in June, but we recognise that small venues—the Music Venue Trust says 10% currently struggle to survive and depend on grants from it—do not get any benefit from big gigs. Will the Government consider a levy to support smaller venues, because without them we will never have the Elton Johns, the Queens and the Taylor Swifts who use them to learn their craft, develop and benefit our economy and culture.

Julia Lopez: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that grassroots venues are the talent incubators of the music industry. She will be aware that the Chancellor gave a substantial amount of money at last year's Budget—up to £7 million for a new hub for the Edinburgh Fringe because of that talent pipeline—for the Edinburgh Fringe and the Edinburgh Festival. We are doing what we can with various different pots of money, but we also think there is room for the industry to find a solution on ticket levies. We think it is probably best for the industry to do that, rather than mandate it as a Government.

Damian Green: I welcome my hon. Friend back to her place. In 2023, across the country, not just in Edinburgh, live music boomed, with some 22 million people attending gigs, yet 76 small venues closed—more than one a week. I draw the Minister's attention to an analogy with another hugely successful leisure industry, football, where a small amount of the enormous riches gained by the Premier League is allowed to trickle down to the grassroots so that the future of the sport is preserved. Just as with football, we have hugely profitable large arenas where the superstars of today perform and create huge revenues. A levy on the tickets from those sorts of shows—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, Mr Speaker; I am very passionate about this—would help small venues to produce the superstars of tomorrow, so will the Minister take a positive attitude towards a levy?

Julia Lopez: My right hon. Friend has made his point well, if not briefly. We agree about the importance of grassroots music, which is why we have given another £5 million to the supporting grassroots music fund, but we are also in close touch with the Music Venue Trust, which has a great initiative called "Own Our Venues". Arts Council England is helping with the purchase of some of the freeholds of these venues. We support that as well, but we think there is more scope for the industry to lead a solution, and we are backing talks between different parts of the industry.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear from the industry. I call Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The music industry is just about the most unequal sector in the whole of society. Those at the bottom—the

vast majority—earn an absolute pittance, while those at the very top have unimaginable earnings. Surely we should be doing everything possible to try to change that. It is the sensible option: they do it in France, and the Scottish National party Government are considering doing it in Scotland. Will the Minister support that effort and initiative in Scotland, and if it shows that it can help redistribute some of this money, will she follow that example?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for telling us what the Scottish National party is doing. I had understood that it was cutting a substantial amount from the arts budget. We have been supporting, for instance, the Edinburgh grassroots hub. I think there is a great deal of appetite in this place for a solution; I also think that the best option is for those in the industry to get together, and we are backing discussions of that kind. Indeed, before I went on leave I talked to Mark Davyd of the Music Venue Trust about the issue.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome the Minister back to her place. She mentioned the £5 million for the supporting grassroots music fund, and that is greatly welcomed, but let us be clear: festivals, rehearsal spaces and independent promoters are also eligible for the fund. That is a lot of mouths to feed. They are all important parts of the ecosystem, and they all need funds. In real terms, this is a tiny amount of money for grassroots music venues. Is my hon. Friend pushing the Treasury to expand that funding to ensure that it can go further?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for drawing on her expertise in this regard, and for the work that the Select Committee is doing. I am going to provide that dreadful answer: ahead of the Budget, we will be discussing all these matters with the Treasury.

Creative Industries: Tax Relief

2. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential impact of tax relief on the growth of the creative industries. [900888]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): Let me begin by welcoming the Minister back to her place. Since 2012, the Conservative Government have introduced tax reliefs for the creative industries year on year. That is one of the reasons why the creative industries are growing at twice the rate of the rest of the economy, and why they are world leading. The Labour party opposed every single one of those tax reliefs, and despite its warm words it offers no substantive action.

Stephen Metcalfe: As my right hon. and learned Friend says, since we came to office we have introduced a number of tax reliefs that have supported children's television, video games, production, galleries, orchestras, theatres and museums. It is for the Chancellor to decide on tax policy, but can my right hon. and learned Friend tell us what more she can do to make this go further, to ensure that we remain one of the world's leading production venues?

Lucy Frazer: We have indeed introduced many tax reliefs, and since we came to office I have instigated and backed the introduction of tax reliefs and other support for the sector. Independent film making has been supported with more than £60 million of Government and national lottery funding, and I have recently spoken to representatives of the independent sector to establish how we can provide further support. However, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, matters of tax are ultimately matters for the Chancellor.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I have a suggestion for the Minister. When I met several film, television and advertising companies in my constituency recently, they pointed out that Malta and Mauritius have a 40% rebate which also covers commercials, and that Ireland will be following suit with a 40% rebate on reality TV and game shows. These are the bread-and-butter products of the industry, and they have a huge impact on local areas where filming takes place. The UK is falling behind in this respect. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Treasury and other colleagues about the matter?

Lucy Frazer: I assure the hon. Lady that I have regular discussions with the Treasury and the industry about how we can continue to support this vital sector. We are not falling behind. We are world leading, and we need to maintain that competitive edge. Our screen sector tax reliefs are estimated to have delivered over 200,000 new jobs and more than £13 billion in economic output.

Playing Fields: Community Access

3. Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What steps she is taking to help increase community access to playing fields. [900889]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The Government are committed to ensuring that every community has the facilities it needs to make sport and physical activity accessible to all, with over £320 million being invested by 2025 to develop thousands of state-of-the-art community football pitches and multi-use sports facilities across the UK.

Munira Wilson: Udney Park playing fields in Teddington, in my constituency, have gone to rack and ruin over the past decade as successive developers have bought the site and, quite rightly, failed to build on it. The Udney Park Community Fields Foundation, led by Jonathan Dunn, has campaigned tirelessly to bring those fields into community use, because we desperately need more sports fields in my constituency. Now the site is back on the market, will the Minister join me, local sports groups and the local authority in backing the community's bid for the site? Will he also put in a friendly word with relevant Ministers on the bid to the community ownership fund?

Stuart Andrew: I commend the hon. Lady for her commitment to improving sports facilities in her local area, and I commend all the volunteers, like Jonathan Dunn, who do a tremendous amount of work. Frankly, without them we would not have so many people being

physically active. The Football Foundation and Sport England are always ready to discuss potential investments, and I would be happy to provide the hon. Lady with those contacts. Of course, I will raise this issue with my colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The community sports area on Tithe Farm Road in Houghton Regis is about to get an amazing new all-weather facility funded by developer money, town council money, Central Bedfordshire Council money and Government money. Will the Minister come to open the facility? It is much needed and should be celebrated.

Stuart Andrew: How could I possibly resist such an invitation? It is always a great honour to open facilities in this role, and I am delighted that we are so busy that we are opening thousands of them.

Local Journalism

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support local journalism. [900890]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): We recognise that local media face serious challenges to their sustainability. Our digital markets legislation will help to rebalance the relationship between publishers and platforms, and the Government have been exploring the role of the BBC in local news through the mid-term charter review. We continue to consider all possible options in the interest of promoting and sustaining local newspapers, because we think they are vital pillars of the community and of a thriving democracy.

Liz Twist: Low pay and job insecurity are rife in local journalism. There have recently been big redundancies at my local paper, the *Evening Chronicle*, which has lost a third of its news reporters and half its sports reporters over a two-year period, meaning that my constituents get less local news, less coverage of emergency incidents and less coverage of their beloved sports teams. What further steps will the Minister take to address the issue of retaining careers in local journalism?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for raising these issues. I know that sustaining a good, financially beneficial career is a concern for many people working in journalism. Before I went on leave, I met Reach and other local newspaper groups to talk about some of the challenges they face. The Government are doing what we can through our ad spend, and we have looked at various things over the years, including zero rating of VAT, rates relief and so on, to try to help the sustainability of the local newspaper model. Ultimately, sustainability is at the heart of the challenge of giving local journalists places to have good careers. We are encouraging the BBC's local democracy reporting service, which gives journalists opportunities beyond local newspapers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister back to her place. The Government are one of the biggest advertisers in the UK yet, when it comes to placing adverts and campaigns, local papers

such as the *Barnsley Chronicle* can be overlooked in favour of buying ad space online. Many people in this country do not have digital access or still rely on print media as their primary source of news and information, and our local papers are struggling. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the Government's policy on placing adverts supports the interests of both our press and the public?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting this issue, which the Cabinet Office leads on. The DCMS has been in talks with the Cabinet Office about that spend. As I say, I have spoken to groups such as Reach about this previously. I was in the Cabinet Office during the pandemic, when some large adverts were used and some of the issues faced were about regularity; the Government spent a large amount of money with local newspapers because of that audience reach, because of older readership and so on. So the Government do a lot in this area, but I appreciate that there is always more we can look to do and I understand the point she is making about online advertising.

Sports Facilities: Devon and Cornwall

5. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on developing new sports facilities in Devon and Cornwall. [900891]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): As I mentioned a moment ago, the Government are investing in facilities up and down the country. I am pleased to say that the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme has invested, through the Football Foundation, more than £766,000 since 2022 across Devon and Cornwall, supporting 79 projects so far with equipment.

Kevin Foster: Groups such as the Torquay athletics club do great work in coaching and encouraging young people across Torbay to participate in sport, yet there are no synthetic 400-metre track and field athletics facilities suitable for high-level training in our bay. What opportunities does the Minister see for getting such a facility in Torbay to address that need?

Stuart Andrew: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. It is vital that communities have access to the right facilities, in order to help us meet our target of having more than 3 million more people being active by 2030. Sport England has provided more than £20 million to support grassroots projects in the region. I would be happy to share a full list of the available funds that are open for him to have a look at. Let me also add my thanks to his constituents for the work they are doing in getting people more active.

Loneliness

6. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle loneliness. [900892]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Since the tackling loneliness strategy launched in 2018, the Government

and their partners have invested more than £80 million in tackling loneliness. The 2023 annual report included 60 new cross-government commitments, and updates on progress on things included in that report are due to be published in March.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Severe cuts have left a £600 million gap in adult social care funding. More than 1 million lonely and isolated elderly people now rely on charities such as Re-engage, which I volunteer with, to plug that gap. I know that the Minister does care about this, but surely he must recognise that those cuts and their leading to that rise in desperate loneliness are because of this Government.

Stuart Andrew: First, let me pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she does with those charities. The partnership between Government and charities has made the UK one of the world's leading countries on tackling loneliness. That is why in the Budget in 2023 we announced £100 million of support for charities and community organisations, recognising the challenges they face and paying tribute to them for the work they are doing in tackling this important issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): When the Government released their national strategy in 2018, we had a far more limited understanding of loneliness, its consequences and the effectiveness of interventions than we do now. However, despite six years of hard work and good initiatives, the problem has got worse; the level of loneliness has risen by half a million since 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) said, the pandemic and now the cost of living crisis have created new pressures, and with charities and local authorities facing higher demand and rising costs, it is increasingly difficult for them to respond. Given all those challenges, what has the Minister done to prepare for a refreshed national strategy to tackle loneliness?

Stuart Andrew: This is a complex area and a lot of the research done since the strategy was launched in 2018 has helped us to understand the issue in a lot more detail. Chronic loneliness has remained at about the same level, but there is still more work to be done. That is why we are now taking very targeted approaches to specific demographics within our society. I am also convening a cross-government meeting of Ministers from across Departments to see what more we can do to make sure we are meeting our strategy ambition.

Protecting Heritage Assets

7. **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support local communities and special interest groups in protecting heritage assets. [900894]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): DCMS welcomes applications through Historic England for local heritage assets to be considered for designation. We are also committed to supporting communities to care for their local heritage assets, including

through Historic England's repair grants for heritage at risk and the National Lottery Heritage Fund's grants for heritage.

Steve Tuckwell: With both RAF Northolt and the Battle of Britain Bunker in the heart of my constituency, the people of Uxbridge and South Ruislip share incredibly deep ties with the second world war, especially in the context of the Royal Air Force. As the 84th anniversary of the battle of Britain approaches, would my hon. Friend meet me and other local groups dedicated to preserving the important fabric of both of these valuable heritage sites, to ensure all is done for them to continue to stand as testaments to the bravery of the few who preserved our freedoms?

Julia Lopez: My constituency shares deep ties with my hon. Friend's, as RAF Hornchurch is in my constituency. Some RAF fighters based there joined in the battle of Britain, protecting London and our nation at a time of deep terror. We have a fantastic local museum at RAF Hornchurch, if I may just give it a plug, that is run by volunteers and is an absolute treasure trove; I recommend it. I understand that my hon. Friend has met with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, who is responsible for arts and heritage, but I understand that we will also have an opportunity to debate the subject in greater detail next week, and I look forward to that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Hadrian's Wall runs through the heart of Newcastle's west end, but it is little celebrated or signposted, and the Hadrian's Wall national trail does not actually follow the wall's path through my constituency. What help can the Minister offer to local communities keen to celebrate this history, which is literally in their backyard?

Julia Lopez: I was not aware of this outrageous oversight on paths and signage, so I will raise it with Lord Parkinson at the next opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will the Minister help the heritage of Victoria Tower Gardens and the voluntary organisations London Parks & Gardens Trust and the Thorney Island Society by getting the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation to unredact the minutes of December 2018, so that I can quote them when I appear at the hybrid Bill Committee on Wednesday?

Julia Lopez: I confess I am not sure about the issue my hon. Friend refers to, so I will do some investigation and we will see what the Department can do to facilitate his request.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her positive answers; it is good to see her back in her place.

We have some incredible heritage in Strangford, which goes back long before Ards and North Down Borough Council was brought together. The council has some ideas for promoting first and second world war heritage at the Somme Museum at Conlig. Have any discussions

taken place with Ards and North Down Borough Council to ensure that our heritage is retained for everyone, culturally, historically and visually?

Julia Lopez: I have just been informed that my ministerial colleague had a very positive visit to the hon. Gentleman's constituency—I am sure he always offers a good time in Northern Ireland. I will ask if there have been any discussions with his local authority on that basis.

UK Musicians: European Tours

8. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support UK musicians seeking to tour in Europe. [900895]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): I am still feeling slightly embarrassed by my answer to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)!

We have engaged with EU member states to clarify guidance and, where possible, improve arrangements when for EU touring. The vast majority of EU member states—23 of the 27—offer visa and permit-free routes to touring. We are always looking at what more we can do, including through the music export growth scheme, which is being tripled to £3.2 million over the next two years.

Patrick Grady: Glasgow North is home to many talented musicians, some of whom play in Scotland's world-class orchestras, but the Association of British Orchestras has warned that the removal of tax credits for performances in the European economic area is a direct result of Brexit and could make touring in Europe unviable for orchestras. What is the Minister's message to my constituents, whose ability to tour in Europe is being sacrificed on the altar of Brexit fundamentalism?

Julia Lopez: Unlike the SNP, we actually listen to what people say in referenda, so I am afraid we will not be rejoining the EU and therefore we cannot have special tax privileges on that basis. DCMS is aware of the concerns of touring orchestras. We are facilitating discussions with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs so the orchestras know precisely where they stand on some of the issues they have raised.

Film and Television Industry

9. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the growth of the film and television industry. [900896]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): We have seen significant growth in the film and TV industries. The support that we have taken includes reforms to audiovisual tax reliefs, uplifts for animation and children's TV, and £28 million of investment in the UK global screen fund. As I have said, the Labour party voted against all our tax reliefs and, as far as I am aware, has offered no funding to those industries.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her answer. She will know that there is now more studio space for feature film production in the home counties than there is in Hollywood. However,

there is a vulnerability. We found that out at the time of the American writers and actors' strikes, when a number of my friends, and many other people who are not my friends, were made redundant temporarily because film production halted. How can we make the British film industry more independent of the American production machine?

Lucy Frazer: I know that my hon. Friend is himself a veteran of the silver screen, appearing in the brilliant British "House of Cards". Our film industry is world leading. He is right that the strikes caused disruption. We work very closely with our partners in other jurisdictions. One example is the international hit film "Barbie", which was filmed in the UK, supported 750 jobs, added £80 million to our economy and earned more than £1.1 billion at the global box office. We needed to ensure that the film industry could continue to thrive after the strikes, which is why we are continuing to support the industry with tax incentives, funding pots and, importantly, the development of a skills pipeline to ensure success long into the future.

BBC Current Affairs Coverage: Impartiality

10. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Whether she has had recent discussions with the BBC Board on the impartiality of the BBC's current affairs coverage. [900897]

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Julia Lopez): The BBC has a duty to deliver its impartial and accurate news and current affairs coverage under its royal charter. It is editorially independent, which means that editorial policies are a matter for the BBC, but both the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the BBC's leadership team. We have discussed the important issue of impartiality on multiple occasions. It is also a key focus of the Government's mid-term review of the BBC's governance and regulation.

Rob Butler: As a former BBC journalist myself, I completely believe in its editorial independence from the Government, but, just as strongly, I consider it essential that the BBC, across all its programming and from all presenters, should be absolutely and unequivocally impartial. Given the concerns that we have heard about the current coverage of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the reporting of the resignation of the president of Harvard and examples of where Ofcom has found significant editorial failings, does my hon. Friend agree that the BBC needs to work consistently, constantly and visibly to enforce that requirement on impartiality?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right: trust is the BBC's currency. That is especially important in relation to its international coverage, particularly during conflicts, so it must use its words with care. With regard to the events in Israel and Gaza, the Government have been clear that the BBC should reflect on its coverage and learn lessons for the future, but, of course, we again emphasise impartiality and the highest editorial standards. That is a strategic priority of the BBC's leadership, and we are talking to them about this in relation to the mid-term review and licensing renewal.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As an ex-BBC reporter, I am in awe of my former colleagues' bravery and impartiality when they cover world affairs. We have all followed with horror the Israeli bombardment of Gaza. Reporters Without Borders says that it appears that Israel is now directly targeting journalists. The Al-Jazeera bureau chief has had three children killed, including his journalist son—what unimaginable pain. Another Palestinian journalist, Ayat Khaddoura, said:

“When will this war end? Who will tell the world what we went through and what we saw?”

I bring her question to the House as she is no longer alive to do so. Can the Minister share with journalists across the world how the Government's refusal to call for a ceasefire is advancing the cause of journalistic freedom or peace in the region, and can she tell us who the Government's position has persuaded apart from those on the Labour Front Bench who remain limpet close to the Tory position on Gaza, as on so many other issues?

Mr Speaker: That question was a long way from the impartiality of the BBC. We must ensure that we stick to the subject of the question. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that topicals would have been a much better place for his question. Minister, can you pick out the part that you need to?

Julia Lopez: I simply wish to pay tribute to every journalist who puts their life on the line to bring truth to the public's attention. They play an incredibly important role. We are proud of what the BBC journalists do in particular. They have also done some awesome things in Ukraine. As a Government, we just want to say that we support their work and pay tribute to them.

Access to Sport: Women and Girls

12. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What progress she has made on increasing women and girls' access to sport. [900900]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): Women and girls should have exactly the same access to sport as boys and men. That is why we supported the recommendations in Karen Carney's excellent report. It is why we are investing £600 million to boost equal access to sport, and why we recently announced £30 million for the Lionesses Futures Fund to deliver 30 pitches across the country with priority access for women and girls, with further opportunities for 8,000 women and girls.

Andrew Jones: We have had fantastic success with women's football, particularly the Lionesses, including Harrogate's Rachel Daly, who has been a great inspiration locally, but what steps is my right hon. and learned Friend taking to ensure that sports with a smaller following can sustain a competitive grassroots environment for girls?

Lucy Frazer: I recognise Rachel's success as the top scorer in the women's super league last year. We support sport at every level. Sport England's This Girl Can campaign, funded by the Government, inspires millions

of women and girls to get involved in all sports. The School Games programme, also funded by the Government, encourages children to take up sport and get active.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Unfortunately, in recent weeks there has been a spate of disgusting sexist, misogynistic abuse directed towards sportswomen just for being at the top of their game. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), has been on the receiving end just for standing up to it, which I commend him for. I agree with him that vile, misogynistic comments are dangerous. The reality is that they are putting women and girls off sport. Does the Secretary of State agree that every sporting organisation should have a strategy to eliminate all forms of sexual harassment and abuse?

Lucy Frazer: I agree with the hon. Member: we should not have misogynistic, bullying behaviour in sport, and all governing bodies should be looking at what their sports are doing. We set out in our sports strategy how we should have fair competition and integrity in sport.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Secretary of State mentioned the Carney review, but I am afraid that the Government seem to be failing women's football on that, with a complete lack of detail about how the implementation group to put into practice the Carney review recommendations will work. Without senior leadership, that group will not have the teeth that it needs, and all the hard work will be put at risk. Fans, players and clubs deserve urgent action and leadership from the top. If the Secretary of State does not reform the women's game and give it the same prominence as the men's, I will. Will she commit to chairing the implementation group, and reporting back to Parliament so that MPs can hold her to account?

Lucy Frazer: I completely dispute what the hon. Member says about our support for women in sport, and women in football. I have had the pleasure of meeting Karen Carney on a number of occasions. Her report is excellent. We endorse all its recommendations, many of which are for the FA, which I have also spoken to on this subject. I will ensure that the recommendations are fulfilled. The implementation board will have all the governing bodies on it. Its first meeting is in March. I will keep a very close eye on the board, and will work very closely with my right hon. Friend the Under-Secretary on that and every other issue.

Topical Questions

T1. [900905] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): As 2023 drew to a close, official statistics highlighted that under this Government the creative industries continued to thrive. They now employ almost 2.5 million workers, a growth of 4.4%, so we are well on our way to meeting our objectives to grow the creative industries by £50 billion and increase employment by 1 million by 2030.

Peter Aldous: Local commercial radio, whether in Lancashire or Suffolk, can fill the gap left by the reduction in BBC local radio coverage, but in the Lowestoft and Waveney area it is constrained in doing so, as the local digital audio broadcasting network has not been extended to cover the area. Please can my right hon. and learned Friend arrange for that important infrastructure, which is available throughout most of the UK, to be extended to north-east Suffolk as soon as possible?

Lucy Frazer: I completely agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of local radio to listeners across the UK, and I know that he is an effective campaigner for his local area. The BBC and commercial radio are responsible for the operation of their respective radio networks, including the DAB radio networks, but I have asked my officials to engage with local DAB multiplex operators and broadcasters to look at whether there is a desire to increase local DAB coverage further.

T2. [900907] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that, in the media world, content is king, and that that is why we must support our world-leading creative talent? Will she take steps to require artificial intelligence developers to provide songwriters and composers with detailed information as to how their works are being used, including when authorisation has been granted for use of those works as training data?

Lucy Frazer: The right hon. Member is absolutely right about the importance of protecting the original work of the creative industries. I have held a number of roundtables to ensure that we protect that originality. The Intellectual Property Office is working on that very issue, and I have been liaising with it and with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology.

T3. [900908] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Premier League and the English Football League have held meetings, and yet have failed to come up with a solution for a fairer redistribution of funding. Given their inability to come to an agreement, will she get the two sides together round the table—she is probably already doing it—to encourage them to come up with a solution? Failing that, if legislation is necessary, will she consider it, because we do not want to see any clubs going under?

Lucy Frazer: It is absolutely right that a deal should be done. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), and I have been encouraging all the authorities to come to an arrangement. We have been clear that if no arrangement is reached, there will obviously be a backstop in the legislation for the football regulator that we will bring forward to the House shortly.

T5. [900910] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): As the Secretary of State will be aware, charities are facing an extremely challenging fundraising environment and, at the same time, are trying to respond to increased demands due to the cost of living crisis. Will she explain why the Government continue to impose sales restrictions on charity lottery fundraising, the removal of which would not cost the Treasury a single penny, but would

ensure much-needed additional funds for charitable causes? That would hugely benefit communities in my constituency and across the whole UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): As probably one of the few Members of this House who have actually set up a charities lottery, I understand the importance of them. It is right to say that we did a significant review of them not so long ago. I know the hon. Member is probably referring to one particular lottery, and I have written to that lottery with suggestions, having consulted with the Gambling Commission, of ways it may be able to expand within the current remit. But, as a Department, we are extremely busy at the moment dealing with the gambling White Paper—that has to take priority. Once we have done that, we will consider what further work may need to be done on society lotteries.

T4. [900909] **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): With both Wealdstone and Uxbridge football clubs embedded in my constituency, grassroots football is incredibly important to the people of Uxbridge and South Ruislip. Clubs like those offer more than just football; they act as vital community hubs and support a significant increase in girls' football through to special educational provision and much more. For the benefit of the clubs and fans across my constituency, will the Minister give the House an update on the progress being made to protect grassroots football, including how television revenues will be distributed, to ensure that those important community assets do not just survive but flourish?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of football clubs like Wealdstone and Uxbridge. They are incredibly important in providing opportunities for people to become physically active, but are also integral parts of our communities. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State just mentioned, we have been urging the football authorities to come up with a deal, so that that money can flow down and we can ensure that our great football sport that we have in this country continues to flourish.

T6. [900911] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): This year, in Scotland, we will have the chance to see the Scottish football team on terrestrial television. That is a rare opportunity—not just because we have qualified, but because Scottish football, like other sports, is becoming increasingly difficult to view, because it is increasingly behind a paywall. That is damaging its attraction to young people who want to see it. Will the Minister tell us what discussions are taking place to try to alleviate that problem?

Stuart Andrew: I am glad that people in Scotland will be able to watch their national team. I believe that our current list works well. It is important that we strike the right balance, because we have to ensure that the sport rights holders use the income they get to benefit the whole of that sporting environment. That is something we look at constantly, but I think that at the moment we have the right balance.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Given Ofcom's comments that it is considering whether its proposals for regulation of local radio are still appropriate in the

light of the BBC's changes to local radio provision, does the Minister agree that the BBC's mid-term review is a good opportunity to look at how the BBC delivers for older audiences, particularly in its local radio provision?

Lucy Frazer: The mid-term review is a very important point where we can look further, and indeed have looked further, at a number of issues, including competition, complaints and impartiality. We will be publishing the results of the mid-term review very shortly.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister will know that Warwick and Leamington—Leamington being also known as Silicon Spa—enjoys the greatest concentration of games companies in the world. I appreciate what was said in the autumn statement, but there is a skills shortage. Can the Minister update us on what is being done to address that?

Lucy Frazer: The gaming industry in this country is world leading, and I have had the pleasure of visiting a number of gaming companies to see how they are thriving. We have a creative industries skills package, which we committed to in the creative industries sector vision, to ensure a pipeline of talent all the way from primary school right up until someone's second or third job, and there are measures at every single one of those steps.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Wallington FC is an amazing local football club in Roundshaw, in Carshalton and Wallington, but it is having trouble maintaining its lease with the new owners and its very old sports pavilion needs an overhaul. Can the Minister set out what support is available from the Department or other organisations to help with that?

Stuart Andrew: The volunteers that my hon. Friend mentions are absolutely the lifeblood of community sport and it is vital that they have those facilities, as I mentioned earlier. Again, we are investing more than £320 million, and any team can have discussions with the local authority and the Football Foundation. I am happy to meet him privately to discuss that and perhaps give him some pointers.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Performers in the UK are having their images, voices or likenesses reproduced by others using AI technology, without their consent. The Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, which regulates performers' intellectual property, does not account for AI. When will this Government act to protect the rights of artists, performers and other creatives in the UK, or are they content to see this continued exploitation and violation of people's intellectual property rights?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member will know that in the UK we have world-leading protections for copyright and intellectual property. We want to make sure that, as we move into a new technological age with generative AI, we continue to protect creative work. I assure her that we are working closely with the industry and the Intellectual Property Office to ensure that we get the best protections we can, and I know that an update on the IPO's work will be published shortly.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): One of the key recommendations of the Carney review into women's football was the need for an improvement in mental health provision in elite women's sport. I think the Government have accepted most of the recommendations of the Carney review, so can the Secretary of State give us an update on how she thinks mental health provision needs to be improved in women's elite sport?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that important piece of work in Karen Carney's review. I know that football authorities such as the FA, for example, are starting work in this area, but that is precisely why we will be introducing the implementation group, because we want to ensure that pressure is put on to do the work that is needed, and to do it quickly.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Labour has a programme for a new generation of youth hubs, because we know that our young people are struggling with mental health challenges, school, themselves and others, and some are being picked off by criminal gangs. In contrast with our programme, the YMCA has identified a 70% cut in funding since 2010 and a loss of 4,500 frontline youth workers. When will the Government invest in our young people and in a comprehensive youth service?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question, because this is something I feel very passionately about. I am very proud that we are investing £500 million in our national youth guarantee, and that we already have in place a programme to build youth clubs—we have already built 87 throughout the country, spending £300 million. We want constructive things for people to do, which is why we are spending £300 million on our sports pitches. I have strengthened the statutory guidance in relation to what local authorities are required to do, and we are working across Departments to ensure that our young people have something to do, somewhere to go and someone to talk to.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Choral Music: Cathedrals

1. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Whether the Commissioners are taking steps to support choral music in cathedrals. [900767]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church Commissioners provided £1 million to support music in cathedrals during the pandemic. That sum was match funded by the Cathedral Music Trust. The commissioners are extremely grateful to the trust for doing what it did to help ensure that worship in our cathedrals remains of the highest calibre.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend will know that cathedral schools, such as Lichfield Cathedral School, play an important part in providing young choristers for cathedrals, but they are very concerned that if they

have to charge 20% on their fees, and possibly lose their charitable status, they may no longer be viable and will go bust. What assessment have the commissioners made of the effects of such a change?

Andrew Selous: I can tell my hon. Friend that there is a concern that cathedral schools may not be able to afford to pay business rates. If the payment of business rates and the addition of VAT on fees cause choir schools to close, that would be an issue for a number of cathedrals.

Rough Sleeping

2. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to support work by local authorities and the Government on reducing rough sleeping. [900768]

Andrew Selous: Many parish churches provide shelters and support for rough sleepers. The Church of England is working to provide long-term secure housing for those who need it, and piloting projects to build housing on Church land to enable that to happen.

Kevin Foster: Church buildings and congregations can work well with local councils to reduce rough sleeping by providing not only a bed and a meal, but the opportunity for lasting spiritual and emotional support through membership of the Church family. What further support can the Church of England offer parishes in Torbay that are undertaking such work?

Andrew Selous: I warmly congratulate all the churches in Torbay on the provision of the night shelter, and I single out in particular Mark Gridley and Gary Mitchell, who I know have been instrumental in leading that work—I am sure that the whole House is grateful for what they are doing. It is also typical of my hon. Friend that, as I understand it, he provides a Sunday evening surgery at the shelter. I am sure that churches across England could learn from that excellent initiative. If any churches would welcome conversation with the Church of England about housing on Church land, I ask them to get in touch with me directly and I will enable that to happen.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my constituency, unfortunately, at this time of year we are witnessing a number of people who are homeless—we have not seen that for some time. The story of Christmas tells of Mary's journey before the birth of baby Jesus, when they too were homeless. I am very keen to hear from the Church Commissioners what can be done not just here on the mainland, which I understand is the responsibility of the Church of England, but in Northern Ireland, where the Church of Ireland and other churches also wish to participate.

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. In the first instance, I suggest that he and churches in Northern Ireland might want to look at the joint archbishops' commission on housing, which came out last year. The commission was widely praised for its work, and we are taking that work forward in the Church of England, but I am sure that churches in Northern Ireland could learn from it as well.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Election Finance from Overseas: Transparency

3. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Whether the committee has had recent discussions with the Electoral Commission on the adequacy of the transparency of election finance from overseas. [900769]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The committee has not had any recent discussions with the commission on the matters raised. The commission publishes information about donations to ensure transparency, and has powers to sanction political parties that accept impermissible foreign donations. However, it has also highlighted that the political finance system is vulnerable to unlawful influence from donations both overseas and in the UK. It has recommended that parties should be required to know where donations come from, and to have policies in place to manage the risk of receiving money from unlawful sources.

Patricia Gibson: Last year, the parliamentary National Security Strategy Committee revealed that the Russian state attempted to interfere with the 2019 general election. This Government have made it easier for overseas donors, including those living in Russia, to donate to UK political parties. Does the Electoral Commission share my party's concern that this Government are opening up UK democracy to even greater influence by hostile nations?

Cat Smith: It would be a matter for the security services, rather than the Electoral Commission, to make a full assessment of whether unlawful foreign money has been used to campaign at UK general elections—in 2019, for example, as the hon. Member has pointed out. However, political parties must report when they are given an unlawful donation and return it to the donor. In addition, the commission carries out permissibility checks on a sample of donations, and has the power to sanction political parties that accept impermissible foreign donations. The commission will continue to recommend changes to ensure that voters can have greater confidence in the political finance system.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Multimedia Platforms

4. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Whether the commissioners are taking steps to improve the use of multimedia platforms to communicate the Church's mission and ministry. [900770]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): I am very pleased to be able to tell the hon. Lady that the Church of England has transformed its use of digital and social media in recent years, including through

Instagram and TikTok, and our digital team has won over 30 prestigious awards for its work. That has led to hugely increased online engagement—as the hon. Lady and I were learning about earlier this morning—not least among those who have difficulty attending church.

Rachael Maskell: In a multimedia age, there are 2 million people in the UK who are housebound, and globally many Christians across the persecuted church are unable to gather with others. With good Christian online content such as services and podcasts, and popular series such as “The Chosen” through to the Alpha course, how is the Church equipping people to navigate that content safely and easily, in order to extend its mission with the equipment and skills needed to access it?

Andrew Selous: I commend the hon. Lady for such an important question, which takes in the housebound in England and people persecuted across the world who cannot attend church safely; she is absolutely right to raise those issues. For those who are not online at all, the Church of England offers DailyHope, which is a free telephone line providing 24/7 worship, prayer and talks. Of course, our digital content can be followed not just around England but across the world, to help make Jesus known.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

General Election: Online Misinformation

5. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent discussions the committee has had with the Electoral Commission on tackling online misinformation ahead of the next general election. [900771]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The committee has not had any recent discussions with the Electoral Commission on the matters raised. The commission's regulatory remit is focused on ensuring that political finance is transparent and that campaigning materials include an imprint showing voters who has produced the material. The commission does not have a role in regulating the content of election material, but it does encourage all campaigners to undertake their role responsibly and transparently. It has called for changes in the law to improve transparency and safeguard the UK's electoral system.

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Lady for her answer. The imprints are going to be important, but we have already seen an attack on our system through cyber-attacks at the last general election. At this general election, we face the increased, insidious threat to our democracy from artificial intelligence and fake news circulating false audio from politicians during conference season, so is there anything else that the commission is considering, or that it could do, to attack that sort of insidious approach?

Cat Smith: The commission shares the hon. Lady's concerns about some of the threats that new technologies, deepfakes and AI-generated content could pose, ultimately

taking away voter confidence in the electoral system. While the commission does not have a role in the regulation of the content of campaign material, it is working with other organisations to try to support responsible and transparent campaigning. If the hon. Lady would be interested, I would be very happy to arrange an opportunity for her to meet with the Electoral Commission, perhaps to discuss this matter further.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Australian Wine

6. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): If the Commission will take steps to increase purchases of Australian wine for sale in the House of Commons. [900772]

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne): The wine sold in the House of Commons is reviewed annually, with the next review due in the spring of 2024. The right hon. Gentleman's question specifically relates to Australian wine; I understand that a Chardonnay and a Shiraz are available, compared with three English wines, so Australian wine is represented on the wine list in the Palace of Westminster.

John Spellar: As part of a dispute over covid, China imposed particularly punishing tariffs on Australian wine, damaging that industry. May I urge the House of Commons Commission to stand with our Australian friends and allies, and prioritise buying Australian wine and encouraging its use in our venues to make it clear that bullying does not pay?

Sir Charles Walker: Of course, if colleagues here wish to prioritise the purchase of Australian wine from the wine list, I encourage them to do so, but I also remind them that we have very good English wines on the wine list as well. More generally, I am sure the nation has heard the right hon. Gentleman's call to arms, so when we are out in the supermarkets stocking our own shelves, perhaps we should all be mindful of buying two or three bottles of Australian wine as well—seriously—to show solidarity with our Australian friends and their growers.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Buildings: Security

7. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Whether the Commissioners have issued recent guidance to church parishes on securing their buildings against theft. [900773]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Back from wine to God, Mr Speaker. Sadly, vandalism and theft are persistent issues for parish churches, and

I was sorry to learn about thefts at churches in Stanmore, Hendon, Edgware and Bushey in my hon. Friend's constituency. I can tell him that advice from the diocese has been circulated to all parishes in the area. Of course, the best way to deter thieves is to have a high footfall in and around churches, keeping the building open to welcome people. I also know that the police will be providing crime prevention advice to the churches concerned.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. He is right that St John's church in Stanmore was the subject of a burglary just before Christmas, Christ Church in Hendon was the subject of another burglary, and St Andrew's church in Kingsbury was robbed during the mass itself. Will my hon. Friend use his powers to encourage the police to take extra action, particularly around Christian festivals when it seems that there is more action by burglars and a pattern of behaviour?

Andrew Selous: I think the whole House is very sorry to learn what has happened to my hon. Friend's local churches. A theft during the mass is really quite extraordinary. I will make sure that the Church of England nationally gets in touch with the Metropolitan police to pass on his concerns about that case. On general security advice, alarm sensors and attaching safes securely to the building will help, as will making sure that there is an accurate record, and pictures of valuables can help to secure their return. We certainly do not want a repeat of what my hon. Friend has experienced.

Cuba: Support for Christians

8. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to support Christians in Cuba. [900774]

Andrew Selous: I commend the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief for yet again bringing this issue before the House. It is extremely concerning that the Cuban Government continue to control religious activity so tightly by using surveillance, harassment, forced exile, fines and ill-treatment of prisoners. The Church of England works multilaterally through the United Nations, the World Council of Churches and other bodies to advocate vigorously for freedom of religion or belief for everyone in Cuba.

Fiona Bruce: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. The Open Doors 2024 world watchlist will be launched in the Palace of Westminster on 17 January, and I urge all colleagues to attend. I anticipate that once again it will, sadly, indicate a deteriorating picture of freedom for Christians around the world as autocratic regimes seek to suppress dissenting voices.

On Cuba, I thank the Church Commissioner for sharing my concerns about reports on the worsening situation, particularly for religious leaders there. As he mentioned, many are subject to harassment, fines, forced exile, detention and ill-treatment in prison. Will he join me in calling for the release of religious prisoner of conscience Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the case of Pastor Lorenzo is all too indicative of a worsening climate of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba.

The Church of England calls on the Cuban Government to release Pastor Lorenzo immediately, along with all those others detained in relation to the 11 July protests. The international community must continue to follow this case closely and hold Cuba to account bilaterally and multilaterally. My hon. Friend has put Pastor Lorenzo's name on the record in this House. I also endorse everything she said about the Open Doors event in the House next Wednesday.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Party Spending Limits: Impact on the Democratic Process

9. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whether the committee has had recent discussions with the Electoral Commission on the potential impact of increased electoral party spending limits on the democratic process. [900775]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The committee discussed the matters raised at a private meeting with the Electoral Commission in November. The commission has said that the UK Government's recent increases to spending limits and donation reporting thresholds represent significant changes to the UK's political finance controls. The commission has published updated guidance to support parties to understand and comply with the new limits; however, it is concerned that increased spending limits risk significantly more scope for higher-spending parties to campaign.

Mr Carmichael: The *Daily Mirror* reported at the weekend that the Conservative party is already spending more on the Prime Minister's Facebook page and adverts than Donald Trump is spending on his, so the motivation for doubling the party spending limits is pretty clear already. If this cannot be stopped, can the commission at least do more to increase transparency, so that people can see this shoddy attempt to buy democracy for what it is?

Cat Smith: The commission has said that any changes to spending reporting thresholds should be supported by rigorous analysis—which of course is for the Government to publish—including of the likely impact on public confidence and transparency. The commission continues to make the case for changes to the political finance system to further improve public trust and confidence.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Anglican Hospital in Gaza

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What support the Church is providing to the Anglican Hospital in Gaza. [900778]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):

The House may not be aware that the Anglican Church is one of the largest providers of healthcare and education globally. The al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza is an example of this. Before Christmas, the hospital was severely damaged again and a tank demolished its front wall. Most of the hospital staff were taken away by the Israeli Defence Force and the Church of England has asked the Government here to inquire about their wellbeing and whereabouts and to request that they be released.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Intimidation by hard-line settlers has prompted the Patriarch to say that clergy are fighting for their lives, and that the Armenian quarter faces a violent demise. Is a Christian presence in Jerusalem still viable?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for bringing this issue before the House. He is right: a century ago, a quarter of Jerusalem was Christian; now, just 1% of the population is, and in the Armenian quarter of the old city, the Christian presence has come under intensified threat from intimidation and aggressive property acquisition by settlers. The Church of England

is very concerned that the rule of law should prevail in Israel and the status quo be maintained. It is unconscionable that Christians should be driven from the holy land.

Mr Speaker: That completes that set of questions—

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: That would normally come after business questions.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It is about DCMS questions.

Mr Speaker: Very well.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful. When I referred to December 2018, I should have made it clear that that was the date of the freedom of information request by Dorian Gerhold. I shall write to the Minister explaining what information I want.

Mr Speaker: Excellent. That clarifies that.

Business of the House

10.38 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): 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 one).

WEDNESDAY 17 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House on the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill (day two).

THURSDAY 18 JANUARY—Debate on a motion on the loan charge, followed by a debate on a motion on HS2 compensation. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 19 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 22 January includes:

MONDAY 22 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill.

Lucy Powell: Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, to staff, to Members and to those watching. It might be a new year, but I am afraid it is the same old story: a Government who have run out of road and ideas, and who are not fixing the problems we face but making them worse. Many on the Leader of the House's own side have reached the same conclusion. Yet another MP has resigned having lost trust, another has admitted that over their 13 years things have got worse, and a former Immigration Minister is taking to the airwaves to say that their Rwanda plan will not work—and it is only the first week back.

But some things have changed. The Prime Minister seems to have had a dramatic reversal in strategy. Despite just months ago rather laughably saying that he was the change candidate, his latest reset confirmed what we all know: he is now just offering more of the same—more of the same low growth, more of the same high taxes, more of the same backlogs and broken public services, and more of the same historically low living standards. Only this hapless Prime Minister would set himself targets that were hard to miss and then miss them.

We had further confirmation today, with new figures from the BBC showing every NHS target missed, and not just this past year, when the Government want to blame the strikes, or since the pandemic, which might be a little understandable—no: key NHS targets have been missed in each and every one of the past seven years. That is the second half of their time in office, after all their decisions and policies took effect. That is the record of this Government. Let us have that debate in this election year about the choice the voters will face: more of the same failure from the Conservatives, or change and hope with Labour.

Turning to the sub-postmaster scandal, we welcome the Government's announcement of emergency legislation to quickly pardon those wrongfully convicted, and we

stand ready to work with them. What has now come to wider public attention is the travesty, injustice and two decades of struggle they faced. Will the Leader of the House give us more details today and assure us that as the spotlight inevitably moves on, the Government will not take their foot off the gas in getting urgent justice, redress and accountability?

The issue goes wider. It follows a pattern similar to other injustices in which the state or corporate cover-up has wronged ordinary people, such as Windrush, infected blood, building safety and Grenfell, Hillsborough and more. All those cases, transpiring over decades, came to public awareness after the notable efforts of Back Benchers and dogged journalists working with the victims. Today's Government should be learning wider lessons.

Recourse and redress proves every time to be incredibly difficult, lengthy and costly, fighting against powerful organisations that employ smoke and mirrors, expensive lawyers and enjoy the protection of the establishment, leaving victims facing years and years of frustrating battle. No amount of money can compensate for a life ruined. How are the Government collectively reviewing these recent scandals to make it easier for group action against vested interests?

Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Government also expedite compensation for the Windrush scheme and victims of infected blood, who are still being frustrated; pay out for the remediation of building safety where innocent leaseholders are still left in limbo; and bring in a legal duty of candour, as demanded by the Hillsborough families. Is justice delayed not justice denied?

Another big learning is for accountability. Time and again, we see those responsible rewarded for failure and not held accountable for their failings, with more Government contracts, bonuses, gongs and peerages and the cost picked up by the taxpayer. I have asked the Leader of the House this before, but will she make it easier for Parliament to strip people of honours and peerages when they are found responsible for serious failings? Will she also condemn the practice, as we saw over the new year, of honours being awarded for failure?

Will the Leader of the House bring forward proposals to go after those responsible to pay financially and face the consequences? Will she put an end to the revolving door of awarding Government contracts? In the case of Fujitsu, the contracts are apparently worth several billion pounds. Is it any wonder that trust in politics has been so eroded when people do not see any accountability and when ordinary people pick up the bill while those responsible get off scot-free?

Penny Mordaunt: Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to all colleagues. This week, I was delighted to welcome Holocaust survivor Mala Tribich to the Commons, where she viewed the exhibition in Portcullis House. I encourage all Members to see it.

I am sure that I speak for the whole House in saying that our thoughts remain with the hostages still kept captive in Gaza—next week sees us pass the 100th day since they were taken—just as our thoughts remain with all the innocent people caught up in those events.

May I also give a shout out to the Royal Navy's rowing team, HMS Oardacious, who are rowing across the Atlantic for mental health support? With just 500 nautical miles to go, they may land before next week's business questions, and they are currently 100 miles ahead of the next team.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I turn to the substantive issue that the hon. Lady raised: the Post Office scandal. She will know about the existing legislation announced on 29 November, but it is to be welcomed that we are now taking unprecedented steps to quash convictions. That work is well under way, and we want to bring it to the House swiftly. The House will be aware of the risks outlined by the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), but I think we will find them necessary.

While the inquiry will look at some of the issues raised in this place, the hon. Lady is right that we should reflect now on what we could learn, and in particular what we should conclude about the powers given to arm's length bodies of the state and what operational independence should mean for those organisations. Subsequent Conservative Administrations have been right in gripping and trying to resolve some difficult and long-running issues, from Windrush to the apology given by the noble Lord Cameron to the Hillsborough families, the apology given by the current Prime Minister to former members of our armed forces who had been shamed and driven out of service for being gay, and the 2017 infected blood inquiry and the later compensation study, which will make some amends for the decades of injustice and suffering that those people have endured. I am optimistic that we will reach some justice for those affected this year; I know that the Paymaster General is working hard to do that.

We were right to have a full public inquiry into the Horizon Post Office scandal, and we have rightly heard much about that this week, including in statements and urgent questions. I pay tribute to all right hon. and hon. Members and to the noble Lord Arbuthnot for the work they have done on this issue. I also pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton. In 2021, as a Back Bencher, he was fighting hard for sub-postmasters, and he has diligently pursued this issue in his ministerial role. That is his record on this issue and on much else, too. I remind the House that when he was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking, he helped people whose businesses had been deliberately and cynically destroyed by their lenders, winning compensation from Lloyds, HBOS and Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. He is a very good man, and I know that he will bring forward legislation on this issue quickly.

The hon. Lady mentioned NHS performance data. Monthly performance data shows that in November overall waiting lists fell by more than 95,000 from October, down to 7.6 million. There were also 60,000 fewer patients waiting for care in November than in the previous month, and 112,000 fewer than in September. We have some difficult issues to deal with post pandemic, but the Prime Minister's plan is working, and the new Secretary of State for Health is bringing forward further measures. As the hon. Lady will know, we have stood up an enormous number of new services and new healthcare professionals as well as immense numbers of new diagnostic centres, and we are vastly increasing the number of operations that can take place.

I do not wish to take any lectures from the hon. Lady on performance in the NHS. I point her to what Labour is doing in Wales, where I think the current situation in

terms of waiting lists is four times worse than in England. Nor will I take any lessons on tax from a party that is clobbering British citizens where it is in power. It is doubling rates in Wales, and its London Mayor is clobbering hard-working people and charities with the ultra low emission zone. He has just capitulated to the militant trade unions on transport but does not know where to find the money to do that. Labour is soft on crime; the Met's £70 million black hole in its budget demonstrates that. Time and again, where Labour is in power, it shows that it is not on the side of the British people.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly mentioned the holocaust exhibition, and you, Mr Speaker, will lead the holocaust service in a few days' time. Recently, I met holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who said that the proposed memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens was too small for its purpose and too large for the park.

The hybrid Committee will meet on Tuesday and Wednesday next week. Will my right hon. Friend consider talking to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to see whether they could put up scaffolding on a temporary basis to show the amount of space taken by the box of the so-called learning centre, and perhaps some plywood boards to illustrate the 23 fins that are supposed to be there? Then, we could go round the outside of the park to see whether it is visible, and see from inside how much damage it does to that well-loved park.

Penny Mordaunt: I know that my hon. Friend continues to press on this particular project. He will know that I am limited in what I can do to assist him, but I will write to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make sure that he has heard, again, what my hon. Friend has said.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Bliadhna mhath ùr—happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in this place and watching.

Some positive news to start our first business questions of 2024: recent data from the Office for National Statistics and the Scottish Parliament Information Centre—the Commons Library equivalent—shows that Scotland's gender pay gap is at a record low, and almost half that of the UK as a whole. Women's weekly full-time pay has risen more than 10% in the last year. Any gap is, of course, too high, but I am sure that the Leader of the House would like to acknowledge the Scottish Government's gender pay gap action plan, the first in the UK, which undoubtedly has helped to achieve those welcome results.

The Leader of the House's Government could take several steps to help end the gender pay gap and advance equality right across these isles. After repeatedly shelving the employment Bill, they could finally act to make workplaces fairer, particularly in the current cost of living crisis, which we know impacts women more. They could legislate for mandatory gender and ethnicity pay

gap reporting. They could finally deliver compensation for WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality—who have waited far too long to receive justice. More broadly, they could tackle the gender pension gap, as yearly incomes among pensioners are on average more than £7,000 lower for women.

While the Leader of the House considers her response to those suggestions, could she also respond to reports in the media that her Government blocked a minority ethnic woman from joining the board of Channel 4 without offering a reason? I am curious to hear what action she took in response to the recent comments by the Home Secretary, and whether she will condemn them now. They do nothing to dispel perceptions that a culture of misogyny in the UK Government is hampering progress on these issues. As she is a former Minister for Women and Equalities, I am sure that these matters are close to her heart, so will she support a debate on them, where perhaps some solutions might finally be agreed?

Penny Mordaunt: I also wish the hon. Lady a very happy new year. I do welcome the good news on the gender pay gap in Scotland. It is nice to see the SNP championing some good progress in Scotland and giving credit where it is due.

With regard to the UK Government's record, we are making good progress: since 2010 we have an additional 2 million women in work. As the author of the women in work road map, which looks at every aspect of a woman's life and tries to address the reasons why she is financially disadvantaged right through her life, from when she leaves school, through raising a family to the pensions gap, I know that this Government are committed to delivering on those disparities.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of Channel 4. I do not know the answer to that today, but I shall certainly ensure that the relevant Department has heard what she said.

The hon. Lady will know what the Home Secretary has said about the other matter she raised. I hope she also knows that the Home Secretary is a very decent fellow who loves his wife greatly. They have been through a lot in recent years as a couple and the hon. Lady will also know that.

I will conclude by adding some further good news about Scotland, which I hope the hon. Lady will welcome. I am delighted that part of the Stone of Destiny has been recovered from SNP headquarters. I am sure that is a great relief to all Members. It is easy to lose things, I know, like a couple of billion quid from your budget, but I am sorry to hear that the SNP has taken as much care of it as it has taken as the steward of Scotland's public services. Happily, the Tupperware container it was stored in has protected it during its stay and the police raids on that premises. I join my Scottish colleagues in encouraging the SNP to find a more suitable home for it.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Traditional craft skills provide jobs and sustain businesses. They also emphasise our shared history: everything from wheelwrights to weavers, and from corsetry to carpentry. It was therefore very good news that, after a long campaign by the all-party parliamentary group for craft, which I chair, the Government announced that our country will now join the UNESCO convention

for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. Will the Leader of the House bring a statement to the House saying when we will join, which will allow colleagues across the Chamber to question what further steps the Government might take to promote the expertise and experience that epitomises the best of Britain?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend both for his question and for the diligent work he and his colleagues have done in raising the profile and shining a spotlight on the incredible heritage of crafts and skills that we ought to celebrate retaining and to educate others about. I shall certainly write to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Given that my right hon. Friend has just missed departmental questions today, I will ask her to inform him about the timetable.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I wish you and Members across the House a very happy new year.

I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business for next Thursday. I give her advance notice that we have a heavily subscribed application for a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day on Thursday 25 January, if we are allocated the time. Holocaust Memorial Day itself is on 27 January.

The Backbench Business Committee would very much welcome applications for debate slots in Westminster Hall. We can secure for Members debate slots on Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons. While we have a glut of applications for the Chamber, we very much welcome applications for Westminster Hall debates to be submitted as soon as possible. I am also glad to report that application forms for Backbench Business debates can now be attained from the Vote Office, so Members can now just pick up a form, fill it in and submit it.

On a local issue for my constituency, the Tyne bridge between Gateshead and Newcastle has been earmarked for funding from the Department for Transport to give it a much-needed repair job and upgrade. I am afraid, though, that the money has been promised but has not been forthcoming, and the work very much needs to start as soon as possible. Indeed, if we do not get the work done, it will not be sound, solid and pristine for its anniversary in four years' time. Will the Leader of the House check what is happening with the Department for Transport and see whether the funds can be released so that we can get on with the work?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his very helpful advert for future Backbench Business debates. In particular, it is good to hear that the Holocaust Memorial Day debate will be very well attended. It obviously has particular poignancy this year. I congratulate him on his innovation with the Vote Office. That is indeed welcome progress.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned a very important constituency matter. As well as celebrating a landmark anniversary, the bridge is a vital thoroughfare for his constituents. Given that the next session of Transport questions will not be until February, I shall write to the Secretary of State on his behalf.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): As a Lancashire MP, Mr Speaker, you will be aware that salmon stocks run on a knife edge in our rivers. [*Laughter.*] I know that there are many famous salmon rivers near your home, Mr Speaker. May I ask the Leader of the House if we can have an urgent debate on the decline in this iconic species in England? Part of that debate will have to cover the impact that cormorant predation is having on salmon smolts.

Before I sit down, I must draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a former, very undistinguished, chair of the Angling Trust.

Penny Mordaunt: I know that this is a matter of concern for many Members around the country. In my own county a number of rivers are suffering particularly as a result of the issues raised by my hon. Friend. Given that the next relevant questions session will not be until February, I will write to the Secretary of State to make him aware of those issues.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): May I wish you and your staff a happy new year, Mr Speaker?

As my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House pointed out, the handling of the Post Office scandal and the delayed justice involved will be familiar to many people, including my constituents, who have been caught up in similar outrageous scandals from Grenfell to Windrush to contaminated blood. In each case Ministers tell them that there is nothing they can do, until they are forced into action by public shame. Will the Leader of the House please allow Government time in which we can make progress for the victims of those scandals?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that many Members have constituents who are still waiting for compensation or the resolution of issues on a number of fronts. I shall not repeat what I said in response to the shadow Leader of the House, but I will say that I shall ask the Cabinet Office what more the head of the civil service can do to ensure that lessons are learnt from the last few weeks in particular. I know that the Cabinet Office evaluates inquiries to try to improve the quality of subsequent work. That has certainly happened in connection with big public inquiries, when it has looked into what constitutes good practice in respect of everything from looking after witnesses to ensuring that those inquiries take place speedily. However, I will ensure that the relevant people in the Cabinet Office have heard the hon. Lady's concerns, which I am sure are echoed by many other Members on both sides of the House.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): On Friday 23 February my private Member's Bill, the Hereditary Titles (Female Succession) Bill, is due to be debated, but sadly it is No. 5 on the Order Paper, and I fear that we may not have much time in which to debate it. I wonder whether the Leader of the House could allocate Government time for a debate on the constitutional sexism which means that an eighth of the seats in the other place are reserved for men. Through such a debate we might be able to seek Government support, and also demonstrate the strength of feeling on both sides of the House that this constitutional sexism needs to end.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will have heard that expression of support for her Bill from Members in all parts of the House. I congratulate her on her diligence: I know that she has been working with the Cabinet Office for several years to ensure that any impediment to her Bill's progress is dealt with. It is a very narrow Bill, which does not deal with any other issues such as inheritance.

I will certainly ensure that the relevant Minister at the Cabinet Office is aware that the Bill is on the Order Paper. I know that my hon. Friend is having discussions with many Ministers about it, and if I can facilitate any of those conversations, I stand ready to do so.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): More than 10 hospitality venues close each day in the UK. Before Christmas, I visited the wonderful Abbey deli in Bath to hear about the challenges that hospitality businesses face in my constituency. I was told that one solution might be a sliding scale of VAT, which could result in both more tax revenue for the Government and higher profits for small businesses. Can we have a statement from the relevant Minister on what the Government will do to support hospitality businesses in 2024?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. She will know that the Treasury, in particular, has been very concerned about this sector, to which it provided particular support through the pandemic years. Since then, it has continued to support the sector through rates relief and so forth. I fully appreciate that VAT thresholds are a particular problem for these types of businesses, and I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has heard what she says. The hon. Lady is a very experienced parliamentarian, and she will know what she can do as we approach the Budget to ensure that these issues are addressed.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My right hon. Friend has referred to arm's length Government agencies, of which the Post Office is just one. I am sure that Members across the House will have experience of tracking down decision makers within these organisations to hold them to account on behalf of our constituents. Can we have a debate on the accountability of these agencies? It may emerge from that debate how we can make them more accountable.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that suggestion. I think it would be a very timely debate indeed. I have already expressed my views on the subject, and I know that, on Monday, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), spoke about how accountability is key to ensuring good oversight of arm's length bodies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) knows how to apply for a debate, and I am sure it would be well attended.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My constituent, Mr Richard Troote, had to wait over 18 months to receive from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs a national insurance refund worth more than £1,300 for the tax year 2021-22. HMRC still has not responded to his complaint, or indeed his request for a complaint, on the refund.

Could the Leader of the House ask for a written statement on what Treasury Ministers will do to provide more support to HMRC civil servants to try to deal with these backlogs? In a cost of living crisis, none of our constituents can afford to wait 18 months for these refunds. It is not acceptable.

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. Money owed by HMRC accrues interest, but that arrangement is not reciprocal. As Treasury questions will not be until later next month, I will write to the Treasury if he gives me details of the case. Hopefully we will be able to get this resolved swiftly for his constituent.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can we have a debate on bus priority measures so that I can express my constituents' strong opposition to the proposal by Barnet Council and the Mayor of London to introduce bus lanes on the A1000 in High Barnet and Whetstone? They will cause huge congestion, they will damage local businesses and they are not needed or wanted.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is right that any such proposal should really be developed with input from the local community, and something has gone wrong if the community is so galvanised against a scheme that is due to come to the area. The next Transport questions are not until 8 February, but I will make sure that the Secretary of State knows about her concerns. I am afraid that the Mayor of London is the decision maker, and I hope he will listen to her and her constituents.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When we ask written questions and when our offices require information from Government Departments, our constituents expect a comprehensive response. However, we are getting standardised responses from UK Visas and Immigration, in particular. We have desperate people who fear for their future, so will the Leader of the House talk to the Home Office about how we can have comprehensive responses so that we can know the timelines, the details and the reasons for the delays in processing cases?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady and perhaps other colleagues are not getting the quality of replies that they need. She will know that we took some measures with the Home Office to try to improve its correspondence services to this House, including getting the permanent secretary to come in to see me. She will also know that Home Office surgeries are available for hon. Members, but I will certainly make sure that the permanent secretary has heard again what she has said. I will also make sure that my teams who work with the parliamentary clerks in those Departments have heard what she has said and will pass that back.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Yesterday, at Prime Minister's questions, it was a real pleasure to welcome the former Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir Chris Tickell, now the Chief Royal Engineer. The Royal Engineers are a key part of community life in the Medway towns and their ranks make up 10% of the British armed forces. The Leader of the House knows from her own experience that the UK has some of the finest armed forces in the

world, but there is a real question about recruitment and retention in the British armed forces. May we have an urgent statement from the Ministry of Defence setting out what concrete steps the Government are taking to address that? I declare an interest, in that I used to be a reservist in the British armed forces.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question and for his previous service. Unfortunately, the date of the next Defence questions has yet to be finalised, so I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what he has said today and the fact that he has raised this issue.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The strong rationale for HS2 was always about the capacity on the west coast line, rather than speed. The Select Committee has now learned that when HS2 starts to run from London to Birmingham it will actually mean fewer seats on trains further north to Manchester, thus reducing the capacity. Given that the Government created this mess by cancelling HS2 to Manchester, may we have a statement or debate in Government time on how we increase capacity on the west coast main line, so that Manchester is properly served by rail services?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important matter. Given that Transport questions are not until 8 February, I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what he has said today. I am sure that this will be about not just rail lines, but rolling stock being purchased and many other issues.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I am sure the whole House will be relieved to hear that the takeover of Southend United football club was finally settled over the festive period. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Conservative leader of Southend City Council, Councillor Tony Cox, on his exceptional efforts in getting that across the line and, of course, Justin Rees, the new owner? Will she also update this House on when the football governance Bill is going to be debated? Many Members want to contribute to that debate, to make sure that we have a more secure future for English football.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say that we are delighted to hear that Southend United is alive and kicking. As a Portsmouth fan, I very much appreciate how much that will mean to the local community. I congratulate everyone on all that they have done to ensure that that happened, particularly Councillor Tony Cox, as I understand he played a major role. I believe that the football governance Bill has support in all parts of the House; we will bring it forward swiftly and further business will be announced in the usual way.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Across the House, I think we all welcome the Government's action this week on the Horizon scandal, the biggest miscarriage of justice in the UK. Does the Leader of the House think it will take an ITV drama for the Government to act quickly on the infected blood scandal, which is of course the largest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS? As we already have the final

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

recommendations on compensation from Sir Brian Langstaff, why can the Government not bring forward a statement next week setting out that compensation will start to be paid from next week?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this issue yet again. I am in regular contact with the Paymaster General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), and I am confident that it will not take an ITV drama for us to resolve the issue. He is working through what the right hon. Lady will know are some very difficult issues. He has the final shift in this particular story, and I am confident he will deliver on it.

We were all shocked by the layer on layer of injustice that was levelled against those who suffered in the Post Office Horizon scandal. Terrible and shocking as that was, the right hon. Lady and I know that the infected blood inquiry is on another level. We want to ensure people get justice, whether they were infected directly or were affected in some way. We are determined to do that, and I know that the Paymaster General is going to deliver.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I have met with several families in my constituency whose children have education, health and care plans, yet they still experience difficulties finding special educational needs and disabilities support. I have taken up their cases with senior council officers, who tell me that SEND is the No. 1 financial challenge for the council. Can we have a debate on the changes made in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the effect they are having through increased demand for services in local authorities? In North Yorkshire alone, the council believes 1,000 cases last year were attributable to changes made by that Act.

Penny Mordaunt: My normal answer would be that my hon. Friend needs to apply for a debate and that I am sure it would be well attended, but that is not required because there is such a debate this afternoon. My hon. Friend is always first out of the blocks, and he has got the points he wishes to raise in *Hansard* before anyone else, I congratulate him on doing so.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Leader of the House is always keen to talk about competent government, yet her Government pay £318 million every day in debt interest and national debt is £37,730 for every man, woman and child in the UK. The Government have burned £4.2 billion worth of personal protective equipment and have wasted £66,600 million on HS2, which is now just a rail link from London to Birmingham. In the spirit of her interest in competent government, will the Leader of the House make a statement on which of those achievements she feels most clearly illustrates the competence of her Government?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is right that we have been through some very difficult challenges; responding to a global pandemic was one of them. Despite all those difficulties, we still manage to have people in England paying lower tax than people in Scotland and we have

managed to have a balanced budget, as opposed to the Scottish National party, which is £2 million adrift over the next four years.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): St Helier Hospital has been saved, thankfully. Accident and emergency and maternity services are now protected within the London Borough of Sutton, and a second state-of-the-art hospital is being built in our borough as well. Work is already under way to prepare the land and improvement works are happening at the hospital, but can we have a debate in Government time on the progress in delivering the Government's new hospital programme and the benefits it has for my constituents in Carshalton and Wallington?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all he has done to secure the new facilities—I think he has two new healthcare facilities in his local area. He will know how to apply for a debate; I envisage that it would cover not just capital infrastructure, but the massive uplift in healthcare professionals, as it is no good just having bricks and mortar. He will know that we have smashed our manifesto target of recruiting 50,000 new nurses.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): A ceasefire in Gaza is desperately needed—one that begins with humanitarian pauses and becomes sustained, so that the remaining hostages can be got out and, crucially, aid can be got in. Given that UN agencies are critical to getting aid into Gaza but have secured only half the \$1.2 billion needed to implement their response plan and support the immediate humanitarian needs in Gaza and the west bank, can we have a debate in Government time on what more Britain can do to galvanise international efforts behind the UN's flash appeal to support the Palestinians?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter and, in doing so, for providing an advert for that unmet need. He will know that, as well as stepping forward and providing aid to support people both in this particular humanitarian crisis and prior to October, the UK has played a considerable role in not just providing funding but getting others to pledge and deliver finance. I shall make sure that the Foreign Secretary has heard his concerns in that area. I will also write to the international development Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), asking him to contact the hon. Gentleman's office to update him on what more is being done.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Can we have a debate on the UK Government's support for Nigeria to defend freedom of religion or belief in light of the appalling atrocity that took place on Christmas eve in Plateau state? At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, a co-ordinated attack by Fulani militants saw 15 villages attacked and approximately 200 people killed, in one of the largest mass attacks in recent years. Christians appeared to be specifically targeted, as militants went from door to door seeking out church pastors to kill. A debate would enable us to join calls for justice, restoration and humanitarian support for the thousands who have been displaced.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that appalling atrocity. It is one of the largest mass attacks that we have seen in recent history and will have brought absolute terror to that community. She will know that the Foreign Office is doing considerable work through the “Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria” programme. The Department will have been very shocked and disappointed to see this take place. I shall make sure that both the Foreign Secretary and the international development Minister have heard what she has said.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Leader of the House said that she would take no lessons on the NHS, yet in the past four years alone the number of patients waiting more than four hours in Barnsley A&E has risen by 400%. Why, under this Conservative Government, do my constituents have to wait so long for basic healthcare?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that we are dealing with the unprecedented challenges arising from the pandemic. She will know that we have invested record amounts in the NHS. She will know also that there has been an unprecedented uplift in the number of healthcare professionals. She will know also from the figures out today that those waiting lists are coming down, and we will continue with that work. It has taken a huge amount of investment in diagnostic centres and in providing 2 million more operations to crack through that backlog. Although covid itself is over, we are still dealing with some of the issues that were caused by that pandemic, but we will get through it, and we will return to normal business in the NHS.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The ombudsman concluded that there was official maladministration in relation to those in the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, who were not properly informed about changes to their state pensions. We have been waiting for its further report on whether this caused injustice to the victims. I understand that a provisional version of that report is now written, with a final vision therefore imminent. Given most people expect that there will have been an injustice in many cases and given the scale of redress that will be required where it is found, can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government are aware of these provisional findings and let us know when Ministers will bring forward details of a redress scheme for Parliament to debate and properly approve?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter. This is a critical piece of work. I will make sure that both the relevant Minister and the ombudsman’s office have heard his concerns today, and I will ask the Minister to give an update on timing.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Schoolchildren in south-east Northumberland have always enjoyed the ability to choose which school they want to attend, but a change in the oversubscription criteria has meant that many kids, mainly in rural areas, are separated from the people they used to go to school with, and their friends and family. They also often have much longer journey times to get to a different school. Can we have a debate in Government time about student allocation in schools in south-east Northumberland, please?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. It is really important that we have genuine school choice. That is part of the way that we can drive standards. Of course, we can only have that if there is good local planning on school places and people anticipate the need. I will certainly ensure that what he has said is heard by the Secretary of State for Education. The next Question Time is on 29 January, if he wishes to raise the matter directly, but it is an issue of local planning and decision making.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I am very much looking forward to welcoming the Leader of the House to Bracknell on Saturday. While there are many challenges out there, and sadly some negativity and vitriol on social media, will she reinforce her customary positive narrative by giving a shout-out for all that is good about east Berkshire—notably, our fantastic education and employment opportunities, our superb sense of community, and all those who are doing so much to help others?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very much looking forward to visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency. We have been through a rough few years, but the people of this country and his constituency have been absolutely stoic. I know that his local area enjoys nearly full employment and high average wages. I think that all 40 schools in his area are rated good or outstanding, and his business community has attracted unprecedented foreign investment. I know that he is eager to do more for his constituents, but I look forward to learning more about what his community is delivering when I visit shortly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I gently point out that it is quite important to ask the Leader of the House something that relates to business in the House, rather than for shout-outs, which are not quite appropriate for business questions.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I invite the Leader of the House, and in fact all hon. Members, to join me and Samaritans on Monday for a brew. Blue Monday may have been a term invented by the travel industry to encourage us to book holidays, but we have converted it to Brew Monday, when we can talk about the importance of talking to each other in an effort to prevent suicide. To back that up, can we have a debate in Government time on the national suicide prevention strategy, and look at what else we can do besides Brew Monday to prevent suicides?

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of all colleagues, I thank the hon. Lady for all the work that she has done over a long period to raise awareness of the issue, and particularly of Brew Monday. We know that the week in the wake of Christmas is a difficult one. Credit card bills arrive and all sorts of things happen to add further stress to individuals. I thank her for raising awareness of Brew Monday and encouraging everyone to take part in it. She will know how to apply for a debate, but I hope that she will recognise that the Chancellor committed in the last Budget to provide an extra £10 million over the next few years to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector through the suicide prevention grant. We have that strategy, and I am sure that if she applied for a debate it would be well attended.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Last Friday, I visited residents affected by the floods in Leighton Buzzard. I have also had communication from the leader of Central Bedfordshire Council pointing out the great upset about damage to residential properties and highways in the local authority area. Although we were severely affected, we are not a local authority designated under the Government's flood recovery framework, so could the Leader of the House give me some guidance on how we can get more investment from water companies, the Environment Agency and internal drainage boards to ensure that we protect properties and highways and prevent such an awful event from affecting people in the future?

Penny Mordaunt: May I first say how sorry I am that my hon. Friend's constituents have been affected? He will know that, through the Government's long-term policy statement published in 2020, there is a methodical plan to protect properties. We have protected about 600,000 homes from flooding over the past few years with an unprecedented investment, but clearly some areas are not eligible for particular schemes. Given that the next questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will not be until next month, and that this will be an imminent issue for his local colleagues, I will write to the Secretary of State and ask that someone from the Department contacts his local authority to discuss the issues they are having and see what support can be provided.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): In the wake of the Post Office Horizon IT scandal, could a Minister from the Cabinet Office make a statement and announce an immediate investigation into all Fujitsu IT systems in use by the Government, and those that have been used historically, to establish whether they have bugs and glitches? We need to look particularly at the Child Maintenance Service, which I am aware used a Fujitsu system until at least 2021.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I refer him to *Hansard*, where he can see what has been said already in the statement and urgent question earlier this week. I shall certainly ensure that both the Post Office Minister and the Cabinet Office Minister with oversight of procurement have heard what he has said today.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Watermouth Valley camping park in my constituency, which has been named the best campsite in the UK in the camping and glamping awards? May we have a debate in Government time about how we could better support tourism and hospitality businesses by reducing VAT, enabling more businesses to enjoy similar successes?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I congratulate Watermouth Valley camping park on its achievements. My hon. Friend will know that, as we approach the Budget, the Chancellor's door will be open for lobbying—I know that other hon. Members have mentioned VAT rates, in particular. It is surely one of the upsides of our new-found freedoms that we are able to vary rates on products and services. I know that this sector, as well as the hospitality

sector, will be keen to ask for things in the forthcoming Budget. I will certainly ensure that the Chancellor has heard what she has said.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the upcoming business. Residents of the town of Sherburn in Elmet, in my constituency, have faced a wave of awful crime in recent months, with cars stolen from driveways and homes burgled. I am sure that she can appreciate just how stressful and traumatic that is for residents, who feel unsafe in their own homes. That is compounded by the fact that Sherburn, like many rural towns in Britain, does not have its own manned police station. May we therefore have an urgent debate on how we can support residents and local police forces, such as mine, to tackle the growing and pernicious issue of rural crime?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. We have a good record and have halved crime since 2010 with roughly the same resource—once online fraud is stripped out—but some areas and issues remain stubborn. I very much appreciate that it is particularly challenging in rural areas. I will certainly ensure that the Home Office has heard his concerns. I know that, in other areas, there is good practice where even if there is not a physical police station, there is a physical police presence, and a lot of good practice is being shared across police areas, but I will ensure that the Home Office has heard what he has said.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned the chaos that would have ensued had the RMT gone ahead with its strike on the underground over this past week. The strike was called after all the other trade unions had accepted the 5% pay offer, and the RMT and other unions were told there was no more money left. However, at the very last moment—literally hours before the strike was due to start—the Mayor of London magically found £30 million. He proposes to increase the council tax share in London by 8.7%. He refuses to give the Metropolitan police the funding it needs, and indeed he can find money for his vanity schemes, yet he still carries on with the ULEZ expansion, which is hated across London. May we have a debate in Government time on the chaos that seems to ensue in City Hall, and on its finances?

Penny Mordaunt: Londoners are enjoying the worst of all possible worlds. On the Mayor's own assessment, he has had spectacular failure with regard to strikes—under his tenure, Londoners have had to endure 139 transport strikes, I think. My hon. Friend is right that this is not just capitulating to unions, while not protecting basic public services; it is rewarding people for taking strike action. I am not sure whether the Mayor has found £30 million, as there is some scepticism and questions are being asked about his budget, but he certainly has not found the £70 million shortfall in the Met's budget to allow it to continue its reforms and good work. It is a sorry state, and I hope it will not be too long before they will have someone in City Hall who will look after their interests, have the backbone to stand up to militant trade unions and realise that clobbering hard-working people and charities through ULEZ is not a good idea.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): In November the Carrbridge Centre, which does important work with children and other residents in Woodchurch in my constituency, had its Barclays bank account closed without warning, despite the fact that there was a very large amount of money in the account. It is one of many charities across the country that have experienced the same thing. The closure placed the centre in an extremely difficult situation, as it could not pay in or out of the account. It had an impact on the running of the centre and the payment of staff wages and was especially problematic during the run-up to Christmas with the special activities that the centre had planned. I am pleased to say that those events eventually did go ahead thanks to the determination and commitment of the staff and trustees, but none the less it is wrong that they have had to go through this. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of such arbitrary decisions by banks such as Barclays on charities and on possible action that can be taken against banks acting in that way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about what has happened in the hon. Lady's constituency, and I applaud the staff and trustees who continued undeterred to provide those services and support to their local communities. In such cases, I always hope that the public affairs departments of businesses—in this case Barclays—are listening in to business questions. If Barclays has not already made redress for this situation, I hope that it will get in touch with her office. I will ensure that the Minister has heard what has been said. The difficulty in these situations is not just that something happens and an account is frozen or closed, but that people are incapable of finding out why that has happened or trying to get it resolved. It is a shoddy situation and I hope Barclays will phone her this afternoon.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): In August last year, Partington post office in my constituency closed, following the retirement of its long-serving postmistress. Partington is an isolated community, with low levels of car ownership and appalling public transport, and of course its town centre banks have long since closed. It is several miles to the nearest main post office—or, for those without transport, a multiple-hour round trip. May we have a debate in Government time on the support available to post offices in isolated communities that do not qualify for the rural support services grant, but where it is incredibly challenging for those communities to reach other post offices, to ensure that those services remain in communities such as Partington?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. He will know that it is covered by work undertaken by the Post Office Minister and by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which runs a successful scheme looking at how services might be retained in the local community, even if the bricks and mortar of the post office have been stood down. The next questions to the Department, which I think runs that best practice scheme, are on 22 January,

so the hon. Gentleman might wish to raise the matter then, but I will also ensure that both relevant Ministers have heard his concerns and ask their offices to get in touch with him.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for another opportunity to ask a question on the state of freedom of religion or belief. In the persecution of Christians in Ukraine under Russian control, one pastor, Dimitry, suffered under Russian interrogation because of his evangelical faith. Russian soldiers have removed crosses, stopped services, fingerprinted everyone in the congregation and taken possession of church buildings. The Russian actions against Christians in Ukraine must stop.

At the same time, a new religious law has been introduced in Belarus. In 2023, Belarusian authorities bulldozed and liquidated the New Life Pentecostal church, detained and fined dozens of Christian religious leaders for perceived political activities, and blacklisted human rights organisations working on religious freedom issues. Last week, on 3 January, Belarus signed into law provisions imposing more restrictions on religious communities. Will the Leader of the House join me in denouncing that Belarusian law, and will she ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister to take up the matter with the Belarusian authorities?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again shining a spotlight, this week on two appalling situations: one in Belarus and the other in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory. In the Orthodox calendar, Christmas was just last Saturday, so the events will have been particularly concerning for many in those communities. I will certainly ensure that the Foreign Office has heard his concerns. He knows that it will take those matters seriously, and I thank him again for bringing them to the attention of the House.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware of the increasing incidence of flooding events, as we heard earlier from the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), which are having a huge impact not only on the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people in so many of our constituencies across the country, but on businesses, on infrastructure and on our farmers' winter crops, which could have a huge impact on food prices as we get into the summer and autumn. I urge her to grant a debate on flooding in Government time.

Penny Mordaunt: That is a concern for many colleagues across the House. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have invested unprecedented amounts in flood defences—the last tranche was £5.2 billion—and have protected many communities, including 600,000 properties. He will know that some flooding is planned—land is set aside where we expect floods to take place—but he is right that we are facing more extreme weather events. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns, which he may also wish to raise directly with the Secretary of State on 1 February.

Civil Nuclear Road Map

11.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on civil nuclear power in the UK. Today, we have published three key documents that reinforce the UK's position as a leader in the civil nuclear renaissance: a civil nuclear road map, a consultation on alternative routes to market, and a consultation on a proposed policy for siting new nuclear power stations. That sets us on a path towards deploying up to 24 GW of nuclear power in Britain by 2050 as part of a cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy system for the future. It is the biggest investment in more than 70 years.

In the civil nuclear road map we are setting out our overarching strategy for the deployment of new nuclear reactors in the UK, and how His Majesty's Government intend to work with the nuclear sector to deliver that ambition. The road map establishes our vision for a vibrant British nuclear sector, providing detail on the policies that we are pursuing to enable delivery, covering areas such as siting, regulation, financing, the joint work that we are undertaking with Defence nuclear colleagues to develop the required nuclear skills and supply chain in the UK, and how we are taking care of our nuclear legacy through policies on decommissioning and waste management.

Announcements in the road map include a commitment to reform the regulations, financing and decommissioning of civil nuclear to make it more agile, thereby streamlining regulation while retaining the UK's world-class standards of safety. For example, the measures that we are announcing today could cut by up to 50% the approval times for reactors that are already approved by overseas regulators.

We are also announcing our commitment to reduce global dependence on Russian fuel and to grow the UK supply chain by investing £300 million, alongside industry, in the British production of clean, green high-assay low-enriched uranium fuel for innovative new reactors, thereby offering a commercial alternative to Russia for ourselves and our allies and partners.

The road map also sets out our long-term ambition for nuclear, providing high-level timelines and key decision points for a wide range of nuclear technologies over the next decades. Those technologies include small modular reactors, advanced modular reactors and gigawatt-scale projects, including a new commitment to explore a further gigawatt-scale nuclear project after Sizewell C. Advanced nuclear technologies, such as SMRs and AMRs, present the opportunity to decarbonise across the energy sector, from grid electricity through industrial heat to entirely new industries such as the production of hydrogen and synthetic fuel.

Last year, we set up Great British Nuclear as an arm's length body responsible for helping to deliver new nuclear projects and lead our energy revolution, but we are also keen to harness innovation in the private sector and help developers to bring forward new nuclear projects outside of GBN's ongoing SMR selection process. We are therefore today also launching our alternative routes to market consultation. That consultation, which will

run for 12 weeks, aims to understand where the Government could support the private sector to bring forward advanced nuclear projects.

Finally, in recognition of our enhanced nuclear ambitions and the exciting potential offered by advanced nuclear technologies, we are launching a public consultation on a proposed new policy for the siting of new nuclear power stations. That consultation marks an important first step in the process for developing a new nuclear national policy statement for England and Wales, and will run for eight weeks. The results of the consultation will be used to inform the drafting of the national policy statement document, which we intend to publish for further consultation.

The proposed siting processes announced today would, of course, apply only to England and Wales. Although our ambition is for a whole British nuclear revolution, the current Scottish Government sadly remain committed to blocking any planning application for new nuclear in Scotland under their devolved consenting regime. However, we continue to invite the Scottish Government to join us and more than 30 other countries around the world to allow for reinvestment in, and the renewal of, our nuclear capacity across the whole UK in order to meet our net zero and energy security objectives. Our intention is to designate the NPS in 2025—subject, of course, to parliamentary processes. For the first time, we intend for the NPS to provide a planning policy framework for SMRs and AMRs, as well as the traditional gigawatt-scale power stations.

To achieve the UK's nuclear ambitions, the Government believe that additional sites will be required for new nuclear projects, along with greater ongoing flexibility in the site selection process to enable new technologies. We are excited to introduce a positive shift in approach in the siting consultation: the new NPS will empower nuclear developers to identify potential sites for development, fostering developers' innovation and, indeed, flexibility. Although the existing designated nuclear sites may possess many inherent positive attributes that potentially make them a consideration for future development, the change allows for the exploration of diverse new locations. By entrusting developers with that responsibility, we aim to streamline the process, encourage creative solutions and enhance the overall efficiency of nuclear development, ultimately contributing to the growth and sustainability of the industry.

We propose that the siting of new nuclear would continue to be constrained by robust criteria that determine where development can occur. Developers would be empowered to undertake the initial screening of sites based on those criteria, with advice from regulators and statutory agencies. Of course, it is our intention that safety will remain paramount, with the highest safety, security and environmental standards overseen by the independent nuclear regulator and environment protection agencies. Public consultation and community engagement will also remain essential parts of the process. This package—this vision, this announcement—represents the biggest investment in nuclear in the UK for over 70 years, ensuring our energy security, keeping us on the path to net zero and delivering the jobs of the future: our nuclear future.

I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

11.48 am

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

The energy bills crisis of the past two years has exposed the deep vulnerabilities in Britain's energy system and the urgent need to build more home-grown power in this country so that we can cut energy bills and have real energy independence from dictators such as Putin. In that context, we support the Government's commitment to new nuclear power. Labour supports new nuclear, which must form a critical part of our future energy mix. Nuclear power is a long-term project for any country, and I want to give the industry and nuclear workers clear assurances that there is a cross-party consensus for nuclear power in this country.

It was the last Labour Government who identified 10 sites for new nuclear in 2009, and in the time since this Government's record has been one of continual delay and false dawns. Yesterday, I met people from west Cumbria who have been waiting six years for a decision on nuclear since the last plan collapsed on this Government's watch. The road map published today is two years later than they promised, and it still leaves a number of unanswered questions about how the Government intend to turn warm words into practical action, so I shall ask the Minister a number of questions.

First, I am glad that the Minister has woken up to the urgent fact that we need to generate more cheap, clean electricity in this country. In which year will any of the policies announced today actually cut bills for people? Secondly, it is all well and good talking about commitments to new stations in the next Parliament, but what is the timetable for the final investment decision for Sizewell C? The Government promised to have a final investment decision by the end of this Parliament, so will the Minister give a categorical promise today that that will be done? Time is running out. Thirdly, will he update us on the timetable for Hinkley Point C, originally promised to be delivered by 2017, and when will it start supplying power to households?

Fourthly, on SMRs, what is the timetable for concluding the competition? Just yesterday I met representatives trying to site SMRs who were complaining of long delays from Government and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority in getting the project moving. How will the Minister unblock that and wider SMR development? Fifthly, what steps are being taken to ensure that the UK retains critical skills in our nuclear sector? Nuclear jobs are high-skilled, well-paid and unionised jobs, and Labour supports the workers and unions in the nuclear industry in calling on the Government to ensure that investment in the industry supports good jobs and apprenticeships right through the supply chain. Finally, will the Minister address the ongoing concerns about the safety and security of our nuclear decommissioning process, given the disturbing revelations about Sellafield? What steps are being taken to ensure that every nuclear site is secure?

Labour supports new nuclear for Britain after 14 years of inaction under the Conservatives. The wider lesson is that this country needs a Government going full pelt for clean power. We should be investing as a country in nuclear, offshore wind, onshore wind, solar, hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, and all forms of clean power that can help to cut bills and make our country energy independent. That is what we need, and that is what a Labour Government will do.

Andrew Bowie: I am so pleased to hear the hon. Lady's support for the Conservative party's policies regarding nuclear, given that we are investing in all of the above and more. I do welcome the support of the official Opposition and their recent damascene conversion to the benefits of nuclear power, but we should never forget, in this place and beyond, that any nuclear projects in this country and any nuclear power stations have been delivered only by a Conservative Government. It is a record of which we were very proud. Labour was in power for 13 years and delivered nothing.

We are very proud today to be publishing our civil nuclear road map. As I say, it is important for the industry that there is cross-party consensus and agreement that investment in nuclear is to the benefit of this country, the economy and the environment and, indeed, will provide energy security and wean ourselves and our allies off our reliance on Vladimir Putin for our energy needs.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right that delivering new nuclear power stations will yield results for the British people and deliver cleaner bills. In Finland, where nuclear power stations are now delivering more than 40% of energy on to the grid, bills have dropped by an incredible 70%. She asked about the final investment decision on Sizewell C; we remain committed to making that decision by the end of this Parliament. On Hinkley Point C, we are in fact very proud of the progress that is being made. Just last month we saw the dome being lifted on to the top of reactor 1. I have nothing but admiration for the workforce and everybody involved in delivering that first-of-a-kind project at Hinkley, and we continue to support it.

The hon. Lady asked about the next phase of the small modular reactor competition. It will be launched within weeks, so I ask her to bide her time and keep her patience. We are very excited to have six fantastic technology companies bidding to deploy in the United Kingdom, and we are moving faster than any comparable programme around the world, to ensure that Britain and the British people benefit from investment in small modular reactors and the benefits they can bring to the energy mix and to local economies.

The hon. Lady asked about skills. One of the things that the nuclear industry can bring, and indeed delivers at this point, is high-skilled, high-wage jobs throughout the country, and indeed in many places where those jobs are at a premium. It is absolutely right that we look at how we can encourage more people, and make the spaces available within industry and in our educational institutions to get more people into the jobs of the future in the nuclear industry. That is why I, along with my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement, have launched the nuclear skills task force, chaired by Sir Simon Bollom. It will publish its initial findings and recommendations in the very near future.

As I said, I welcome the new-found support, optimism and positivity for nuclear demonstrated by the Labour party, and when we as the Conservative party go on to win at the next election, I am sure that the hon. Lady will continue to offer that support from the Opposition Benches.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Committee that I have the privilege of chairing published a big report on the future of nuclear power last year, calling for a comprehensive strategy for new nuclear, so I warmly welcome the Minister's statement and the publication today, which responds very comprehensively and substantially to many of the recommendations we made. In particular, I welcome the commitments to new gigawatt-scale nuclear as part of the 24 GW target; to streamline the regulation, which is extremely important; to small modular reactors; and to the security that comes from investing in our own domestic source of nuclear fuel. Those are very big steps forward. May I ask the Minister specifically to say whether the new site approval mechanism will allow these sites to be used for SMRs by the 2050 deadline or target?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for all the work he has done to champion nuclear, not only in his capacity as Chair of the Select Committee but in his time as Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, when he was in charge of getting this ship moving. To answer his question directly, yes it will. The new siting strategy will cover the possibility of the deployment of all technologies—SMR, AMR and gigawatt-scale reactors. I welcome my right hon. Friend's support.

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

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. He is absolutely right in one respect: the Scottish Government do not support the development of new nuclear power in Scotland. The reasons for that are simple: beside the environmental concerns, the economics do not lie. Nuclear power is slow to deliver and horrendously expensive, and the policy of recent years under Labour and Conservative Governments has been simply to allow private companies to privatise the profits while the risks are socialised for taxpayers. We on this side of the House—at least, on the SNP Benches—all know that Scotland's comparative advantages lie in hydrogen and renewables, both areas in which the Scottish Government's ambitions appear to considerably outstrip those of the current UK Government.

May I ask the Minister two simple questions? First, despite his disagreement with the Scottish Government's stance on planning and nuclear, will he and his Government respect the devolution settlement as it stands? Secondly, will he give an undertaking, as none of his predecessors over the last half century or more have been able to do, that when the multibillion-pound decommissioning liabilities become live for any new generation of nuclear power stations, they will lie squarely on the private companies that have benefited in the preceding decades and will not fall on the taxpayer?

Andrew Bowie: The Scottish National party, like almost every nationalist party in the world, has a misplaced belief in its own exceptionalism, and nowhere is that more true than on nuclear. At COP28, we saw over 30 countries come together to pledge to increase civil nuclear capacity around the world by a third, so clear and obvious is it that nuclear is essential not just in ensuring our energy security, benefiting local communities and driving forward our economy, but in reaching our

net zero goals and ensuring that we have a cleaner energy baseload in the future. Indeed, there is no net zero without nuclear.

It pains me, especially as a Scottish Member of Parliament, that the Scottish Government's wrong-headed position on this remains extant. I would very much welcome a change of direction within the Scottish Government. I urge the Scottish National party to look around the world at the countries joining with us in this nuclear renaissance and revival, and to think of the huge benefits that could be brought to Scotland, with its proud history in nuclear going back many decades, if it were to join us on this journey.

Of course we respect the devolution settlement. We are absolutely committed to maintaining it. What I urge, though, is a change of direction, a change of approach and a change of position by the Scottish Government, so that the Scottish people, the Scottish economy and the Scottish environment can benefit from future investment in nuclear that will be felt in England and Wales, and indeed in so many other countries around the world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Today's statement provides welcome clarity about the Government's road map for the delivery and revival of new nuclear energy capacity, and I will be writing on behalf of my Committee to the Minister shortly to raise some points about the SMR competition that he has touched on today. Notwithstanding the grudging support from those on the Opposition Front Bench, what steps is my hon. Friend taking to build the broad consensus behind this essential component of the delivery of net zero, so that the road map does not fall victim to the short-term thinking that bedevilled the delivery of a safe and effective renewal of nuclear capacity in the past, notably under the previous Labour Government?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support of this document and for the work that he has done in chairing the Committee to drive forward the arguments for further investment in nuclear. I know he shares my belief that if we are to reach net zero, nuclear will play a large part in the mix of energy solutions that we invest in.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to build a broad consensus. I genuinely welcome the support of the official Opposition for new investment in nuclear. As I said, when we look around the world, the pace at which the mood is changing and the broad acceptance of nuclear as a key benefit in reaching our net zero goals is incredible. It will take a lot of hard work on the part of all of us who believe in the benefits that nuclear can bring economically, to our energy security and, ultimately and most importantly, to the environment, to keep the pressure up. I look forward to his writing to me, and to discussing the issues that he has raised further, and I thank him once again for his broad support for what we are trying to deliver.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I welcome the statement? I was going to commend the Minister on the work that I know he has done, until he unfortunately became petty political—I think he spent a bit too much

time in Scottish politics. He will be aware that the small modular reactor assessment is already behind the Government's own timetable. That is undermining Rolls-Royce, which builds small reactors for the Royal Navy and has done for many decades. Meanwhile, the formidable American political industrial machine is hoovering up customers around the world. Can we not learn from the vaccine taskforce how to accelerate process while maintaining safety? Will he now get a move on so that we can build British modular nuclear reactors using British workers?

Andrew Bowie: I know the right hon. Gentleman would never stoop to petty politics in this Chamber or anywhere else, but I have to disagree with him. I share his passion for small modular reactors, and I share his belief that Rolls-Royce is a world-leading company that is delivering for this country right now and will continue to do so in future.

We are proud of the small modular reactor competition, which we launched in July. We have already completed the first process. We have six world-leading technologies competing to get investment from the UK Government for deployment here domestically, of which Rolls-Royce is of course a part. We will be launching the next phase in a matter of weeks. It is world-leading, and faster than any comparable programme in the world. The right hon. Gentleman says to get a move on, but we have not stopped to draw breath since we first launched GBN and the small modular reactor drawdown competition in the summer. However, I welcome his support for what we are doing, and I hope that he can encourage more of his colleagues to support it.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Today I am fighting back tears of joy and jubilation for this road map, because it is absolutely clear that we have a Minister and a Government who are utterly committed to nuclear—whether that is civil, defence, safe storage, medical isotopes or the entire supply chain. May I remind my hon. Friend the Minister that the road map clearly refers to the A595, the road between Barrow and Workington, where the journey began? Will he give his absolute assurance that he will remember where the journey began—with the commitment from my community and the community across Furness and west Cumbria—and ensure that that is at the forefront of his decision making on future missions?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend—she is a friend—is rightly proud of the contribution that Cumbria has made to our nuclear journey over the last century. The journey began at Calder Hall and has continued. She is right, and at the forefront of our decision making will be the experience, expertise and learning that has developed in and around her constituency, which will of course be at the forefront of our nuclear renaissance.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement, which is probably the most significant statement on energy policy for at least a decade. I welcome in particular the intention to streamline planning processes and regulation to reduce unnecessary costs and delays. May I ask for an assurance that if there is to be new nuclear development at Bradwell in Essex, it will be of a type that does not

affect the marine protected area of the Blackwater estuary, a historic oyster fishery on which many of my constituents depend?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his support at this exciting moment. Of course, many sites will be looked at for future nuclear development, and in every case they will have to adhere to the stringent, strong and gold-plated environmental standards that we expect of nuclear licensed sites across the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do apologise for having called two Members in a row from the same side. I shall immediately correct myself by calling two from the Opposition side.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I took no offence at all; it is fully understood.

The best route to affordable energy security is renewables. Nuclear power is blighted by delays and rocketing costs, and the Government are never honest about its much higher costs compared with renewables. On the Government's watch, renewables have faced long delays and the costs for offshore wind development have increased by 40%. Will a renewables road map soon follow the statement to address those challenges and ensure that the Government do not lose their competitive advantage in offshore wind development?

Andrew Bowie: I lose track of where the Liberal Democrats sit on nuclear. I know that their current leader was against it, then he was for it, and then against it again. Right now, I am not quite sure.

I do take issue with the hon. Lady's insinuation that we are not leading the world in renewables. We have the first, second, third, fourth and fifth—and, soon, the sixth—largest offshore wind farms in the world generating power right now for Great Britain. We are investing at pace in solar and in a host of new and emerging technologies because, unlike some parties, we believe that we should not invest all our time and money in one technology. We need a broad range of technologies if we are ever to meet our legally binding net zero commitment. I look forward to the day when the Liberal Democrats can hold a policy for more than five minutes and come to the House and actually support us on the journey to our net zero future.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. However, what lessons will be learned from previous and current projects on value for money? The National Audit Office was scathing about some of the decisions that had been taken on those projects. What more can be done to support manufacturing in this area right across the UK?

Andrew Bowie: Building up the UK's supply chain is essential. One of the huge benefits that will be accrued through this biggest-in-70-years investment in new nuclear is the ability to build up our manufacturing base in the United Kingdom, creating those high-wage, high-skilled jobs that we want to see in more communities around the entire country. Of course, lessons will be learned from previous projects. We are always looking at value

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for money for the British taxpayer, which is why, for example, we are using the regulated asset base model for funding Sizewell C.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's announcement today, because when the advanced gas-cooled reactors are decommissioned by 2030, we will have a dip in nuclear production. The Public Accounts Committee, of which I have the honour to be deputy chair, has done a lot of work on this. We recently had a follow-up visit to Sellafield. I agree with my hon. Friend that they do fantastic work there, but it is our largest single project, with a minimum cost of £200 billion over the next 100 years. Will he undertake to renew our efforts to get a better handle on the decommissioning costs, so that they can be properly allocated and we can have a true estimate of what nuclear generation costs?

Andrew Bowie: I agree with my hon. Friend on the amazing work being conducted at Sellafield in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). The lessons being learned through the decommissioning process at Sellafield will yield benefits. We are leading the way across the world on the decommissioning of sites and are very happy to be advising other countries on their decommissioning efforts. We need to ensure that any projects run by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority are proved to be value for money, and that we learn from the lessons of the past.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My party's policy is to support the development of the present nuclear sites in Wales, one of which is Trawsfynydd in my constituency. The Welsh Government have funded Cwmni Eginio to develop Trawsfynydd, and £20 million was allocated only last autumn for that purpose by the north Wales growth deal to enable critical development and planning, prior to the final investment decision to be made anon. Given the strategic developments and investments in Wales, can the Minister confirm that the entirely publicly owned Trawsfynydd, with its potential 550 jobs, remains a possible location for an SMR in the near future? Will he please visit Trawsfynydd?

Andrew Bowie: I would be delighted to visit the right hon. Lady's constituency. Trawsfynydd has exciting potential as a site for an SMR, and for other nuclear licensed activities. It and many others are potential sites for the deployment of these new technologies in the years ahead.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nuclear energy, I warmly welcome today's publication of the long-awaited civil nuclear road map, in particular the exploration of alternative routes to market for SMRs and AMRs outside the Great British Nuclear scheme. On the delivery of large-scale projects, I am curious to know why the road map states on page 20 that the Government will need to wait for the Sizewell C final investment decision before they can set out timelines and processes for a new large-scale project in the UK. That formal work and engagement in the Minister's team need not wait on the work of another team over which he does not have

control or oversight. In the spirit of speeding up delivery, might he begin this work now in readiness for maximising the time we have left before 2050 to get this done?

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Lady can be assured that work is already beginning on identifying future sites for large-scale gigawatt power stations. We are committed to announcing more in due course.

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): May I add my intense excitement for this announcement and, in particular, for the inclusion of advanced modular reactors in the road map? Finally we have a way forward for them. My hon. Friend knows how important it is to me to get an AMR in Hartlepool. He was with me on his first ever visit to Hartlepool on the day that we announced a two-year extension for our reactor, which takes us to 2026. Does this announcement mean what I think it does—the guarantee of a future for nuclear at Hartlepool? Is it only a matter of time before he comes back to announce not only what we will build there, but who will build it and when?

Andrew Bowie: I remember that visit distinctly—my first as the nuclear Minister. I thank the hon. Lady and everyone who hosts nuclear power stations in their constituencies for championing that industry, the sector and the workforce. The workforce and the sector have been widely castigated in the popular mindset over many years, but now are reaping the rewards of continued support from people such as my hon. Friend and others in this House. I am delighted that Hartlepool got the extension. The road map that we set out today will deliver a clear identification of what can be delivered, where and how. That means a bright future for nuclear in Hartlepool.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Nova Innovation in my constituency recently announced the wonderful news that it had won €20 million of investment from the EU to lead a pan-European consortium to create the Seastar tidal energy farm in Orkney, the largest tidal energy site in the world. Why does the UK Government continue to largely ignore this safe, lower cost, reliable form of energy? As Greenpeace points out, the energy industry itself knows that the economic case for slow, expensive nuclear just does not add up.

Andrew Bowie: Tidal received money for the very first time through the last auction round in the contracts for difference process. This Government are investing in tidal technologies, wind, solar, hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, continued exploration for oil and gas—which the hon. Lady's party opposes—and nuclear. Of course, it is fantastic news for her constituents and the businesses around Scotland that are winning contracts to invest in renewables. What, to their shame, Scottish National party representatives in this place never mention is the hundreds of thousands of jobs in Scotland that depend on the nuclear industry—manufacturing, construction, education and the fantastic work going on right now in Torness, the only generating power station in Scotland currently delivering power to 1 million homes. Perhaps the Scottish National party will come to the Chamber and explain how, when that power station closes down—as sadly and inevitably one day it will—they will replace

the power generated for Scottish homes under their plans to completely ignore this safe, secure and clean option for secure future energy.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the civil nuclear road map, in particular the recognition that we will need additional nuclear sites to those in the existing policy framework. Does the Minister agree that there is one big difference between a gigawatt reactor and an SMR—gigawatt reactors are very big, and SMRs are comparatively quite small? Therefore, does he believe that we need to consider smaller sites such as Dungeness in my constituency, which could be very suitable for such technologies as SMRs?

Andrew Bowie: Again, I welcome my hon. Friend's support and I thank him for hosting me on a visit to Dungeness—the fish and chips were exquisite. I agree that we will look at every site and possible site and judge them on the basis of what type of technology could be built there. That will benefit his community, communities around the country and the United Kingdom more widely.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is great that the Government have outlined plans for the biggest expansion of nuclear power in 70 years to reduce energy bills, which so many of our constituents struggle with on a daily basis. Minister, I ask you this question because you admitted that Northern Ireland—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he should not refer directly to the Minister. Let us have another go.

Jim Shannon: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. What provisions does the UK civil nuclear plan include to involve Northern Ireland? How will it ensure that the region's perspectives and concerns are adequately taken into account in the development and implementation of nuclear politics and policies, so that we can create jobs and strengthen our economy at the same time as other areas in the United Kingdom?

Andrew Bowie: As ever, the hon. Gentleman champions his constituents and the people and economy of Northern Ireland. It is essential to me that every part of our United Kingdom benefits from this once-in-a-generation investment into new nuclear. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss how Northern Ireland and his constituents in Strangford could benefit from investment in skills and the supply chain. Deployment of nuclear capabilities is a devolved competency, but I would be happy to meet him to see what his constituents can get from this historic announcement.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): From Anglesey, all the way up the coast to the tip of Cumbria, the north-west nuclear arc will be, as some Members have already suggested, dancing a little jig today. Springfields in Lancashire is the geographic and, I would argue, fuel production heart of that north-west nuclear arc. I welcome this announcement to secure the future £300 million investment to ensure that Vladimir Putin does not have his hands on the taps of advanced nuclear fuels. That is so important for the hundreds, if not thousands of people who live in South Ribble and work in the adjacent

Springfields. This investment helps Lancashire support the UK domestic nuclear industry, but can the Minister tell me if there are opportunities for exporting Lancashire nous, skills, capability and fuel to the world?

Andrew Bowie: Absolutely. Lancashire, like Cumbria, is at the heart of the vision we are announcing today. The £300 million investment in new nuclear fuels means that the United Kingdom will remain among a handful of nations committed and able to work across the entire fuel supply chain. The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is visiting Springfields as I speak, demonstrating our commitment to that plant and its people. Moving forward, we will be central to our allies and partners around the world being able to move away from and wean themselves off relying on hostile foreign actors like Vladimir Putin for their energy baseload. Lancashire will be key to doing that.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Nuclear is hugely important for our energy security, so I welcome today's statement. Missing from my atomic Friend's extensive list of the benefits of nuclear is how much kinder nuclear is on land use, with a small modular reactor needing just two football pitches to produce enough power for around 1 million homes, compared to 2,000 acres of solar that will power only 50,000 homes. Does the Minister agree that nuclear is so much kinder and does not involve destroying vast swathes of the British countryside and impacting our food security?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the footprint and the comparable impact on land of nuclear compared to other technologies, but it is very important that we have a wide range of energy technologies moving forward. We will benefit from investment in wind, solar, hydrogen, CCUS and the nuclear we are announcing today, but I welcome his support for what we are announcing.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the statement and the publication of the three documents. With Sizewell C, as well as offshore wind and hydrogen, East Anglia, Suffolk and Lowestoft will play a vital strategic role in enhancing our energy security, keeping bills low and driving forward the transition to net zero. To enable the local area to play this lead role to the maximum advantage of local people and local businesses, does my hon. Friend recognise the vital importance of investment in skills at East Coast College and investment in infrastructure, such as in the port of Lowestoft?

Andrew Bowie: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is spot on. I was very happy to visit East Anglia last year and see for myself the investment Sizewell C is making in the local community and in local colleges, supporting young people who want to get into the new high-skilled jobs that will be produced through the development of projects such as Sizewell C. I am very happy to announce that I will be visiting East Anglia again on Monday to see the progress that has been made at Sizewell C. He is absolutely right that the benefits that accrue locally through investment in nuclear, at large scale and at small modular scale, are unprecedented. That is one of the things that I hope comes out of today: yes we are talking about our energy security and yes we are talking about reaching net zero, but the impact locally to

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communities through investment in new nuclear is unprecedented. I am very excited to see what it brings in the years ahead.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. Clearly, nuclear will have a major part to play in energy generation in coming years. A number of companies have already looked at sites in my northern Lincolnshire constituency, which he will know is a major centre for the renewable energy sector. He spoke of encouraging developers to identify potential sites. Does he agree with me that it is also important that local authorities play a part in encouraging this type of development? I can assure him that North Lincolnshire Council and North East Lincolnshire Council will welcome such developments.

Andrew Bowie: I completely agree. Local authorities have a key role in driving forward interest and investment in small modular reactors and advanced modular reactors, and indeed in any new technologies that come through as the result of today's announcement and the investment we are making in nuclear. I would be delighted to visit his constituency and see the potential of possible sites for small modular reactor deployment in the area he represents, because he is absolutely right. The potential for these technologies is huge not just, as I have said, for our energy security moving forward, but for the benefits they bring to communities up and down the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

Backbench Business

SEND Provision and Funding

[Relevant documents: e-petition 634116, *Increase funding for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) education*; e-petition 619720, *Fund more specialist school places for children with special educational needs*; e-petition 607849, *Make SEND training mandatory for all teaching staff*; e-petition 591092, *Require School SENCOs to be fully qualified for the role*; e-petition 587365, *Require all school staff receive training on SEN children*; and e-petition 584129, *More Funding For SEN Children To Access Appropriate School Provisions*.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I would just like to explain to colleagues how we intend to proceed this afternoon. We have two very well-subscribed debates and I will try to ensure that all Back Benchers have a fairly equal opportunity across the afternoon. The guidance is that the opening speeches are to be between 10 and 15 minutes. I advise that, in order to be fair to everybody, we will start off with the guidance that six minutes will allow everybody an equal opportunity from the Back Benches. If people cannot stick to that, I will have to put on a time limit, but I think that will ensure that everybody gets a good chance to contribute.

12.25 pm

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls for a review of funding for SEND provision.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try my absolute best to stay inside your guidance. We have 24 applicants to speak in the debate, which I think is a record, so forgive me if I do not take interventions. Nearly 100,000 people signed petitions relating to these subjects and I am pleased to say that they will have their voices heard in the Chamber today.

The debate about how best to cater for those with special educational needs and disabilities is often dominated by hard numbers: money, places, headcounts and so on. That is obviously a vital part of the discussion, but the real heart of the matter is the human impact, and the children and families behind the figures. My part of the world, the East Riding, has the lowest per capita funding, which is about a third of the highest-funded areas.

I declare an interest, or more than an interest: a prejudice. I have a grandchild who suffers from something called SYNGAP-1, a genetic disease that makes her non-verbal and gives her daily fits and seizures, so she has a very high intensity of requirement. In the two years of covid, she missed 40 days of teaching, over and above lockdown requirements, because of a lack of resources. That is eight weeks of schooling lost, causing enormous distress to a child who needs continuity and stability. We can see immediately how that has an effect. Chloe has complex needs and meeting those needs is a daily challenge for her parents and teachers. For her to miss so much school is simply awful and puts huge pressure on Chloe herself and on the rest of her family.

As important as Chloe is to me, the point is that her case is not unusual. Many of her classmates had and continue to have the same experiences, as do thousands

upon thousands of children across the country. Parents, teachers, teaching assistants, mental health workers, carers and a host of others do incredible work to ensure that children get as much help as possible, but they are struggling to provide adequately for everyone. At the moment, the resources are simply not there.

A bit of background here is important. Education, health and care plans—EHCPs, as they are known—were introduced in 2014. This was a well-intentioned reform that sought to provide holistic support for young people in need. But what the reforms failed to do was provide resilience in the system to deal with future changes to demand for services. In recent years, there has been a huge increase in that demand: population growth, better detection of conditions such as autism, and longer life expectancy because of medical progress all put pressures on the system. As a result, the total number of EHCPs and statements of special educational need has more than doubled since 2015. That is a rise of more than a quarter of a million cases, with large increases in every age group, but the funding from central Government simply has not kept pace.

Part of the answer is to update the funding formula. The existing allocation of funds is based on an out-of-date assessment of each area's special educational needs. Of course, some level of differentiation of funding makes sense, as not every area has the same needs. For example, rurality has a huge impact, as staff, campaigners and families in my area know only too well. Those national pressures lie behind the call by the f40 group, representing local authorities with some of the worst rates of SEND funding, for £4.6 billion in additional annual funding from central Government. The figure is based on that huge growth in the number of EHCPs local authorities have to support, as well as significant inflationary pressures. Each EHCP, tailored to the specific needs of a child requiring additional support, costs the local authority cash, so the more EHCPs are needed, the more local authorities have to cough up and the greater the pressure on their already tight finances. We should remember that in the past two years, six local authorities have already declared themselves effectively bankrupt.

The impact of these pressures on SEND provision is clear for all to see. In 2022, less than half of EHCPs were issued within 20 weeks of application. In other words, one in two children waited more than five months. Given that 13% of children have special educational needs, that is a huge number of kids waiting for help, and many have to wait a lot longer to get the support that they need. In some cases children have to be sent to schools far away owing to a lack of local places, and families struggle, over and above their normal needs, to get appropriate support.

Parents and carers have supplied me with many illustrative examples. One, Jennifer, said that

“we have been on a waiting list for 22 months for my son to see a Speech and Language Therapist...The lack of SEN schools needs addressing as a matter of urgency”

as children are being

“let down and are suffering”.

Another, Esther, said:

“My son hasn't had his EHCP met in four years in an SEN school... he has not had speech therapy for over three years, nor has he had his physio, occupational therapy, sensory or educational

needs met...There is urgent need for more funding so that SEN schools can have appropriate class sizes with therapists and enough qualified and skilled support staff.”

According to one special needs specialist teacher, Louise:

“Services such as speech and language therapy have been reduced dramatically. In my Autism Spectrum Condition Resourced Provision class, we used to have three hours per week and now have three hours per half term.”

Another teacher, Catherine, said:

“We have large numbers of children who require specialist support to allow them to thrive and stay safe”.

Owing to a lack of resources, however, other children are “receiving minimal support as we are firefighting, just to keep the children...safe.”

The financial impact of all this is, of course, enormous. The cumulative deficit in local authority high needs budgets is estimated to be £2.3 billion, and is expected to reach £3.6 billion by March 2025. There are more than 80 local authorities with large high needs deficits. Currently those deficits are being kept off local authority balance sheets by a statutory override, but the override is time-limited and will expire in 2026 if it is not extended. If and when it does expire, many councils will be bankrupted overnight, with huge implications not just for education but for all local services. That is why the f40 group considers the expiry to be a sword of Damocles hanging over the entire sector. Fifty-five local authorities have had to sign up to the Government's Delivering Better Value in SEND programme and 34 have had to sign up to the Safety Valve programme—both set up to meet the challenge of dealing with the rising demand and costs—which means that nearly 90 authorities have already had to go to the Government for help.

Of course, it is also crucial that we are able to plan for future challenges so that we can meet them when they arise, rather than constantly firefighting with limited resources. To that end, there needs to be a substantial increase in capital funding to allow local authorities to invest in SEND projects. I say to the Minister that the recent announcement of £2.6 billion for that purpose is welcome, but more is needed. Without the start-up cash, we will simply find ourselves in another crisis in five years' time. The numbers may sound big, and we all know that these are straitened times for the economy after covid, but in reality, failing to invest is a false economy. We might save some money in the short term, but the long-term costs, both to the budgets and to the children concerned, are huge.

Let us take an example. A child suffering from poor physical and mental health, suicidal ideation and poor school attendance spent a great deal of time refusing to engage at all. Special needs staff, having set out an action plan, gave him one-to-one mentoring support, thrice-weekly pastoral sessions, regular counselling and organised work experience. As a result his school attendance improved, he began to develop friendships with peers, and he was able to manage a full school timetable. His life was transformed.

The reverse scenario, however, happens all too often. As Mo, a speech and language therapist, put it:

“It is widely acknowledged that early intervention is key. However, due to a lack of funding, staffing levels and subsequent long waiting lists, we are unable to provide”

that intervention. A child might, say, have autism and anxiety, and might be struggling to get into school and struggling to cope with the day's work. Without help,

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those things get worse. The children come to school less, they find it harder and harder to carry out basic tasks, their friendships suffer, and it is then more difficult for special needs staff to get through to them. Ultimately, they will need a much greater—and more expensive—effort to reintegrate them into schooling, and will require much more long-term care. Intervening early is transformative, and that requires resources to make it possible to act before problems spiral out of control.

A further problem is the severe workforce difficulties that SEND employers face. Specialist teaching assistants, for example, now cost employers about £24,000 each, up from about £16,000 10 years ago. However, the place funding has been not changed from £10,000 per child, so we are not matching that extra demand. Many SEND workers would be better remunerated in less skilled jobs, and in a challenging economic climate, they may be forced to vote with their feet. One therapist, Hayley, said that she had seen

“a huge decline in skills and knowledge of the workforce.”

That will not come as a surprise to anyone in the sector. Of course Ministers say they value the work that SEND staff do, but it must be backed up by funding. Otherwise the workforce will continue to dwindle, with dire consequences for those who rely on their support.

There are many other aspects that I should like to mention, but you wanted me to be sharp, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will not deal with most of them.

These challenges extend to further education. Young people aged 16 to 25 make up 27% of those with EHCPs, and I know that some of my colleagues will want to touch on that. Moreover, as I have said, this is not simply a matter of funding. Just this week the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), recognised the need for “systemic reform” because families were waiting between nine and 13 months for a hearing after appealing against EHCP decisions.

I am sure that some of my colleagues will go further into these issues in their speeches, and will mention their own experiences of helping families in their constituencies. My right hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) cannot be here this afternoon because of a constituency engagement, but I know that he agrees with all the points I have made. Front Benchers who cannot contribute to the debate also have their concerns. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has, like many others, been contacted by numerous constituents about this subject, and has taken their worries on board. The same is true of other Ministers who did not particularly want me to mention them; I cannot think why!

The bottom line is this. The support that a society provides for its most vulnerable is a measure of its compassion, and, to my mind, a measure of its civilisation. That is the key. I am sure that the Government share those principles, but now we must find a way to deliver the change that is needed to make them a reality.

12.38 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), who did a superb job of

setting out the strategic argument for more funding for those with special educational needs. I hope that we will get some hint from Ministers that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has heard the calls from parents across the country, and that more revenue funding and, crucially, more capital funding will be made available.

I want to raise a series of parochial issues that are nevertheless relevant to the more strategic arguments advanced by the right hon. Gentleman. Let me say at the outset that I entirely recognise from my own casework the stories of parents and their difficulties in obtaining support for their children with special educational needs. I am sure that is the experience of everyone in this House.

At the outset, I acknowledge the skill and commitment of those who work with and teach children with special educational needs, both in my constituency and across the country. Teachers are remarkable at the best of times but, like other school staff, they are not valued enough. They are fundamental to the future of our country and to the future of the vulnerable young people we are talking about today.

I am fortunate that Harrow is blessed with good special schools. Alexandra School in south Harrow, in my constituency, is particularly good, but Shaftesbury High School, Kingsley High School and Woodlands School are also very effective. I commend their staff to the House. I also acknowledge the impressive performance of special educational needs co-ordinators and other staff who support young people in Harrow’s mainstream school settings.

There is a clear need for a new 300-place special school in Harrow. The four special schools I mentioned face serious financial difficulties, and more investment is needed for the young people in Harrow’s mainstream schools to get the support they need. Harrow has seen a 55% increase in the number of young people with EHCPs over the last five years, and Harrow Council estimates that the figure is likely to increase by about 100 a year. The four special schools in Harrow have just under 500 places between them, but 700 young people a year from my community are being placed in special schools. The council already relies on finding placements for vulnerable children with special educational needs in out-of-borough schools and private special schools that are further away from their family settings.

As I understand it, Harrow already has a much greater reliance on private SEN schools than the national average. There is very little space to expand the borough’s four special schools, and Harrow is unfortunately surrounded by neighbouring boroughs that are also seeing very significant increases in the number of young people with significant special educational needs. Pressure is also rising fast on the private and independent schools catering for those with special educational needs on which Harrow might draw.

That means that a much higher proportion of Harrow’s high needs budget is being spent on significantly more expensive placements than would be spent if an additional special school were built in the borough. As I understand it, my council is now worried that there will be further significant fee increases for those schools, placing even greater pressure on the existing special needs budget.

The Department for Education has turned down Harrow’s application for a special school three times, even though the Department accepts that it was an effective bid and

worthy of funding, had funding been available—hence the urgent need for more capital funding.

Finally, I underline the point that special schools in Harrow, and I suspect across the country, are already facing serious financial problems. I understand that the National Network of Specialist Provision has revealed that 80% of special schools responding to its survey reported a budget deficit in year one of their financial cycle, rising to 90% in year two. The average size of that deficit is £145,000 in year one, which has huge implications for school budgets. That needs to be urgently addressed in the forthcoming Budget.

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

12.44 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this hugely important debate. I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing time, and to the Petitions Committee for organising and managing many of the important petitions to which it relates, some of which I hope to address.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on championing this vital campaign. Having worked alongside him on one or two challenging issues over the years, I now have the pleasure of doing so again. I support his motion for three key reasons. As we have heard, Members across the House have huge case loads relating to special educational needs. As Chairman of the Education Committee, and as a long-standing and committed supporter of f40 and its campaign for fairer funding, I think that getting the right support to children with special educational needs and disabilities is a vital challenge, and we have to be frank that it is a challenge with which successive Governments have struggled.

The Committee praised the aims of the 2014 reforms, but it concluded in 2019 that their implementation had not been effective and that funding was “wholly inadequate”. It is to the Government’s great credit that high needs funding has since increased substantially, more than doubling since 2015 and increasing by 60% since the start of this Parliament.

There has been a real focus on providing more specialist places but, while it is undoubtedly true that this Government have prioritised the needs of SEN children in spending reviews, it is also true that the real and substantial increases have not been enough to meet demand. The vast majority of local authorities are facing high needs deficits. Worcestershire is by no means among the worst, but it has told me that it expects its deficit to rise from £34.5 million at the end of March 2024 to £44 million next year.

Not only are specialist and mainstream settings in every constituency struggling to meet the demands of the parents and families that they do accommodate but, as my right hon. Friend made clear in his granddaughter’s case, too many children are not in those settings when they ought to be. The Education Committee has heard that non-elective home education is too prevalent in this space. It is therefore right that we use this debate to press for more resource for what is, legally and morally, a meeting of basic need and the fundamental right to education.

I pay tribute, as others have, to the incredible work happening in every single school in my constituency to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. I say every single school, because it is clear that SEN children and children with EHCPs are spread across the entire school estate—mainstream as well as specialist. I hear from teachers and leaders in mainstream primary schools, early years settings, secondaries, sixth forms and colleges, and, almost without exception, they speak about observing rising levels of need and complexity of need.

That is even more acute in specialist settings, which some years ago were dealing with a few highly complex cases of children with multiple and severe conditions, alongside larger numbers of children with a single diagnosis. Today, an increasing proportion of their intake is taken up by those with multiple and severe conditions, and both Regency High School and Fort Royal Community Primary School in my constituency have described the pressures that creates.

We should all be supporting the incredible parents and carers who support SEN children, while recognising, as the Government’s Green Paper and White Paper have, that the current system has been a source of frustration and confrontation for them. We should be supporting the aspirations of the Green Paper and the White Paper to deliver the right support in the right place at the right time, but to do so will require the scale of resource and investment in training, infrastructure and needs-based funding for which this debate is calling.

There are brilliant people providing support to SEND children across the country, but the rising tide of demand for specialist support needs to be acknowledged from the start. That is why the case for more funding, as well as fairer funding, is really important. Ahead of this debate, f40 prepared a detailed and instructive briefing setting out that the areas that have among the lowest overall school funding also have among the lowest extra funding for high needs. For the record, Worcestershire has the 30th lowest overall funding and the 32nd lowest high needs funding. That position has improved since 2010, but it still puts our school pupils, and particularly our special needs pupils, at a huge disadvantage compared with those with exactly the same needs in better funded areas.

I know that the Department for Education drafted legislation to take the next step in delivering on our manifesto promise of a fairer funding formula by making dedicated schools grant payments directly to schools, rather than through local authorities, but that the legislation fell victim to the demise of the late Schools Bill. I ask the Minister for an update on when the Department plans to take that crucial next step.

Today, f40 is calling not for reallocation but for growing the size of the pie, and for doing so with urgency. That call has been backed by the National Education Union, the Association of School and College Leaders, the National Association of Head Teachers, the Early Years Alliance and the National Governance Association, which all agree that the high needs block requires an extra £4.6 billion a year just to prevent the current crisis in high needs from getting worse. That has been estimated through the growth in the number of EHCPs since 2015.

The substantial revenue funding ask in today’s motion is only part of the solution. We also need to reduce lengthy journeys, which have placed huge strains on

[Mr Robin Walker]

home-to-school transport budgets but do nothing for the welfare of children. My local authority, like many others, is seeing huge increases in its home-to-school transport budget. That is contributing to another growing deficit, putting more pressure on local families and other services. Although I appreciate that the Department for Education is not the funder for those budgets, joint working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that they are properly funded and effectively used is vital.

We need to ensure that the worthy aspiration set out in the last spending review settlement—the £2.6 billion to provide new places—is not just dealt with as a one-off; it needs to be continued in future spending reviews. With that in mind, I am very grateful for the investment that has gone into a new all-through specialist autism school in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). However, I know that my primary special school, Fort Royal, and my secondary special school, Regency, are desperately in need of expansion. We need to see that capital continue to come and we desperately need a new specialist assessment centre for the early years in Worcester.

Spending to save in this area is very important, and the Government have rightly set out to halve the disability employment gap. My Committee's inquiry on careers education highlighted how SEN children could benefit from more support in advice and guidance on their careers. I very much agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden said about the importance of speech and language therapy and investment in that area. I supported the calls for SEND in the specialists campaign last year, and I am glad that the Government have responded positively to a number of those, but we also need to look at auditory verbal therapy, teachers of the deaf, and the number of child psychologists and paediatricians in our health and care teams. Some areas that go beyond the education budget need to be looked at in this respect.

I briefly wish to touch on some of the petitions in support of this motion that related to training for SEN. They are very important, and I welcome the fact that the Government have made some moves to include more SEN content in the initial teacher training curriculum. I urge them also to look at the early career framework in that respect, and that echoes some of the calls that my Select Committee has made. Petition 591092 called for greater qualifications for SENCOs and for us to set a higher bar for their expertise and training. My Committee has welcomed the Government's commitment to national professional qualifications for SENCOs and heard some positive information on the number of people taking the level 3 qualification. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), who is on the Front Bench today, wrote to us in October to say:

"We have increased funding for an additional 2,000 SENCOs to be trained, taking the total up to 7,000... The project is on track to train a minimum of 3,000 SENCOs by August 2024."

Can he confirm that that trajectory is being maintained?

This is a hugely challenging and important area. It would not only ease a large and growing financial burden affecting every local authority up and down the

country, but particularly benefit children with SEND and their families if the aspirations set out in this motion could be delivered. I therefore commend it to the whole House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I thank the two opening speakers for being nearly within time. I remind Members that my guidance is that they should speak for six minutes. I call Ian Lavery.

12.53 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): We can be said to be a decent and humane society only if we have done our utmost to provide help and support for the most vulnerable children in our communities. We should be able to proclaim not only that we provide for reasonable levels of material wellbeing for such children, but that we are also allowing them access to the education they need to better their lives. On both counts, this Government have failed, but one of their most glaring failures is the failure to provide the necessary funding for the educational requirements of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am about the regional inequalities in respect of both the prevalence of EHCPs and the inadequate resourcing that reflects this particular need?

Ian Lavery: I thank my hon. Friend for that very clear intervention, and I will deal with that point later in my contribution.

As a nation, we generally fail to make education provision the priority that it deserves to be. We can develop a modern and diverse economy only if we have people with the necessary skills and knowledge that such an economy requires. Most importantly, our working-class children will continue to be held back if we do not prioritise the proper funding of our schools and further education colleges. Shamefully, the UK spends only 4.2% of our national income on education, compared with the average of 5% spent by OECD members.

When one considers the financial resources provided for the educational needs for pupils with SEND, one sees that the underfunding is even more pronounced. According to the f40 organisation, which represents the 40 local authorities with the lowest amount of education funding, an additional £4.6 billion for baseline funding is required to make up that shortfall. Without this additional spending, children with SEND will not find the places they deserve in either mainstream or specialist schools. Yet at a time when more SEND funding is so desperately needed, the funding is actually decreasing.

In September 2023, my local authority, Northumberland County Council, reported that the number of EHCPs in Northumberland is increasing by 10% per year. Increased need should, of course, be met by increased funding, but central Government have increased the element for SEND funding within their grant to the council by only 8.84%. Indeed, over the past four years there has been growth of 72% in the number of EHCPs, while funding from the DfE has increased by only 42%—it is unbelievable.

In 2023-24, for the first time, the Northumberland schools high needs block will overspend. Expectations for April 2025 are even worse, and there will be a minus 12% deficit at the minimum. On a positive note, there are more learners with SEND having their needs well met in Northumberland schools than ever before. That is testament to the fantastic work of the school and local authority staff, who are finding way to continue amid the chaos, but they are being stretched to the limit. I want to pay tribute to the staff, pupils and parents at The Dales School, Cleaswell Hill School, Collingwood School and Castle School, among others in my constituency, which continue to do a fantastic job. Shockingly, however, the amount per SEND child per year allocated by the Government is £10,000—an amount that has been frozen for 11 years. Costs pressures on all schools have increased greatly, yet the amount per child with SEND has remained frozen for more than a decade—that is astonishing.

Many children with SEND can only attend schools that have the physical environment that is appropriate for them. That requires ensuring that their schools have, at all times, the adjustments in layout and means of access that these children must have. Some students with SEND also need specialist electronic education equipment and IT provision. Those needs can be met only with adequate capital spending. Last summer, the Government announced £2.6 billion of increased capital funding for the support of specialist provision, yet that has to be assessed within the context of the 80% cut in devolved school capital funding that was made in 2011-12, at the time of the Tory and Liberal Democrat coalition Government, which of course has led to the current school repair bill of £11 billion. This increase also does not reflect the recent inflation in construction costs and it is grossly inadequate.

It also has to be remembered that when local authorities are unable to provide their own places for children with SEND, they often have to pay for expensive private schools to take them, putting further strains on their budgets. Students aged 16 to 25 with SEND need access to further education in order to enrol in the courses they want and to maximise their full potential, both academically and in their future employment prospects. There are specialist further education colleges for some students with SEND, which are more costly for local authorities and do not have adequate places to meet demand. Those FE colleges may be best for some, but many would benefit from enrolling in mainstream further education.

There are wider social issues at stake. Parents who cannot find specialist places for their children with SEND are often forced to care for their children at home. As recently reported by the BBC, that can take its toll on such families, in terms of both finances and mental health. The parents can find themselves isolated, stressed and depressed. Moreover, they are unable to work and, in many cases, are forced to rely on benefits. Instead of concentrating on helping families by increasing funding so that children can attend schools that meet their needs, the Prime Minister this weekend seemed to be interested only in depriving the sick and disabled of their benefits.

In conclusion, we have to address the lack of fair funding for SEND schools. There cannot be any further cuts or delays.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It may be helpful if I actually put the clock on, or else other Members wishing to speak will have their time cut down.

1.1 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I am sure the clock will be very helpful, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing this important debate.

I will start with something that is unusual in this place: a mea culpa. I served on the Bill Committee for what became the Children and Families Act 2014. We debated education, health and care plans at length and how we aspired to their making a real difference. We thought they would make a difference by bringing together education, health and social care funding, enabling the children we are speaking about to have the opportunity to thrive and achieve everything that we know they can and need to achieve.

Sadly, I remember the word “fight” recurred again and again in that debate. Parents were tired of fighting for the right school place, for a statement, which would later become an EHCP, or for the right transport to get their child to the education setting they needed. We thought that Act would see an end to the fighting, but it simply has not, because that has again been the recurring word that parents from my constituency have used in emails to me when I told them that I planned to speak in this debate. They are still tired, still fighting and still seeing children making no progress in a range of settings across our constituencies, whether they be specialist or mainstream provision, as the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), said. The sad truth is that those parents are worn out.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): To reinforce that point, a lady called Jill Mothersdale in Sedgefield came to me and said exactly that. They are so tired of trying to fight the system and get results. It is not anywhere, but everywhere, and I endorse the comments made by my right hon. Friend.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is right that it is everywhere. A mother contacted me about her two daughters, one of whom she says has made no progress in her school setting for years and is being allowed to sit at the back of the classroom, making no contribution. She will not pass her GCSEs and, more than likely, will never move into employment. It is about transition: children have to be given the opportunity to achieve the maximum they can, so that they will go on to perform useful roles in society and in work, and so that the children of today are not the problem of the Department for Work and Pensions tomorrow or, worse, the problem of the Ministry of Justice. That is the stark reality. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden said, we need change.

I do not want my contribution to be entirely negative, although I fear I may get a bit pokey and political at some point. I want to talk about a brilliant school in my constituency: St Edward's School in Melchet Park, a specialist school for boys with emotional and mental

[Caroline Nokes]

health challenges, with particular social needs. It is a private school the sole customer of which is local education authorities. Any increase in the fees of that school will be an increase for local authorities and the hard-pressed taxpayer.

St Edward's School does a brilliant job. The year before last, I visited the school on International Women's Day, and a 12-year-old boy asked me what I was doing to celebrate the day. I, in my role, had forgotten it was International Women's Day, which is absolutely shameful, but he had not. I planted a tree at the school with a young man called Jacob, who made me properly laugh, despite all the challenges he faced, because he was in a setting that was safe, secure and appropriate for his emotional and behavioural needs.

My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee was right to refer to transport, because that school transports children in every single morning and out every afternoon, over massive distances. They come from across the whole of Hampshire. Some of the kids are sat in taxis for well over an hour at both ends of the day. The school wishes to extend the residential offering, so that the children can have the same stability and security in the extended day as they get in their school hours. It is particularly important for children with social and emotional needs to have consistency and certainty about how their day will pan out. It might be awkward for those of a different political persuasion to recognise that a charitable part of the private sector is producing the goods for young people and making sure that those boys are getting the security they need, but we have to face up to that.

I will finish on a point about special educational needs that is often overlooked, and a challenge that we all face. Girls on the autistic spectrum are often much better than their male counterparts at mirroring the behaviours of their classmates and masking their condition. As a result, they are less likely to get the EHCPs that they desperately need. We have to make sure that we do not overlook that, and recognise that there can be differences across the sexes in the way conditions present. We have to make sure that diagnoses are easier to get for girls, who in too many instances will be stuck in mainstream settings because their EHCP has not been granted because they have been much better at masking their additional needs.

To conclude, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden and Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. It is important that we recognise that the changes we made in the 2014 Act have not given us the change that we need, and we must do better.

1.7 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Backbench Business Committee, on which I served many years ago, and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for bringing forward this important debate. That so many Members are present shows the importance of SEND education to our young people.

People are disabled by barriers in society, not by difference. Children with special educational needs and their families in Leeds North West are consistently made to feel that they are the problem. The system is a

complete mess. There is a huge shortage of specialist provision and enhanced mainstream provision, so children are forced into schools that do not have the expertise to manage their needs. That leads to exclusion, isolation and children being withdrawn. Support staff do not have adequate training or care, and many are paid less than those working in supermarkets.

The number of children with special educational needs and disabilities who are either excluded or waiting for a place at a school has jumped by almost a third since 2020. The severe delay in children receiving EHCPs means that families in Leeds North West have been left in the dark for months about which secondary school their child will attend. That is especially distressing for children with autism, who often struggle with routine changes and would benefit massively from knowing where they will be placed.

One of my constituents told me that it took until the end of year 6 for their child to receive an EHCP, which is far too late to secure a place for specialist provision for year 7. Only this December, in year 9, has my constituent's son been able to secure a place in specialist provision—that is three years too late. He will never be able to get back those years of his childhood spent struggling with no support for his complex needs.

Early intervention is non-existent. In many hospitals, an initial appointment at a child development centre has a waiting list of more than 18 months, but after waiting 18 months, it is not really early intervention any more, is it? Health visitors are unable to identify children who need speech and language therapy interventions, because they only have time to visit for child protection. Although child protection is vital, we need a holistic approach for children.

Child and adolescent mental health services are on their knees. Leeds CAMHS is taking on only the most egregious cases, as it has huge waiting lists, massive underfunding and a workforce crisis. It is estimated that only one in four children who need help for mental health issues obtain access to CAMHS services.

I wish to look briefly at some positive examples of provision in Leeds. I recently visited two settings with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). We went to a specialist Lighthouse School for young people with autism in my constituency and to the Vine, which is part of Leeds City College, in my right hon. Friend's constituency. I had one of the most challenging and interesting question and answer sessions with a group of young people. The first question put to me was: what is the meaning of life. As I am sure all Members here know, that is not the normal question we would get when we go to school Q&A sessions.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): What was your answer?

Alex Sobel: My answer was 42, referencing Douglas Adams, which all the young people understood far better than me. They were a very bright and articulate bunch, but they were there because of the school and the additional support that it provided. Lighthouse is struggling for funding. It is a charity so, as well as the funding that it receives, it gets additional funding and support from charitable means, but that should not be how a school operates. It should be able to survive and thrive on statutory funding.

The Vine is a specialist facility for profound and multiple learning difficulties, with a very challenging cohort of young people, many of whom are non-verbal. The families we spoke to were so grateful for the provision, but we need so much more. Its facilities include a hydrotherapy pool, rebound facilities and sensory perception rooms. It is the only place in Leeds that offers such facilities, so it attracts people from miles away.

Making sure that we have suitable schools and services for these children should be a priority, but, unfortunately, due to the Government's abandonment of funding for local authorities, Leeds City Council does not have the budget to manage and enhance these school places. This is not just a systematic let-down. To knowingly force children into school placements that we know are not right for them, or simply to accept the fact that they will not receive any education at all, is neglect, and I am afraid the neglect of vulnerable children amounts to abuse.

1.13 pm

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): What a pleasure and privilege it is to have the opportunity to speak today. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing the debate.

Like many, I wish to start by thanking not just our specialist schools—Tor View, Belmont School, Cribden House School and Crosshill School in Darwin—but all the schools in my constituency that support children with special educational needs. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) in his place; he is the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, so he will not get the opportunity to speak today, but I know that he is a huge campaigner on this issue in his adjoining constituency. Many of those schools will be shared between us to support our constituents.

I come to this debate as a parent of a non-verbal six-year-old who has an EHCP. The experiences we are talking about today and the struggles that parents face have been the experiences and the struggles of my wife and I as we try to navigate the system on behalf of our son, which is why I am so grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate.

I want to ask every colleague in the Chamber to do a favour for me, my son and other parents with children who have autism and other additional needs. There is a brilliant organisation in my constituency called Spectrum of Light, which is run by Julie Nixon, who has given so much of her time to supporting the parents of children with additional needs. We teamed up to hold an additional needs, autism and special needs fair, bringing together all the councils, including Lancashire County Council and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, and the support groups into one room, and asked parents of children with additional needs to come along. It was the most fulfilling and rewarding thing I have done as a Member of Parliament for at least a decade.

It is our job to help people—to help parents. I know that many colleagues across the House support apprenticeship fairs and job fairs. We all try to support our constituents. We had 400 parents attend our fair. I had parents contacting me from Cumbria who wanted to attend. This is something that we, as MPs, can do. We can all support parents who, like me and my wife, have really had to struggle to get the support that they need for their child. As Members of Parliament, we can make a

difference by coming and talking in this debate—it is a hugely important debate. We can also make a difference by using our offices to support parents.

The fair that we held made such a difference to all the parents who attended. I just hope that this is something that we can all do on a cross-party basis. It does not matter what party we are from; this is just about doing good work and rolling it out across our constituencies. If anyone wants to contact me about how to do it, I am more than happy to deal with the inquiries.

That autism, special needs and additional needs fair in Lancashire demonstrated to me that we have a real challenge in servicing the demands of people like me and other parents. I recently visited east Lancashire adolescent centre at Burnley General Teaching Hospital, because it had been given a national Quality Network for Community CAMHS accreditation award. The lead psychiatrist told me that there has been a 300% increase in the number of children presenting with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder since the covid lockdown. The centre is trying to service that additional need without any additional funding, and that, in particular, is why this debate is so important. It speaks to the challenge that other councils face. I do not criticise anyone at Lancashire County Council or Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council; they are doing a brilliant job, but they are very, very pushed.

Spectrum of Light and I recently held a teleconference for parents who are struggling to receive an EHCP. I will talk about some of those conversations. Sarah, a Rossendale resident, said that the deadline for the completion of her EHCP was 8 December. She has had no appointment with the educational psychologist. Her seven-year-old son is rarely at school—he has attended school for only 20 hours since September. Hannah, another Rossendale resident, has three children who are currently trying to get an EHCP. Her daughter has ADHD and is struggling in school through isolation, but she cannot get an EHCP. Her son has autism and cannot get an EHCP. They both attend a school in my constituency—in fact, all three of her children attend schools in my constituency. The challenge, or the blockage, seems to be the lack of availability of educational psychologists to push through these EHCPs to support parents.

As well as asking every colleague to contact my office, which my staff will not thank me for, I want each of us to hold a fair to support parents who, like me, have a child with additional needs and really need help. My big ask of the Government—not just for Lancashire but for authorities across the country—is to find a way to increase the number and availability of educational psychologists. We cannot ration EHCPs through waiting lists; that is not the intention. It is not what the Government want to do, but it is, in practice, what is happening on the ground because of the lack of educational psychologists.

My ask of the Minister—I hope he will deal with this in his summation at the end of the debate—is to please find a way to support councils to fast track EHCPs. That would make a difference. EHCPs do work when people get them. I know that it works for me, my family and my son. The challenge is that people just cannot get them in a timely manner.

1.19 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry). While I cannot speak from

[Munira Wilson]

personal experience in the way he movingly has, I hope to shed light on some of the issues through examples that I have come across around the country and in my constituency.

One of the reasons I am in this place is that I am passionate about children and firmly believe that every child, no matter their background or needs, can achieve great things. As we have heard, too many vulnerable children are not getting the support that they need to thrive and achieve their potential, and too many parents are fighting an adversarial system because of the growing demand and the lack of resource. EHCPs are inevitably being rationed in the way that we have heard. We have heard about the growing number of councils with high needs deficits. That is why the Local Government Association says that the Government have not gone far enough in addressing the cost and demand pressures.

Since 2016, there has been an upward trend in the number of children with special educational needs, but in the same period the number of speech and language therapist vacancies has soared. In my constituency, special schools tell me that they just cannot recruit the teaching assistants they need. There is also a lot of pressure on staff in mainstream schools. I hear that week in and week out from schools in my constituency. I went to visit Coppice Valley Primary School in Harrogate in October, where I had a long chat with the leadership team about SEND issues. Heartbreakingly, the school's SEND lead, who is passionate about his job and brilliant at it, is leaving his job because he does not feel that he can meet the needs of the children he has been hired to serve, due to the problems that the school is having in accessing the resources that it needs from North Yorkshire Council.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), who cannot be here today, wanted me to share the story of a 16-year-old boy in her constituency, who has a life-limiting degenerative condition and is totally reliant on the care of others. He has attended a specialist school for many years, but has been unable to attend since September 2023 because he has now moved into post-16 education, and his parents' travel allowance to get him to and from school was cut by 62%. His parents are now unable to afford to transport him.

I heard of a set of twins in Guildford, one of whom is going through the local secondary school while their sibling has languished at home for years, getting little or no education. The lack of contact with children their own age and of a school routine is making the situation far worse. Imagine how devastating it is for the parents to see one child thrive while their twin suffers. That cannot be right.

In my constituency surgery just a few weeks ago, I saw a parent whose year 10 child was getting a handful of hours of medical tuition at sporadic times through the week, which was a logistical nightmare for the parent, because the school that offered the alternative provision that they needed, and that was suitable for them, simply did not have the space.

With the growing number of children who are being identified as having SEND, there is insufficient provision and funding to keep pace. In particular, there are not enough spaces in our special schools. Unfortunately, the gap is often being filled by some who are just out to

make money. Let me be clear: I have no ideological issue with private SEND schools. Many are brilliant, not-for-profit charitable schools, delivering an excellent education, but there is profiteering, often by private equity companies. One company last year had a turnover for SEND of £134 million, and a £25 million profit after tax. Far too many SEND schools are making obscene profits, while the sector struggles to provide basic education for so many. That is putting huge pressure on local authority budgets, as are some independent children's homes that are also run by private equity firms.

We already have 34 local authorities under the safety valve agreement with the DFE, and we expect more to go on to that list. We are being held to ransom by people making money from those in need. We are all asking for more money to be put in by central Government, but there is definitely a case to be made that there is a saving to be found by having more state-funded specialist provision and giving local authorities the power to open special schools when no other provider is coming forth to set one up.

Briefly on tribunals, I think everyone will know from their casework that local authorities won only 1.7% of appeals but spent over £100 million fighting them. Again, that money could go into the system. Every child matters. They deserve the very best. I am afraid that reform on SEND from the Government has been very slow. There has been delay after delay, not helped by the political chaos at the top of Government. Even the latest reforms that were announced last year will not work without adequate funding. I congratulate and thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing the debate and shining a spotlight on the issues. I hope that the Minister will listen, and I look forward to his comments.

1.25 pm

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): It is striking that there is such strong cross-party support for the motion moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis). I congratulate him, and agree with every word of his speech. The Minister is a very smart man. I am sure that he will welcome the cross-party pressure, because he cares a lot about this subject, and it will help him in his battles within the Department and with the Treasury for the much-needed increase in funding in this area.

Suffolk is also a member of the f40. We are underfunded, even compared with Norfolk, which I can tell the House makes us in Suffolk feel particularly bad. Some 27% of the local funding formula is still based on 2017-18 spending, and because that was low in Suffolk, it is a drag anchor. While that drag anchor remains, it is explicit in the formula that the funding is unfair between different counties. That needs to be fixed so that counties such as Suffolk get fair funding. Despite the very tight funding, Suffolk County Council works incredibly hard. There are some excellent examples of best practice—for instance, at St Mary's in Mildenhall, Exning Primary School and others that I have visited—but they all suffer terribly from the very tight funding.

In addition to the points that have been made already across the parties, I want to put a slightly uncomfortable truth on the table. Having served in the Department, and elsewhere in Government, I think I know a bit about what is going on. The challenge is that when

EHCPs were introduced in 2014, they improved the system by making statementing more consistent across the country, but that did not resolve the fact that ultimately the budget is limited. I want the budget to be bigger, but however big it is, it will always be limited, so it is also about how the budget is allocated.

Thus far, we have had a discussion about how the budget is allocated between different counties and regions, led—he was rather humble about it—by my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who was not only part of f40, but is f40 and has led f40. We have also discussed who individually gets a diagnosis, and therefore who gets an EHCP. Here there is a bigger social injustice that needs to be named and then dealt with: the silent scandal of access to diagnosis. I come at the issue from the point of view of dyslexia. I am dyslexic and it is the area that I am most expert in; until recently, I was vice-president of the British Dyslexia Association.

A study in November by the London School of Economics found that 15% of children with specific learning difficulties are in the most affluent decile and 6% are in the least affluent. That cannot reflect reality. It is simply not true that 15% of those in the most affluent decile have specific learning difficulties, and only 6% in the most deprived. The truth is—this is just a fact of life—that in the most affluent decile are parents who can pay the £600 for diagnosis outside the state system, and more parents who are articulate and able to fight, and go to their MP and to the council to make their case, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry) does for his child. That means that there is an unjust allocation of diagnosis within the system, with relatively too much diagnosis among those in the upper echelons of the demographic scale, and relatively too little for those who are less well off. That is unfair. Ultimately, that is an affront to universal education.

I believe in universal education because it underpins universal equality of opportunity in this country. However, what leads to the disparity we see in the data of who gets a diagnosis is if we say, “You can have universal education, but if your child has a special need, you can pay £600 to get them identified, which will make it more likely they will get the EHCP, and therefore much more state money following them. If you don’t have the £600, or the wherewithal to find one of the many brilliant charities like Evelyn’s that helps you get it, you will not get that extra money and therefore the extra support”. That is harder to fix than just asking for extra money because it implies that, in one part of the income distribution, too many people are getting a diagnosis. That is the uncomfortable truth. The fact is that there is not enough diagnosis, early identification and funding, but, crucially, there is also an inequality in the diagnoses that lead to the EHCPs.

I founded a charity—the Accessible Learning Foundation—to try to champion that need for early identification and support. That is how much I care about the issue. I know the Minister cares about it as well, and I hope that he will address the point about the distribution of access and who gets identified, as well as the overall level of funding, because both need to be fixed.

1.31 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I also thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing the debate. Back

in 2014, during the passage of the Children and Families Act 2014, Labour, alongside a multitude of teachers, local authorities, professional organisations and parents, warned the Government that their rushed reforms would create a postcode lottery of variable provision where many children with SEND would continue to be let down. We warned that unless the proposed reforms were properly funded and proper demographic modelling was carried out to assess the actual number of children and learners who need support, the reforms would fail—and fail they have. Even the Government agree that the reforms have failed, stating in 2019 as they launched a review into SEND that they aimed to

“improve the services available to families who need support” and end the “postcode lottery” they still face.

After a three-year delay, the Government finally published the review in 2022, highlighting their own failures again: that, too often, children and young people with SEND and those educated in alternative provision feel unsupported and their outcomes fall behind those of their peers. Eventually, in 2023, the Government’s SEND and alternative provision improvement plan and road map were published. Many have concluded that those are insufficient and ineffective given the crisis we face. That view is shared by my constituents, who are absolutely exhausted from having to fight every single step of the way for their child’s education.

Despite our local council’s SEND department coming out of special measures in 2022, our children’s services are now rated inadequate. Despite hardworking council staff and dedicated teaching staff right across South Shields, the situation has not improved for many parents or children with SEND thanks to continued cuts. Assessments are grossly delayed, EHC plans are not being implemented and children are travelling miles out of our borough. In the midst of a cost of living crisis, my constituents are paying for private assessments, private tuition and independent schools. There is simply not enough specialist provision and not enough support in mainstream education.

Costly appeals against EHC plans have risen to a record high since the 2014 reforms—nearly 14,000 last year—yet 98% have been successful, so it is clear that there is something grossly wrong with the system. That is likely only the tip of the iceberg, because many parents do not have the time, energy or financial support to continue legal action. The parents I have spoken to said that they wanted me to use their words in the debate, but not their names for fear of any repercussions. That just shows how threatened they feel by the system as a whole.

It is not just our children who are being short-changed. For young adults with SEND, access to further education is severely hampered by funding cuts. They deplete the sector, which now survives largely on donations and fundraising. As always with this Government, it is charities, community interest companies and others that have to fill the gap left by the state for essential services. Without the North East Autism Society and AutismAble in South Shields, I know that my constituents’ learning needs would not be met.

Access to education should be a fundamental right for all children, no matter who they are, where they are from or what their circumstances. A good education can mean the difference between where someone begins in life and where they end up. People across the House

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

may already know that I struggled throughout my education with undiagnosed dyspraxia and dyslexia. I also did not come from a wealthy or privileged background and was certainly not destined to end up in this place, but I got here through good education, good teachers, work experience and training. Education can make the impossible happen. That is why my party's goal always has been and always will be for educational excellence for every single child in this country.

1.35 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for bringing this important debate on SEND to the Chamber.

Before I speak about SEND let me say that some young people and children have been sitting in the Gallery in different groups throughout the debate. I would like to say how incredibly proud I am of our nation's children and how incredibly proud they should be of themselves. Today our children rank 11th in the world for maths and 13th for reading. I do not know whether they are year 13s, but if they or any children watching today are in year 13, I can tell them that when they started school in reception, they were 27th in the world for maths and 25th for reading. It has been a massive change.

I fundamentally believe that every child should have the right to a world-class education, because that education is what will give them the freedom to make choices about what they do with their future. Every child should have that choice, and that is why special educational needs children are so important. We should ensure that they have those choices, too. No child should be left behind; they should have the right support, opportunities and places.

The high-needs budget has doubled since 2015, so it is not fair to say that there have been funding cuts—it is not true—but there has also been a significant growth in demand. As Children's Minister during the pandemic, I know that the toll the pandemic took on children, not just in this country but globally, breaks my heart. We know that it took a big toll on those children who were already known to have SEND, but it also meant that more children present today with special educational needs than in the past. Part of that is to do with the early years, which are so crucial to a child's development, particularly their communication and education skills. Very young children missed out on those crucial three years.

When I visited a primary school in my Chelmsford constituency last term, I was told that 50% of the children in their reception class are not properly toilet trained. That is a massive change. Other primary schools have told me that they see more reception and year 1 children presenting as somewhere on the autistic spectrum, as well as with some ADHD needs, but because they were not assessed earlier or given more support in the early years environment, they have arrived at school without support that could have helped them cope more easily with mainstream schools. I have been working with Essex County Council and some of my schools to see what we can do about that. There is clearly a backlog in assessing children. Could we, for example, encourage or do more with educational psychologists to see whether

they could see more children? We know we have a shortage of educational psychologists, and they are in great demand, but could they be seeing more children in the time they have? I am sure we could do more with specialist hubs within mainstream schools, which are key—where they work, they work really well.

Anecdotally, I am concerned about the rise in children being put on part-time timetables, especially those who may not yet have an EHCP. Part-time timetables should only be used for a very short time. I wonder whether there are some systemic social issues that are impacting on young people's mental health—in particular, some have pointed out to me a suggested link between an increase in online gaming, poor mental health and non-attendance at school.

I wanted to mention school attendance, because it has been in the press a lot this week with the new statistics showing that the proportion of students that are persistently absent from schools has more than doubled. As colleagues have pointed out, where children have unmet SEND needs, that can lead to them missing school because they face issues with attendance. There can be good reasons why children with SEND sometimes have higher rates of non-attendance than others, but we need to make sure that their needs are met.

That is not a new issue this week, however. The Department for Education has focused on it and produced new guidance, "Working together to improve school attendance". The Select Committee also produced a detailed report, the No. 1 recommendation of which was that that guidance should be made statutory. Before Christmas I presented a private Member's Bill to the House, the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill, which will do two things: it will make that guidance statutory and it will require local authorities to support families, schools and children with their attendance.

Within that guidance there is the understanding that children with special educational needs need bespoke support and that that support needs to be carrots, not just sticks and fines. I hope that every single Member of this House will get behind my private Member's Bill as one of the things we should be doing to support children with their attendance, including making sure that more children with SEND get the support they need.

1.42 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for special educational needs and disabilities—everyone is very welcome to get involved in that—and as one of the few openly neurodiverse MPs: I have dyspraxia, dyslexia and ADHD.

Across the sector it is a truism that SEND provision in the UK is chronically underfunded. Others have already alluded to the £40 billion estimate of £4.6 billion. While additional funds delivered through the delivering better value programme and the additional £2.6 billion on capital funding are welcome, it is clear that they just do not meet the funds needed to stand still, let alone the additional demand for services, which is growing every year. Fixing the investment gap is critical to addressing the issue, but I want to make a plea that we cannot see this as simply a numbers problem.

We have seen that approach recently from Ministers, for example with the revelations reported in *The Observer* last October of a target to cut EHCPs by 20% in a contract to develop the delivering better value programme. It is not just about the target; it is about the method of getting there, through early intervention and through making our education system more inclusive. However, we should also be clear about the reality that, although hard-fought and hard-won, in a heavily under-resourced system, an EHCP is a lifeline for young people and families in advocating for the provision they need. For many SEND families, the 20% target will be a source of alarm.

Behind those numbers are families and young people who are struggling. The measure of a policy is not a falling statistic or the amount of money it saves, but the extent to which it addresses the needs of young people trying to access the education that is their right. I strongly believe that our approach to the issue should start with treating SEND young people and their families with the dignity and respect that all people deserve. That should mean a supporting hand from day one, but we lack the infrastructure for that kind of early intervention.

A survey last year by the Institute of Health Visiting found that only 37% of health visitors in England felt that they were delivering a good or outstanding service. That is too low. Only 6% were working within the recommended ratio of 250 children per visitor, and 28%—more than a quarter of the workforce—were servicing the needs of 750 children. That is a terrible statistic. The institute estimates a shortfall of 5,000 health visitors in England, and 48% say they will leave the profession in the next five years. We have also seen dramatic cuts in Sure Start services, with 1,416 centre closures since the onset of austerity in 2010. As an aside, the scale of those closures throws yesterday's inadequate announcement of 75 new family hubs into stark relief.

As has been said, early identification of SEND also requires having trained early years staff who know what they are looking for. To most people, that seems like common sense. A recent survey by the Fair Foundation found that people overestimated early years pay by 47%. People value this workforce, but their pay does not value them. Nearly three quarters of the survey participants thought that people working in early years should be paid more, and I agree. We need to invest in the workforce charged with looking after our children and properly value the work they do, as well as training and upskilling them where necessary.

On all these points of early intervention—the crisis in the health visitor workforce, cuts to Sure Start and the undervaluing of early years staff, the lack of multi-sensory teaching workforce and speech and language therapists, and the difficulties accessing physio—we are moving in the wrong direction. We need more healthcare visitors, with visits on day one of a child's life; we need more early years support for families and young people; and we need a professionalised early years workforce that knows how to identify the SEND needs of our children.

Those problems are systemic. They are also about how services integrate. It is no good identifying needs if there is not enough capacity to give a timely referral. In March 2023 the waiting list for speech and language therapy had gone up by 42% since 2021, from 51,000 to 73,000—and no wonder. Last year, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists found that almost one

in four jobs were vacant across the UK. If we take ADHD, we know that the referral rates are going up, and there are some shocking statistics of people waiting up to three years for a referral—the wait is up to a decade in some adult services. We need to cut down the waiting times for all forms of assessment and diagnosis. To do that will require looking at those backlogs as we would any other backlog and taking seriously the staffing shortages we are suffering.

We should be promoting strength-based approaches to SEND. In the education system, we should be looking to create inclusive spaces where young people can truly be themselves. There is no good reason why children with SEND should not flourish, but that means rethinking how we approach behaviour in classrooms, training and supporting teachers to understand that all behaviour is a form of communication, not off-rolling young people because they do not fit into a certain box or just to cheat the figures. I will finish with the point that Ofsted should not be rating any school excellent if it does not have good-quality SEND provision.

1.48 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this very important debate, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing it. I hope that I can contribute with some experience as the leader of a local authority and as someone who sat on the Education Committee's SEND inquiry in 2019.

I want to describe the problem from a local authority perspective for colleagues in the House. The 2014 legislation was well intentioned, as we have heard, but it has not delivered on those intentions. In some ways it has created an impossible circumstance, where very high levels of demand and expectation now exist on a service that faces huge budget and capacity pressures. That is not sustainable.

Local authorities in many ways are caught between a rock and a hard place. They are expected to meet the demands of families but also have to balance a budget, and all the time with the knowledge that any steps taken to reduce costs may well end up being overturned in tribunal. Inadvertently, and understandably, seeking to give parents of SEND children some authority and control over what support they get is creating an adversarial system. There are funding issues to all that, but fundamentally the system does not work, so funding alone will not fix it. Because it is a partnership across health, schools, local authorities and others, there is a challenge both in meeting expectation and in accountability for the outcomes.

Fundamentally, at a policy level we have a system that says to families that they can have whatever support and services they want. That is a laudable aim, but in reality there are limited budgets and capacity in the system, which means that local authorities and delivery partners are constrained in what they can do. The system has not recognised that contradiction, so the local partnership is still judged against an unachievable target, which is why, in the latest inspections, nowhere nationally is any better than “inconsistent” in its SEND outcomes.

In Nottinghamshire, we fully recognise the need for improvement in the capacity for SEND support, in tackling waiting times for outcomes, and in the scrutiny

[Ben Bradley]

and accountability of the system, among other things. We have introduced a new SEND improvement board—Dame Christine Lenehan of the Council for Disabled Children in its independent chair—with the intention of driving improvement in the system with proper scrutiny and oversight. We have already seen positive steps from it. We are fully committed to tackling those issues, to the extent that I have also created a specific cabinet role for SEND support.

In truth, though, we are constrained. The inspection regime is not really sure of what it is asking us for. Many authorities have huge deficits in the high needs block, so they are massively overspending, yet they have still received more positive inspection outcomes. We have balanced the budget and do not have a deficit, which clearly has an impact on services, but that does not seem to be a factor in inspection outcomes. Are we being asked to balance that budget or not? We have a legal duty to do so, but it is not recognised by Ofsted.

Nottinghamshire is among the most poorly funded authorities in this space, but we still balance our budget for additional needs. Other authorities have more money and still overspend massively but are rewarded with better inspection outcomes. Fundamentally, the system does not have a shared and coherent view of what it is asking us to deliver. That is a huge issue.

We are also told that the Government's approach is to increase inclusion in mainstream schools where possible. It is absolutely right for children to receive appropriate support in mainstream setting wherever possible, and for us to work with schools and SENCOs to deliver it. Notts has taken that approach for many years and been held up as an exemplar of good practice in some Government circles, but at inspections we are marked down for it. Again, different parts of Government are telling us different things, so it is not always clear what we are being asked to do.

We take a graduated approach and step children up the pyramid depending on need, but the first response is to try to support children to remain in mainstream school, partly because that is very often the best outcome for the children, and partly because it is a requirement of a system with limited funding that we try low-cost options first. From an outcomes perspective, that is often the right thing to do, because although some children will require lifelong care, we want many of them to go on and live independent lives and be in employment—we should have high ambitions for our children. It is not often the best thing to become more reliant on more services than we need, because it can make that journey to being an independent adult more difficult.

Every child and every circumstance is different, but from what I am saying, Members can see where the tension and conflict arises at each stage. The opinion of health professionals and people tasked with achieving the goal of helping children to become independent adults often clashes with the totally understandable desire of parents to get the most and very best bespoke support for their child.

SEND transport is one of the biggest pressures on council budgets at the minute. Our budget has risen by 50% over five years because of rising demand, inflationary costs of fuel and contracts and wage rises, so we are again in a position of trying to save money. In some

cases, that is the right thing to do because the expectation outstrips what is reasonable. However, it will inevitably lead us to further conflict as we have to go back to families and say, "I know you've had a one-to-one taxi service to school with a supportive member of staff every day for the past several years, but we now need you to share with somebody else," or, "We now need you to take your child to school yourself, because you have a mobility vehicle for that purpose." That might be the right thing to do—these might be rational decisions in order to offer the best services within a limited budget—but it will inevitably cause issues. That is coming down the track. If we end up with such decisions being overturned in tribunal, we are back to the question of what we are being asked to achieve within our limited budget.

On a brighter note, I want to mention some of the work that we are doing in Nottinghamshire. We are taking this incredibly seriously through our independent improvement board and cabinet-level focus, as I have mentioned. We are creating 494 SEND specialist places, including at the Newark Orchard SEND School, which opened last year, and at a new school that we are building in Mansfield this year—I am very proud of that. We are working with SENCOs in our schools to improve the graduated approach and the available support.

Money is not the ultimate answer here. We have well-meaning legislation that does not work. I ask Ministers to consider two proposals: first, the help with SEND transport costs—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

Ben Bradley:—and the other I will come back to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I call Rachael Maskell.

1.54 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Such is the need in York that I have undertaken a comprehensive project on SEND. At a recent constituency SEND summit of parents, agencies and charities, all were desperate to see children have their care needs met. To put it into context, York is the 17th worst area for school funding, and it is in the bottom third for higher needs funding. Children in York deserve the same as children across the country; there should be no differentiation.

I recently met York Hospital's paediatric team. They highlighted the change that they are seeing. In 2018, they assessed 42 children for autism. By 2022 that figure had risen to 118, and last year it rose again. The story is that funding is not rising with the needs that those children have. The same is occurring for education, health and care plans. We need those rises to be met with increased funding for the workforce—health visitors, physios, psychologists and speech and language therapists—and for special school places and mental health services. We need a comprehensive, multi-agency workforce plan. That is my first ask of the Minister.

Secondly, we know that early investment saves money over a lifetime. We should see that not as spending but as investment in young lives. We need to ensure that children with physical impairments have the equipment they need, so that they are not waiting forever for a wheelchair, for example, but getting it on spec and on

time. One of my constituents has now been placed in residential care halfway across the country because they need an accessible shower in their home. As I read this week, saying goodbye brought tears to both parents' eyes. Goodness knows the long-term costs. We need to smarten up when it comes to children with needs.

This is not just about health or local authority funding; it is also about education. I have seen the travails of teaching assistants in York who have been stripped of 52-week contracts and given term-time only contracts. They are juggling at least two jobs just to survive on the lowest pay scales imaginable. Every day, they teach, nurse and support emotional, physical and mental health needs with a high degree of skill. We need a proper job evaluation scheme and a national pay spine for teaching assistants. They need recognition and wages that reflect it.

As we have heard this week, we also need to consider excluded children. We know from the data that autistic children are almost twice as likely to be excluded with or without a plan, which comes at a heavy cost. The disciplinary process at South Bank Multi Academy Trust in my constituency, about which I am meeting the Minister shortly, is turning away children with SEND at such a high rate. Children there are melting down at home because they are not getting the support they need. My third ask of the Minister is that, when he leaves the Chamber, he goes to the Department, rips up the draconian guidance on discipline, and starts again by instituting therapeutic schools.

Fourthly, we need to have a look at the shortage of childcare and special support after school, during holidays and out of school. I thank York Inspirational Kids, Snappy, Choose2, the Island and so many more for the provision that they offer, but their funding is also challenged. We need to ensure that they get the resources that they need to provide support for children outside school.

For far too long, parents have battled. They are battling, they are fighting, and they are exhausted because they are not getting support. They wait for months and years to get the diagnosis that is key to unlocking everything. We need to ensure that parents who are waiting for a diagnosis get the advice and help that they need to best support their children in those early years. What a difference that could make for them.

I thank all those who work in SEND in my constituency. I know how desperate they are. They are stressed and stretched because they are trying to deliver far more than their time allows. We value every penny spent in their direction, but we need to look again at the funding formula, which is simply not working, and ensure that we see it as an opportunity for the future. Invest in these children—ensure that they have the opportunities they need.

Finally, we need a complete overhaul of the SEN improvement plan. It needs to be far more evidence-based, based on the data as well as the best therapies possible. We need to look around the globe at where they get things right first time, and ensure that our children get that benefit too. Ensuring that services are properly funded will make such a difference to these young people. It will give them the opportunities in life that they are currently being denied; it will help to heal the relationships between children and parents, which are often so stressed as they struggle to get by, week by week; and it is the right thing to do.

2 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank all school staff for the amazing work that they do, day in and day out. I saw that at first hand as a school governor for 20 years, during my time as an MP, and I am in awe of what teachers and school support staff do. They have massively improved the performance of children in England in reading and maths—we have shot up the international league tables—and the first place to start is by giving a big thank you to schools for what they have done.

I have seen the work that our dedicated teachers do for children with special needs and disabilities in Heathwood Lower School and many other schools, and I have also spent time with voluntary groups such as Freddie & Friends in Leighton Buzzard, which sets out to provide a safe and welcoming place for children with special needs and disabilities. I hope that the fact that time out of school is equally important for these children does not get lost in the debate.

Like other local authorities, Central Bedfordshire Council benefited from recent increases in funding for special educational needs and disabilities, which was very welcome. Despite that, the council has had to vote a further £5 million of additional funding to balance the books.

On the issue of fairness, I have looked at the 2023-24 DSG funding figures for Central Bedfordshire and for Hampshire, which is a statistical neighbour of Central Bedfordshire. Hampshire gets £5,528 per child, while Central Bedfordshire gets £4,742—a difference of £786. If that higher figure is good enough for children in Hampshire, it is good enough for the children I am proud to represent.

Notwithstanding the massive investment on the part of the Government and the extra money put in by Central Bedfordshire Council, Central Bedfordshire manages to complete only around one in five of its education, health and care plan applications within the statutory timeframe, and a number of children with EHCPs are still without a school. I wonder what the Government do to monitor and enforce local authorities' statutory duties.

There is a wider problem at play in getting children in my constituency the support that they need. Many—probably a majority—of the children who go on to need an education, health and care plan need to see a specialist doctor at our local child development centre, the Edwin Lobo Centre. The waiting list for that centre, which serves my constituents, currently stands at between 65 and 72 weeks. Once the appointment has taken place, there is often a delay of a further four to five weeks before the doctor's report is received.

All that takes place before the 20-week clock starts ticking, and in four out of five cases it will be missed anyway. That means that children are routinely waiting more than two years in either an inappropriate setting or a school where there is insufficient funding to properly meet their needs. For many younger children, that can represent a very large proportion of their school life, and leads to them missing out on those vital first few years.

It is clear to me that what is needed is what we tried to get back in 2014: a more joined-up approach to special educational needs and disabilities by the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for

[Andrew Selous]

Health and Social Care, to look at this issue in the round. When the Minister responds to the debate, I would be grateful if he could address my points about the differences in local authority funding, the waits in the health system, and what we can do to bridge the gap and get the care that these children need to be provided on a timely basis.

2.4 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): All Members present have experiences of their own constituencies. I was the chair of governors of a specialist school; like the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry), I brought together local organisations and parents over time. I declare an interest: my wife, Dr Cynthia Pinto, is an educational psychologist. She chairs the British Psychological Society's education and child psychology division, which is in conference at the moment. I will circulate a couple of pages from a briefing that has been sent to me that contains some of the discussions that are taking place at that conference.

All the experiences we are reporting in this House are very similar. We have come across some wonderful young people who have achieved so much despite the disadvantages they have had, and some incredibly dedicated staff—true professionals doing the best they can—but also a large number of tragedies related to the struggles those young people face, particularly to get the assessment and support they need. Members may remember that last September a report was released regarding the increase in the number of complaints from parents to the local government ombudsman. There was a 60% increase in the number of complaints upheld by the ombudsman from parents who were failing to get access to the services they desperately needed. As the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen said, most of those complaints were about access to the assessment to get the plan itself in place.

I do not want to repeat what has been said before, but I am afraid this does come down to money—it is about finances. As we have heard from other Members, people have failed to get access from the very earliest stages, and if my constituency is anything like others, the closure of the Sure Start centres has had an impact. The development of family hubs may be a bit of a solution, but as the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) outlined at the very beginning—as always, I congratulate him on securing this debate—the gap in overall local government expenditure is huge, and it is cumulative over a number of years.

I welcome the additional money that the Government have provided in recent years, but the lack of investment has built up over a long time. The f40 group's figures are incontestable, and that lack of investment is reported right across the country. The motion we are debating calls for a review of SEND funding; I am interested to hear from the Minister how that review will take place if the House passes the motion, because it is urgently needed.

To turn back to the issue of educational psychologists, I want to cite the Government's own stats. The educational psychologist route into the plan is so key to ensuring that parents have confidence that there is something they can build on at least, and they use those plans effectively in their negotiations with their local authorities to get the resources they need. As the right hon. Member

for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) said, due to the lack of access to local authority educational psychologists, too many parents are having to raise the funds themselves to bring in a private educational psychologist, which of course then advantages them over others.

The figures that the Department for Education has published regarding educational psychologist recruitment state that 88% of local authorities are reporting difficulty in recruitment; 48% are citing pay as a reason; one third are reporting difficulties with the retention of educational psychologists; and 69% are not confident that they will be able to meet the demand for educational psychologist services. A staggering 96% of local authorities that report recruitment and retention issues say that those difficulties affected outcomes for children and young people requiring support. The inability to get a plan as a result of the long waiting times for educational psychologist assessments is almost the foundation stone of the current failure of the system.

I have to say that the recent pay deal has not helped at all. This year, for the first time in its history, the Association of Educational Psychologists took industrial action because it was desperate on the issue of pay. It has just had a settlement, which it has reluctantly accepted, but the argument coming back from the association is that it does not think the settlement will do anything for retention or future recruitment. That has to be looked at, and it will undoubtedly come back as an issue—not, I hope, as an issue for industrial action, but as an issue for proper negotiation.

How is the Minister going to respond to all the issues we have raised? Today we will agree that there should be a review. Unfortunately, the review that took place and the plan put forward by the Government have not worked and have not embedded confidence in the minds of others. I would therefore welcome the Minister's view on how such a review should take place. I also say to those on my own Front Bench that this issue has to be addressed when we go into government—I hope, in the coming months—and that will require resources.

2.10 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this very important debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing it.

I have two special needs schools in my constituency: Alderman Knight School—I should declare that my wife is a governor of it—and the Milestone School. They provide the most amazing care and education for children with special needs. Specifically, Milestone provides for children with far more complex needs, while Alderman Knight provides for those with a range of difficulties.

One of the problems we have in Gloucestershire, as has been said about other areas, is a lack of special school places. Estimates put that figure at about 330 places short across the county. The problem is that because they have been given places on appeal, 100 children have had special school places awarded to them, but no places have yet been found for them. That is a very big difficulty that both the schools I mentioned have raised with me.

Alderman Knight was built 10 years ago for 120 pupils, and there are now 235 pupils on its roll. That puts a big strain on the school itself, and it also means that class

sizes have increased. The problem with that for special schools is that as the class sizes get bigger, they tend to lose what makes them special, which is something they are very concerned about.

Such schools are obviously very concerned about their budgets. As has been said, the formulas for calculating the cost of educating children in special schools is outdated and does not work, especially when children require a one-to-one situation. It simply does not enable the schools to provide that kind of care. The problem is that even if they could find extra teachers and even if they could recruit them, they could not actually afford to do so because of their budgets.

All this means that the schools are under great strain, but it also means that as places are not found for some pupils who should be educated in special needs schools, they end up in mainstream schools. It has always been the case that an awful lot of pupils with special needs are educated in mainstream schools, which have coped magnificently for very many years with many of those pupils, but some of those pupils should actually be in special schools, not mainstream schools, and such schools tend to struggle to provide the kind of care and education that their pupils need. They also have problems with funding, because the formula they depend on is outdated and not accurate, so they have a similar problem. We have a big and growing problem.

As mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members, we have a problem with the overall funding formula. Gloucestershire has traditionally been lower funded. I do not know why, and no Minister in any Government has ever been able to persuade me of the reasons for that or the need to continue with such a situation. I am aware that a few years ago, because of pressure from f40 and many of us in this Chamber, the formula was improved, but by no means has it been improved to the extent that it needs to be improved. I am not necessarily asking for more money from the Treasury; I am asking for the cake to be sliced up in a much fairer way and for the formula for calculating how much is needed to educate children with special needs to be reassessed and changed.

I think that each county or metropolitan area—however it is divided up—needs to carry out a full assessment of how many children have special needs and require places in special schools, and against that they need to assess how many places are available. If there is a shortfall, the Government must come forward with proposals for how that will be put right. We certainly need to assess how much it is costing mainstream schools to educate children with special needs and whether they are getting enough money. It is my submission that they are not, so we need to decide what we will do about that.

I am not going to speak about EHCPs because that issue has been covered by several hon. Members. The only thing I would add is that it is not only the time it takes to get the plan that is the problem; the plan also needs to be reassessed as the child progresses through schools. Quite often, that takes far too long, so the child does not get the care they need and they do not then get the money following those new assessments.

There are lots of issues, but I only have a very short time, so I want to finish by paying tribute to the special schools not only in my constituency, but across Gloucestershire. We had something of a battle many years ago to save special school provision in Gloucestershire,

and I am glad we did because such schools carry out the most fantastic work. However, we do need to reassess the situation, and we need to make sure that those schools can carry on serving what are very special children.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that many people still wish to speak. After the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to five minutes. The next speaker, with six minutes, is Ruth Cadbury.

2.17 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Fantastic—thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing the debate. We have heard many excellent speeches from across the House, although I notice that there are demands for more funding from Members whose party has been responsible for these budgets for the past 13 years.

Every time I visit a school in my constituency and discuss my role and the children's aspirations with them, I go on to meet the head or senior leadership team, and without exception the first and most pressing issue they raise with me is SEND. They tell me they do not have the resources to adequately support these children or their parents. They feel that these children are being abandoned. That is not for want of adequate legal powers, with the EHCP system brought in in 2014, or due to the support structures of Hounslow council, but because of a chronic lack of resources to deliver what the law expects.

Heads also tell me that there seems to have been a recent rise in the number of children who clearly have additional needs, with children exhibiting extreme stress, which is hardly surprising given the housing and income pressures that many local families face. A growing number of children also appear to be presenting with some form of neurodiversity. Most teachers are not specialists in mental health, neurodiversity or other forms of SEND. However, schools feel that they cannot teach a child, or indeed the other children in the class, if five children in a class cannot sit down, cannot stop talking, or are even screaming, ripping things up, chewing things, or as I heard about one child, spending hours on end switching a particular light switch on and off, on and off. These children are not naughty. The experienced educationalists telling me this know that, with appropriate and adequate specialist support, these children can and would learn. They can thrive and they can achieve, but the schools just do not have the resources to provide the world-class education that all children need.

Treating SEND as a serious policy priority is important not just for children with additional needs, but for their parents and siblings, their teachers and the other children in their schools, but under this Government these people are not getting the support they need. They are being let down, and children's futures are being failed.

In 2014, the Government extended the SEND duty of local councils to include young people up to the age of 25 and added social and healthcare needs to what was previously a statement just of educational needs, yet there was no additional funding for the additional legal

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

requirements. Despite this Government undermining local authorities' role in school management and governance, local authorities are still expected to provide appropriate SEND provision. They cannot do that when there are sweeping cuts to their budgets: Hounslow council has faced budget cuts of over £150 million since 2010, and the cuts have had a huge negative impact on local SEND support in the borough.

Countless local parents have told me they are having to wait far too long for their child's EHCP, and when the plan is issued, there are huge flaws and not enough support. Thresholds for support rise as funding declines. One indicator of the scale of such problems is that, nationally, there were 14,000 appeals to tribunal in 2022-23—an increase of 24% in the last year—and 98% of the cases are resolved in favour of the parents and children. Often, the appeals mark the first time parents feel they have been listened to, but as the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) said, the tribunal system only helps parents who have the ability and the resources to push through the jungle. Many of our constituents would not know where to start. No parent should have to fight for an appropriate education for their child.

What about the specialist resources taken up by the assessments and the tribunals that should be spent on providing appropriate education and support for these children, appropriate training for their teachers, and appropriate support for their parents, which together will enable the child to thrive? The briefing we received from the National Autistic Society highlighted the inefficient spending of what funds there are in the system, although as I said, funding is insufficient. The hurdles in front of parents before, during and after the process of appeal are immense. That was the central message I received when I visited and met the Hounslow Parent Carers Forum and heard about the problems they faced.

The shortage of resources means that there is a lack of training for teaching assistants for one-to-one support, a lack of transport and a lack of specialist therapeutic support, and for many children it even means the lack of a school place. Children with high needs are stuck at home, with parents who cannot go out to work, because there is no special school place for them. More families with one or more children with additional needs are also facing housing stress. I have constituents with a very disturbed child, who is always trying to jump out of a tower block window.

2.23 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The Government have taken many positive steps, including doubling high needs funding since 2015, but increased demand for SEND support, together with changes to the code of practice in 2014 and then the covid pandemic, have exacerbated the challenges. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on bringing this debate to the House.

I will talk about early years and early intervention. There has never been more funding poured into early years and childcare provision than there is now, but that is extending the provision of the free entitlement. Early intervention is crucial, and it requires skilled staff who can spot special educational needs or gaps, and a coherent

strategy aligned with funding policy to deliver early intervention and early support effectively. SEND policy and more funding for it need to be brought into early years. We need more focus on high-quality provision for those who need it the most. That will require significant funding initially, but it will save billions in the long term. I know the Government take seriously their plans to deliver long-term change for a brighter future for everyone in the UK. We need to invest to save.

I will focus on Hastings and Rye and East Sussex County Council, where the need for SEND support is a daily issue in my inbox. I call for more alternative provision in Hastings and St Leonards, and the heads of the three secondary schools in the area are united with me in this call. High-quality alternative provision is desperately needed to meet the needs of the left-behind children. No child should ever be left behind. We now have a huge number of children with SEND; it is not sustainable for schools and East Sussex County Council to meet the high needs of those children with the current model. Every child deserves to have their needs met, so they can flourish and be useful members of our society.

The implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 placed significant new and unfunded burdens on local authorities. There has been an exponential increase in the number of children being identified as having significant SEND needs, many to the extent that it is felt that they cannot be provided for in their local mainstream school. Only this week, I received a letter from the Conservative leader of East Sussex County Council regarding the council's financial situation. Although inflation has fallen, it has had a permanent impact on budgets, as some significant costs have risen at a higher rate than the quoted inflation rate. At the same time, demand for statutory services, particularly children's social care, home-to-school transport and adult social care, continues to rise at an exponential rate. For example, the number of children in care whose placements cost more than £10,000 a week has risen, with the single costliest one currently £31,000 a week, or £1.6 million annually.

East Sussex County Council is a member of f40. We need a fairer funding formula—which should have cross-party agreement so that there are no changes in the coming years—for local authorities that reflects local need. Alison Jeffery, the excellent and experienced director of East Sussex children's services, which are rated outstanding by Ofsted, has given East Sussex MPs a comprehensive briefing for today's debate in which she outlines the challenges, but also suggests sensible solutions. I have sent the Minister the full briefing paper by email for his consideration and discussion, and I hope he will meet me to do that. Ms Jeffery states that while she and East Sussex children's services always want more investment, the policy and legal framework for SEND is of equal importance.

The SEND Green Paper identified a range of factors, some of which are being tested through the SEND and AP change programme, which has significant challenges. Many of the things being tested are not main drivers of either demand or costs; more importantly, no legislative changes are being made as part of the programme. The things that do drive demand are not being addressed: for example, we need to review urgently the threshold for a full SEND needs assessment. One option is to

give mainstream schools the resources, autonomy and responsibility to support pupils with SEND short of an EHCP, without labelling them as such. That would allow a readjustment of the threshold for accessing an EHCP, so it would be met only when it was evident that provision in a mainstream setting was either not possible, or possible only with specified extraordinary support.

There are other challenges and solutions, and I hope the Minister will meet me to discuss them.

2.28 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): I congratulate and thank the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), a constituency neighbour of mine, for securing this debate on such an important subject. He is quite right to point out that the resources available for children with additional needs in our part of Yorkshire are under immense strain, and I look forward to working with him on a cross-party basis to improve provision for those in our area who desperately need it. He painted a bleak picture of SEND provision nationally, with local authorities' high-needs funding deficit predicted to reach £3.6 billion by March 2025. It is clear that we are failing in terms of both the quality and the quantity of provision across the country.

It is important that we think about the lives of the people I come across every day who are wrapped up in this failure: the child prevented from realising their full potential by a system that works against them; the parents trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of pushing disjointed agencies and authorities, often trapped in their homes with little respite; and finally the overworked and under-resourced service providers, who are forced to paper over the cracks of a broken system—a system that appears to be failing everyone in my local area who tries their best to engage with it in difficult circumstances. Those who operate our services are nobly trying to do more with less to meet the needs of a growing number of children with additional needs, but meeting this growth in demand is simply not possible without increased resources. Refusing to recognise the resource crisis in this sector is an unparalleled false economy, and insufficient emphasis on intervention at the early years foundation stage stores up huge cost pressures further down the line. That is evident in the nationwide data on this issue.

Across the country, the number of children with SEN who are either excluded or waiting for a school place has risen by 29% in the past three years. That is the consequence of not facing up to the challenge of proper funding and refusing to take the hard choices to do the right thing to provide sufficient support for these children and their families. The national figures are compounded by the particularities of the area I represent. In Selby and Ainsty, our rurality, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, our poor public transport infrastructure and the wealth inequality that we see across our constituency create challenges of provision that are harder to crack on a public policy level, but also make the experience of living without provision more isolating and overwhelming for the parents and children affected.

In the Selby district, SEND provision is not just in a rut; it is truly in freefall. As I said in my maiden speech, parents have to suffer through the uncertainty of sending their children to travel in taxis for hours a day to attend schools in Scarborough or Harrogate. Those children are often exhausted and stressed. Non-verbal autistic

children are unable to communicate the sheer scale of the stress that such journeys create for them. Any reasonable person in my constituency can see that the situation cannot continue.

I am glad that the Department for Education has engaged constructively with me on this subject. I thank the Minister personally for his efforts to do so, but I would like to push a little further on a few specific points that I have raised previously. First, though I concede that the phase-in period for a Selby SEND school must be well managed, I press the DFE to make every effort possible to explore efforts for temporary accommodation uplifts in the intervening years before the school is opened and to ensure that these temporary places are extended to many local children as quickly as possible. I am sure that the Minister can understand the frustration of local parents, who have already been waiting half a decade for the school to open. In the first year, only 40 students will be accommodated, in the second year it will be 75, and the school will only reach its full complement the year after. That means that by the time it reaches full capacity, it will have been almost a decade since funding was first allocated by the DFE. Maintaining options for temporary accommodation throughout this process will be crucial.

I remain resolute in my conviction that every child in the Selby district, regardless of their needs, has the right to a world-class education in a well-funded British school. I will keep fighting to make that a reality, and I once again thank the Minister for his engagement and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden for securing this crucial debate.

2.32 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Every child is special and deserves the best possible start in life. That is why I am a passionate advocate for SEND. Like many in this place, I wish I had a magic wand to resolve all the issues that have been discussed this afternoon, but I do not. Resolution requires dedication, vision, hard work and, above all, lots of money. As the MP for Bracknell, it would be easy for me to knock Labour-run Bracknell Forest Council for what it is and is not doing, but that is not my style. I am a team player, and those who know me will realise that the best politicians are those who work cross-party to resolve issues of great importance, as SEND is to everyone in Bracknell Forest. There is also work to do locally, and I will continue to do my bit in Westminster.

Nationally, I am comfortable right now that the Government are moving in the right direction on the offer for those with SEND. The headline is that the Department for Education is investing £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to support local authorities to offer new places and improve existing provision for children and young people with SEND. That is reinforced by the SEND review published in March 2023. The headline there was that spending has increased by more than 60% from 2019-20 to £10.5 billion overall by next year, which is a lot of money.

The SEND paper reviewed a number of key challenges, particularly the difficulties that parents have in navigating the SEND system. I have met many families locally and the stories have moved me to tears in some cases. There are difficulties of access to provision, children not in school and places not available. It is a difficult thing to

[James Sunderland]

have to deal with as an MP, and I do my best, as we all do. Outcomes for children with SEND are not comparable with their peers. Despite the continuing and unprecedented investment, the system is not financially sustainable.

What is being done? We have an extra £1.4 billion for the high-needs provision capital allocations. In June 2022, the Department announced that it would build up to 60 new centrally delivered special needs schools. One of those will be in my constituency in Crowthorne, and I am pleased to have played a small part in securing the funding for that, but let us be more ambitious and go for a third. We have Kennel Lane and the new school in Crowthorne, and let us go for a third, because there is demand for those places. I urge Bracknell Forest Council to be more ambitious in what it seeks from the Government.

I recognise that the high-needs budget has risen by more than 40% over three years, and the Department is continuing to work with local authorities with the highest dedicated schools grant deficits as part of the safety valve programme. I recognise that this is of great difficulty for schools locally. Bracknell Forest has the safety valve programme. I recognise the impact that it is having, and it may be the best option in the short term.

Overall, more money than ever is being invested in schools right now, ensuring that every child gets a world-class education. The total budget of £59.6 billion in 2024-25 is an increase over previous years and the highest per capita funding ever. That is also the same for SEND funding, but it is still not enough. I will raise two quick issues with the Minister. The first is that mental health services need a shot in the arm. We have £2.6 million in children's mental health in Bracknell, but CAMHS is a disaster, and it needs 20,000 volts put straight through it. It is not right that families are waiting two years or more for a consultation. It is immoral and inept.

The irony will not be lost on the Minister that a GP cannot prescribe medication for any neurodiverse condition without a diagnosis from CAMHS. There is a vicious cycle whereby we cannot get diagnoses, we cannot resource EHCPs, we cannot place children in settings and we cannot even give the parents and the kids themselves some solace without a diagnosis from CAMHS. I would like every local authority in the UK to comprehensively review its SEND provision so that it becomes available in every area for every child. Specialist settings are the way forward for those who need them, and every local authority should have those specialist settings under their wing.

We need to invest in our children with SEND as never before. Yes, there is more to do, and yes, more money is needed—lots of it—but we also need to make better use of what we have. We need to be efficient and able locally to give the kids what they need.

2.37 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Devon is in the middle of a special educational needs pandemic, unrelated to the pandemic. I taught briefly before being elected to this place, and I was shocked by the number of children with special educational needs. I had entire classes where every single child had a special educational need. A newly qualified teacher simply cannot do anything beyond what a more experienced colleague advised, which is to treat every child as special, as indeed they are.

I start by paying tribute to all the parents, teachers and students who are battling the system to get what they believe is right for their child back home in North Devon. I recognise those frustrations, and my inbox is full of those concerns, but my words today are not about individual cases. When looking at this issue, we need to aggregate to try to better understand what is happening. In Devon, we seem to have far too many children being given a label, rather than the help they need to fulfil their potential.

An excellent report by the South-West Social Mobility Commission found that the south-west has the fewest children from disadvantaged backgrounds reaching the expected levels in reading, writing and maths at age 11 of any region, at just 37%, compared with 53% in London. The region also has the fewest young people from any background going on to level 4 or above education or training. Progression rates among those from disadvantaged backgrounds are just 50% in the south-west, compared with 76% in London. Within those statistics, Devon is an enormous education authority. On average, it clearly does not look too great from these figures, but even that hides the variance of what is going on in the northern part of the county, where our social mobility is significantly worse than the south.

Devon is diagnosing SEND and giving out EHCPs at twice the rate of our neighbouring councils. In Devon, the number of children and young people with an EHCP has grown from 3,718 in 2017 to 8,400 in 2023: a 126% increase. Families in Devon pursue an EHCP as they know that will gain them better support than being without one, but it is no wonder that budgets are under pressure given this explosion. I would like to see far more work being done to understand why that is the case, how we can reduce it and how we can raise the educational attainment and social mobility of our young people rather than increase the number of labels they carry.

The situation in Devon has gone on for years. We now have a cohort of young people leaving school with few qualifications, a special educational need and limited support to move forward. The situation is so severe that a recently arrived academy trust has had to adapt its normal processes because of the level of SEN and the high number of pupils unable to cope with its discipline regime. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that regime, that things are so different in northern Devon from elsewhere in the country does ring alarm bells. That is particularly because, being so sparsely populated, it is not like a city where a child can switch to another school if something goes really badly wrong at school.

My schools have some of the biggest catchments in the country, and if children and their parents feel that they would be better served outside their existing school, that results in children being home educated. For some families, that is ideal; for many, it is not. Having been the home education for a child while I taught, I do not believe that the one hour a week that I provided replaced a school education. No one seems to be able to track fully where these children are, how many have opted out of school or been off-rolled, and what provision they are receiving.

For those who have particularly complex needs and require a special education, we currently have 140 applications for every 30 places. Children are travelling halfway across the county to get to school. Ninety minutes in a car is no way to start the day. It also means

that any friendships are unlikely to extend beyond school, and the costs involved are astronomical. Devon's SEN transport costs have risen from £10.4 million to £26.8 million: a 157% increase.

There is clearly an argument that Devon needs more funding as we receive an average of £790 a head compared to the national average of £886, ranking 122nd out of 151 local authorities. We budget far too much funding, at £289 per capita, for independent specialist providers—double the English average—and in 2022 we budgeted 25% larger per capita spend. Against that backdrop, I warmly welcome the Government's work and their commitment to work with Devon County Council to tackle that, with the Minister's engagement and that of his predecessor.

I warmly welcome the commitment to build new special schools in Devon. However, the delay on two of them is putting further pressure on council budgets. The arrival of the new, proactive chief executive at Devon County Council, with her experience of delivering in rural areas, does give me hope for the future, but the rate of growth in SEN is not sustainable. Rural per-pupil funding—particularly for transport—does need addressing, and we need better, sustainable early years support and intervention so that pupils can avoid the need to apply for an EHCP. I hope that the Minister will be able to find time to meet me and Devon colleagues to discuss the challenges that our constituents and councils are facing.

2.42 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): The Conservatives' record in education over the last 13 years has been very good. From phonics and academies to free schools and the recent news that the total core schools budget will be at its highest ever level in the next financial year—£59.6 billion—there is much to be proud of. However, the story is not universally good. When I visit schools in my Gedling constituency, I always ask the headteacher at the end of my visit, "If I could wave a magic wand and solve one thing for you, what would it be?" The almost unanimous response—specifically of primary heads—is about improving SEND provision. I therefore congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) and the Backbench Business Committee for making this important debate possible.

I welcome the news that between 2022 and 2025, there will be an extra £2.6 billion to support local authorities to deliver new places and improve existing provision for children with SEN. The f40 group, which we have heard much about, has produced information showing the high-needs block funding per pupil allocations by local authority, which shows that Westminster and Camden are at the top of the table—Camden gets more than £2,500 per pupil—but Nottinghamshire is fourth from bottom, at about £1,000. Now, I appreciate that there can be various regional factors—London weightings and so forth—but in 2023-24 Nottinghamshire has received £7.4 million less in funding compared with Worcestershire, and £20 million less than Warwickshire. So although I acknowledge the significant uplift in funding in the last four years, Nottinghamshire still has the poorest funding per head compared to neighbours.

Nottinghamshire saw an increase in education, health and care plans of just over 12% in 2021 and just over 11% in 2022, in line with the national annual increase of

11%, but the lower funding levels increase pressure on mainstream settings to meet the needs of children with complex special educational needs and disabilities, and the pressure on school budgets combined with the increase in levels of complex needs means that schools are struggling to fund the notional SEND allocation per child required before they request additional top-up funding.

We heard earlier from the leader of Nottinghamshire County Council, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley). I applaud his work at the county council to increase high-quality special school and alternative provision places. He outlined that there are plans in place or in development for 494 places, but, with a recent capacity survey suggesting that 657 will be required by September 2027, there is still the risk of a shortfall.

My hon. Friend raised the subject of SEN transport, which is a significant issue in Nottinghamshire. It is a reasonably large county, and SEN transport expenditure has increased significantly, from £7.6 million in 2018 to over £12.4 million by 2023. That cost increase has been driven by: increased pupil numbers requiring specialist provision; a lack of local specialist provision so travel is required; increased journey times; and significant inflationary pressures, with fuel costs increasing by 40% in the last 18 months and wages by 10%. All that has meant that the average retendering contract for SEN transport has increased by between 10% and 35%. Therefore, although I welcome the fact that the Government have met their inflation target—they have halved inflation over the last year, and inflation is coming down—those cost pressures obviously remain.

I will also highlight the time that it can take to process funding applications. Nottinghamshire has a lot of stand-alone infant schools—I went to one myself: Pinewood Infant School in Arnold in my Gedling constituency—and one issue that can be faced is that, by the time the funding has come through, the child has already left the infant school. Nottinghamshire County Council is doing much work to streamline funding for children in the transition from nursery setting to school, with a particular focus on stand-alone infant schools, but I would welcome further work by the DFE to help make that process better.

The f40 Group is campaigning for equitable funding for all schools to deliver high-quality education. I appreciate that some of its asks are big and, with billions of pounds required, that will not be resolved overnight, but I do ask whether the process can be streamlined and made quicker so that we get the money to where it is needed. There is also serious work to be done to address the regional variations that mean that areas such as Nottinghamshire have been left out.

I do not intend this to be a critical speech. As I said at the outset, the Conservatives have a good story to tell from the "Right Support, Right Time, Right Place" Command Paper to the doubling of high-needs funding since 2015 and investment in new special schools, but there is more work to be done on levelling up in this area.

2.47 pm

Steve Tuckwell (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for securing this important debate.

[Steve Tuckwell]

For many years we have recognised the importance of universal education for all children and young adults. Back in 1880, school attendance was made compulsory for children aged between five and 10. In 1893, Parliament extended the principle of compulsory education to blind and deaf children, establishing the first specialised schools. Similar provisions would be made for physically impaired children by the end of that century.

Why does that matter? We as a nation recognise and champion the idea of universal education. This House recognised that principle back in the late 1800s, but it was not until 1921 that the local education authorities were given the responsibility to identify children with physical and non-physical disabilities—what we call today special educational needs—and ensure that children were provided with education right the way through to the age of 16. Today, we cannot guarantee a universal education for every child, or at least not at the level to properly help children grow and learn. Nowhere is that more the case than for children and young adults with special educational needs or disabilities.

Across England, 1.4 million pupils have a diverse range of educational needs, and not every one of them is getting the education they need or deserve. The Government have acknowledged that and vowed to tackle it, which I welcome, and I will continue to work with the Government on that. When unveiling the SEND review in 2022, the then Secretary of State for Education admitted that while prior reforms such as those in 2014 gave critical support to more families, the reality is that the system is not working. As many Members have mentioned this afternoon, parents email me constantly and visit me at surgeries, asking and pleading with me to help them secure adequate provision for their children. I care deeply about this, which is why I have made it one of my priorities as the Member of Parliament for Uxbridge and South Ruislip.

As a serving councillor in Hillingdon, I am all too aware of the work that Hillingdon Council has to do to provide suitable SEND provision to those children and young adults who need it. Despite the challenges in Hillingdon, the children services team has recently been awarded outstanding by Ofsted. What is more, I have been lucky to see the work being done when I visit local schools. Through charity visits, I have been able to hear more about what they are doing to help children and young adults with special educational needs. I am proud to say that that included the SeeAbility programme at Moorcroft School in Uxbridge. SeeAbility is an amazing organisation that works to ensure that children with disabilities do not miss out on eyecare and plays a part in championing the Government's national scheme to bring eyecare to all special schools.

That work by the council, charities and other organisations is being undone by incredible strain—financial strain—especially, as many colleagues have mentioned, from transport costs. It was great to see the various announcements and projects in the SEND review, but we run the risk of them being undercut by this issue. Sufficient funding is vital for local authorities such as Hillingdon to have the resources to secure the requirements for children and young adults to achieve their full potential. The billions in funding that the Government have rightly set aside to better protect and expand SEND provision across the country is a far cry from the

10 shillings awarded back in the late 1800s. However, there are concerns that there is a lack of recognition of inflationary pressures, as well as those related to supply-side matters, such as fuel costs.

Councils such as Hillingdon play a key role in supporting children and young adults with special educational needs. These pupils are not asking for anything outrageous or to take liberties. They just want suitable education provision to fulfil their full potential. Their parents and the local authorities want them to fulfil their full potential. We can realise the idea of universal education, truly making it universal for all children and young adults across Uxbridge and South Ruislip and the whole nation. I pay tribute to everyone who provides educational provision across Hillingdon, and to parents and pupils for their amazing work with the difficult challenges around them.

2.52 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. As in the rest of the country, SEND provision in Suffolk is in crisis. We urgently need a review not just of the funding but of how we provide a vulnerable and very needy group of children and young people with the education that they need and deserve.

Almost daily I receive emails, first from desperate parents unable to secure an appropriate school setting for their children, who quite often receive very little education at all, and secondly from primary school headteachers, SENCOs and staff exasperated at being unable to obtain the support they need and at being asked to provide schooling for pupils who really should be in a specialist setting. The system is broken, and the situation has been exacerbated by inflationary pressures since 2015 and covid. It often takes years to obtain an education, health and care plan, on which there probably is too great a reliance. In the Waveney area, schools and staff are doing great work—including the Ashley School and Castle School East—but we urgently need more local provision and to get away from a model whereby vulnerable young children are driven hours around Suffolk and Norfolk.

In the remaining time available, I shall briefly focus on four funding issues. First, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), Suffolk receives a very poor high needs block funding settlement. It is based on historical need and bears no resemblance to the needs of today. Local authorities with similar SEND responsibilities receive wildly different and better funding settlements. Suffolk, as we heard, is a founder member of the f40. The funding discrepancies that exist both in my own county and across the country must be evened out as a matter of urgency.

Secondly, it is important not to forget the vital work done by further education colleges, such as East Coast College. For colleges, disadvantaged funding should be reformed to include a specific block to support students with SEND who do not have high needs. For high needs funding in colleges, tariffs should be set at levels that will allow colleges to recruit and retain support staff.

Thirdly, it is all too easy to overlook the bespoke needs of specialist further education colleges that provide education and skills training for those with SEND who

are aged 16 to 25. At this stage, it is important to remember that special educational needs and disability legislation requires local authorities to create a local offer from birth to age 25 for young people with SEND. Specialist FE colleges play a vital role and, although they are publicly funded, they are not currently eligible for the capital revenue support to address RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. That inequality should be removed.

Finally, it is great news that a GCSE for British Sign Language is on the way, and I congratulate my constituents Ann and Daniel Jillings on all their campaigning work to make that happen. But there is an acute shortage of qualified teachers of the deaf to teach this new exam. The National Deaf Children's Society highlights the immediate need to train 200 more qualified teachers of the deaf. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will keep that particular request in mind.

In conclusion, there is a national crisis in SEN provision, and it is felt particularly badly in Suffolk. As a whole, we are badly letting down large numbers of students, their families and their teachers. In that respect, I support the motion. A review of funding should take place without delay.

2.57 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing the debate and on the strength of his opening speech, which set out well the issues faced across the country.

Many colleagues have already outlined the overall funding challenges facing SEND services, so given the limited time I will focus on another aspect: the impact of delays in diagnosis and the wider opportunities for making an impact on this issue, which inevitably impacts on the funding of it.

It might be helpful to illustrate the issues being faced by using the example of Barton Hill Academy in Torquay. I want to thank the principal, Samantha Smith, and her team for the work they do to inspire and educate so many of our next generation, particularly those with additional needs. Barton Hill Academy has two classrooms for students with additional needs: one for younger students with issues such as autism; and another for slightly older students with mental health and behavioural issues. It deploys several staff members to support those students. Many students are waiting for a diagnosis through the NHS. The school has assigned a member of staff to help support parents of children with autism through the process and to fill out the referral forms, but it is still a difficult process. The delay in getting an assessment and a diagnosis through the NHS, which is not directly related to the education system, inevitably has an impact, because until there is a diagnosis there is not the ability to provide the service that is needed or, in some cases, to look at moving to more appropriate provision.

One key issue raised is that headteachers can be left with a rather unenviable choice. They can keep someone with them who is clearly having an impact on the wider school, when the type of resources they have available are not suitable for them. That said, they know that the issue is not so much behaviour as the fact that the pupil concerned has medical needs that are not being met and is awaiting diagnosis. That can lead to the unenviable process of deciding whether to exclude the pupil, which

is far more suitable in the case of those with behavioural issues. In practical terms, headteachers feel that that is the choice they must start to consider, given the impact on the wider school and the fact that it is not set up to deal with that pupil's needs, but in moral terms it is highly unlikely to produce the best outcome for the child.

This really comes back to the issue of getting the assessments done and ensuring that there can be a clear link between an NHS service and the impact for SEND. One family opted for private provision because they were told that there was a three-year waiting list for an appointment with a paediatrician for an official assessment, which would have meant that their primary-school child would be at secondary school before they saw any outcome from the assessment. The family paid £300 for a private diagnosis, but some local authorities do not accept such diagnoses as a basis for educational provision.

It was useful to discuss with Torbay Council the challenges that it faced—although I welcome the improvements that have been made in the delivery of children's services in Torbay under a number of political parties in recent years. Council representatives cited the impact of early intervention through family hubs. We need to ask what provision there is when people start to home-educate their children, and I think some reviews could be carried out in that regard. We also need to ask what can be done about prioritisation in NHS lists. Rather than people working methodically through a backlog, there should be a point at which children who are in need of treatment but face potential exclusion from mainstream schools could be prioritised for appointments that become available for the usual reasons why an appointment might become available at short notice.

I am interested to hear what the Minister can say about family hub funding beyond next year, and about what focus there will be on overall SEN skills across the wider teaching profession. SENCOs are clearly important, but now that more children with additional needs are in mainstream schools, this is an issue that more teachers are encountering. There is also the question of 90% attendance targets in the context of funding, and how that can be graded for those with fairly low attendance. Finally, there is the need for co-ordination with the NHS.

The debate has given us a welcome chance to discuss these issues, and, again, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing it.

3.2 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Like everyone else, I will start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing this important debate.

One of the key priorities in my campaign to be elected to this place in 2019 was to give children in the Aylesbury constituency a brilliant start in life—and that means all children, including and, indeed, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities. I am pleased to say that there are several specialist SEND schools in my constituency. I have had the privilege of visiting many of them, including Pebble Brook and Booker Park, Chiltern Way Academy, and the independent Pace Centre. The work they do is awe-inspiring, and I pay tribute to their staff, who constantly strive to give the children for whom they care the best possible opportunities and experiences.

[Rob Butler]

Too often, however, the families of the children with SEND feel that they are being left to fight a ferociously complicated system to get their child into those schools and ensure that they have the support they need. Thankfully, they have local support from people in a similar position, including members of the GRASPS group, which is run by volunteers in Buckinghamshire, but they have told me at length of their concerns about delays in assessments, complexity in form-filling, and then the long waits for the EHCPs about which we have heard so much this afternoon.

The team at Buckinghamshire Council and I have discussed those concerns to try to find ways in which to help, and I know that the team are determined to do so, but it is no surprise that the council has highlighted funding as a major challenge. As we have heard, the cost of SEND education can be exceptionally high, and it is not unusual for the cost of residential placements for children with the most complex and serious needs to run to hundreds of thousands of pounds a year.

The SEND Green Paper and the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, published in March 2023, made clear the need to update the funding model. The Government are not ignorant to this, and I am pleased with their direction of travel. We have an excellent Minister to drive that forward in the months ahead. I am pleased that £10 billion of high needs funding has been allocated for the coming financial year, representing a cash-terms increase of 12%.

It should be stressed, and it has been, that high needs block funding has nearly doubled in cash terms since 2013-14, which demonstrates this Government's commitment to helping SEND pupils and their families. However, Buckinghamshire Council fares very poorly compared with many other local authorities, with much lower allocations of funding. The cost to all local authorities of providing support for SEND pupils is increasing dramatically, both because of the number of cases and because of the complexity of need.

Locally, since 2016, there has been a 101% increase in requests for EHCPs. Since 2020, the unit costs for children's placements have increased by 30%. As a result, Bucks Council is looking at bringing some provision in-house to try to contain some of the costs, but that cannot happen overnight. In the meantime, it must try to find the extra money.

Members from all parties will know that I have a profound interest in youth justice. Having spent many years as a youth magistrate and as a member of the Youth Justice Board, I have always been struck by the disproportionate number of young people with SEND in the criminal justice system. According to data published in 2022 by the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice, 80% of children cautioned or sentenced for an offence have been recorded as having special educational needs at some stage—80%. That is an appalling statistic.

It cannot be morally right that so many children with SEND wind up on the wrong side of the law and, all too often, behind bars. We must do more to give children with SEND the appropriate education and training so that they have the same potential to live law-abiding lives as their peers, and we must ensure that provision for those who unfortunately end up in the youth justice system is properly tailored and funded.

I end on a positive note. Many Members of this House run an annual competition for local schoolchildren to design their Christmas cards. For the past two years, I have done something slightly different. I have gone out to local SEND schools, one each year, to ask them to produce the design for my card, and the reason is very simple. All too often, children with special educational needs are airbrushed out or considered incapable of achieving the same as their peers, but I take a different view. I want local children with special needs to be celebrated for what they achieve. I want them to be visible, and I want to give them a showcase in the local community. The simple act of getting them to design my Christmas card has enabled me to do that, and I thank the children at Booker Park School, who designed my 2023 card, and the children at Chiltern Way Academy, who did it in 2022. Both cards had excellent pictures that carried real meaning. This emphasises that there is potential in every child, and we need to approach children with special educational needs and disabilities with a spirit of optimism and positivity.

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

3.7 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time. I pay tribute to the teachers, support staff, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and all who work with children with special educational needs and disabilities.

I am grateful to every right hon. and hon. Member who has contributed to today's debate. We have heard heartbreaking stories from across the country of the desperate situations facing the families of children with special educational needs and disabilities, and we have also heard about the impact on local authorities and professionals of a system that simply is not working. The sheer number of contributions this afternoon speaks to the magnitude of the issue and the depth of the crisis.

We have heard from the hon. Members for Worcester (Mr Walker), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Steve Tuckwell) and for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), and from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), about the funding crisis in SEND.

We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather), and from the hon. Members for Gedling (Tom Randall), for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Bracknell (James Sunderland), about the pressures on school places.

We have from the right hon. Members for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), and from my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), about the terrible battles that parents face.

We have heard from the hon. Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Bracknell, for

Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about the intolerably long waits that families face for diagnoses and EHCPs.

We have heard from the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) about the intense shortage of staff to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and others about the financial impact on families of a system that cannot deliver the support that they need.

After 13 years of Conservative Governments, the system of support that children with SEND and their families rely on is beyond breaking point. Far too many families of children with SEND face a battle for the support their children need. It is often a battle that has to be fought many times over throughout a child's life: a battle for recognition and diagnosis in the early years; a battle for support in primary school; another battle to find the right secondary school and ensure that support is put in place; and a further battle to secure a place in further or higher education.

The consequence of this failing system is heartbreak for families; precious children being made to feel that they are the problem; and, ultimately, attainment of children with SEND going backwards. That leaves families increasingly reliant on going to the courts to get the support to which their children are entitled. It cannot be and is not right that the Government's failure to provide an efficient courts system is now rationing access to the entitlements children have. We each get only one childhood, and support delayed is support denied.

This issue should be an urgent priority for the Government. The current system is failing children and their families, and it is an increasingly prominent factor in the number of councils issuing section 114 notices—in effect, declaring bankruptcy—because they can no longer balance their budget. This issue is on the national risk register for the Department for Education. So what has been the Government's response? They delayed their SEND review, first announced in 2019, three times. Much of the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan will not come into effect until 2025, six years after the review was announced. During that time, 300,000 children with SEND will have left secondary school having spent the entirety of their school education under an increasingly failing system of SEND support.

The Childhood Trust has found that families of children with SEND are disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis and are more likely to be living in poverty than families of children without SEND. That is in no small part driven by the great difficulty that families of children with SEND have in finding a suitable childcare place throughout the early years; for before and after-school care; and, for older children, during the school holidays. We know that one in four parents across the board have had to give up work due to the cost of childcare, and the figures are much higher for parents of children with SEND.

Our education and childcare systems should deliver for every child in the country. Children with SEND deserve so much better than the complacency and neglect they have suffered for the past 13 years, and the piecemeal, sticking-plaster measures that are now being proposed. Labour believes in high and rising standards for every

child. We will work with parents and carers, local authorities, health services and professionals to deliver for children with SEND. We will work to make mainstream schools inclusive for children with SEND. We will ensure that teachers and support staff have the training they need to work with the diverse range of children who are in every classroom throughout the country.

Vicky Ford: I am pleased to hear of the number of things the hon. Lady is suggesting, but will she also support my private Member's Bill to tackle the issue of school attendance?

Helen Hayes: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her intervention. She will know that it is not the protocol for Front Benchers, on either side of the House, to support private Members' Bills. She will also know that my colleague the shadow Education Secretary comprehensively set out this week the priority that Labour places on school attendance and the package of measures we will put in place to start to improve a situation where we have a dire crisis across the country. The right hon. Lady is right to bring that issue forward through the means available to her—her private Member's Bill—and I wish her success with her attempts to raise the priority of the issue and to seek action from the Government to address it.

We will ensure that teachers and support staff have the training they need to work with the diverse range of children who are in every classroom across the country, with a new annual continuing professional development entitlement. We will ensure schools are inspected on their inclusivity as well as the attainment of children by changing the Ofsted inspection framework. We will roll out evidence-based speech and language interventions for the youngest children, because we know that unlocking communication is an essential foundation for learning. We will increase mental health support in every school and we will join up records to reduce the exhausting battles parents face as they have to retell their child's story to every professional they meet.

Vicky Ford: On that point, will the shadow Minister give way?

Helen Hayes: I will not. It has been a long debate and the Minister needs to come in shortly.

We will build an early education and childcare system that works for children and families, from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school. And we will put money back in parents' pockets, with free breakfast clubs in every primary school, ensuring no child has to start the school day hungry, and by placing limits on the cost of school uniform.

This Government have been failing children and families for 13 long years. Labour will put children first again and we will work to rebuild the support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, which has been so badly broken on this Government's watch.

3.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) on securing the debate. I know how passionate he is about ensuring that his constituents get what they

[David Johnston]

should from the SEND system and ensuring that his granddaughter, Chloe, gets the support she needs. He made a powerful case for both. Before I go any further, I formally congratulate him on the announcement of his knighthood, which is a well-deserved honour for his decades of public service.

By way of background, I am an MP in an f40 area, so I am familiar with the case the organisation makes and I met the group towards the end of last year. I have been children's Minister since the end of August, but in the two years before being appointed to that position, the issue of parents and teachers being unable to get the support they need for children with SEND was already in the top two items in my casework and surgery appointments. I pay my own tribute to all the staff supporting children with special educational needs in schools, colleges and alternative provision, both locally and nationally.

The issues raised in the debate are very familiar to me. In previous debates, I have talked about parents having what they feel is a war of attrition with the system to try to get the support they need for their children. That is a war that any parent would wage, but no parent should have to. We know the system is not delivering consistent support and outcomes and that there are significant financial pressures on it, despite considerable Government investment.

I will begin with investment and funding, as that has been the biggest issue discussed this afternoon. As has been touched on, the Government have increased the higher needs budget considerably. In 2024-25, it will be £10.5 billion, which is 60% higher than the figure in 2020. In the past two years, there has been a 32% increase in per head funding in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. Most Members would agree that that is a considerable amount of money, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said in his speech. Some Members may only agree with that privately, but not many Government budgets, under any Government or in any area, have increased by 60%, which demonstrates the Government's considerable support for and commitment to the area.

We have two programmes supporting local authorities that face financial pressure in their SEND system, and a number of Members in the Chamber have local authorities involved in those programmes. First, the safety valve programme, which includes 34 local authorities with the highest percentage deficit, helps local authorities pay down accumulated deficits and reform their systems. By March 2025, the Department will have allocated nearly £900 million through that programme, and if what we are trying to deliver is delivered, those deficits will be eradicated.

Secondly, we have the delivering better value programme for those with substantial but less severe deficits, which involves 55 local authorities, including East Riding of Yorkshire in the area of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. That is helping to deliver high-quality outcomes with sustainable costs. Under that programme, each area develops a reform plan and receives £1 million to support its delivery.

As has been touched on, the high needs budget has doubled since 2015, but even if a Government were able to triple or quadruple it, that would not by itself deliver the outcomes we all want to see. Parents and teachers

know that and frequently say that the issue is not just about money. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) made that point well in his speech, and I intend to pick up with him the discussion about conflicting priorities.

The system needs reform, which is why we published our SEND and alternative provision improvement plan last year, with the aim of getting children and young people the right support, in the right place, at the right time. There is a lot within the plan, but I wish to draw out three key areas briefly, because they are the ones that have come up most this afternoon and are in the petitions attached to this debate.

First, on special school provision and capital funding, which was raised by the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and others, we are making a £2.6 billion investment, £1.5 billion of which has already been allocated. That is on top of our delivery of new special and alternative provision free schools. There are currently 106 special free schools open and a further 78 have been approved to open in the future.

Secondly, on combatting regional variations, the plan will move us towards a national system with national standards, which we have never previously had. Across the country, we now have nine change programme partnerships, which each have between two and four local areas, together with local schools, health services and parents. What they are doing is, for example, testing an EHCP template that we hope can be used nationally, which will improve the timeliness and quality of EHCPs. We are developing national standards of support for special educational needs, beginning with one for speech and language, which will be released later this year. We are also publishing a local and national inclusion dashboard, which parents will be able to access. They will be able to see how their local area is doing, which will drive accountability.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) asked about the skills and knowledge of staff in mainstream schools. Our teacher standards already include clear expectations that teachers must understand the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs, but we are reviewing the core content framework and the early careers framework to improve their confidence in this area. We have a universal SEND services programme, which more than 11,000 staff have already accessed to improve their knowledge and skills. We are also funding the training of 7,000 early years staff with a level 3 SENCO qualification, as my hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee said. Some 5,200 staff have begun that training, so we are on track with that target.¹

There are many other points that I wanted to respond to, but I have only eight minutes, so I will just say to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) and my hon. Friends the Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Gedling (Tom Randall), for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) and others that I understand their point about regional variations. It is based partly on deprivation and other factors and partly on the historical spend factors that have been referred to. I am happy to sit down with anybody to talk about those things.

To the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), I say that it is already the case that a school has to be outstanding in all areas to receive an outstanding

1.[Official Report, 23 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 3MC.]

grade from Ofsted, and it is not the case that we have a 20% target for reducing EHCPs, or indeed any other such target.

In conclusion, I reiterate my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden for securing this debate and to all Members who have contributed to it. We may disagree on certain aspects of how to achieve this, but we are united in our desire to ensure that the SEND system provides excellent outcomes to all children and young people, and that is what this Government are determined to deliver.

3.24 pm

Sir David Davis: As we saw earlier this week, clear injustices induce an extraordinary unity of purpose across the whole House. We have seen a little of that this day, because we all want to give every child the best possible chance in life, irrespective of their circumstances when they are born and thereafter. To that end, we have had some formidable speeches from Members on both sides of the House. For me, the speech that crystallised the issue most clearly was that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who said that in 2014 we set out with the EHCP system to try to stop tired, frazzled parents having a never-ending fight to get the right outcome for their children in our system. The EHCP system has not worked. It has not delivered what we wanted because of the massive increase in demand and in complexity.

The increasing costs have overwhelmed even the large increases in expenditure that the Government have provided. That is why we need the review of funding and of allocation, both individually and across regions. The House has heard about my council in East Riding, which is the worst off, but we have heard about the unfairness of the system for individuals too. On behalf of the support staff, who work harder than anybody I know, the teachers, the parents, who have the toughest job there is, and of course the children, who we are here to give a decent life to, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls for a review of funding for SEND provision.

Proposed British Jewish History Month

3.26 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls for the creation of a British Jewish History Month.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee, which agreed to the debate, and the more than 40 Members of Parliament from across the House who signed my application. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for attending the Backbench Business Committee to support me. I thought long and hard about the timing of the debate, particularly after the horrendous 7 October attacks and the rise in antisemitism in this country, with an increase in antisemitism of over 1,300% in London alone in the past year.

We cannot conflate British Jews with the state of Israel; being a British Jew means being a British citizen. That was really brought home to me when I met a group of British Jewish schoolchildren in November on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer). When I asked the teacher why 10-year-olds were wearing baseball caps, he told me that it was because they had to hide their kippah. I thought, how can we get to a state where British children are hiding their identities? It made me think that we have to celebrate the British Jewish community and thank them for the outstanding contribution that they have made to this country. I also thank Jonathan Abro, a constituent of mine, who also led me to think that it is time to change the narrative about the British Jewish community in this country. He was incensed by Westminster City Council's newsletter on hate crime, which did not mention antisemitism.

I know that the Jewish community is interested in its own history—the Jewish Historical Society of England was established in Victorian times—but it is now time for the whole nation to celebrate the history of our Jewish friends and neighbours. The Jewish community is such a small one: 280,000 British citizens identified as Jewish in the 2021 census. That is 0.5% of our population. Compare that with the 6.5% of Muslims and 1.7% of Hindus.

For a small minority, the impact the British Jewish community has made in all walks of life in this country is outstanding, and that is why we need to establish a British Jewish history month. Jews throughout the centuries have arrived in the UK fleeing persecution and murder in other countries and have had to rebuild their lives here.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing the debate. Jews have contributed hugely to this country over many centuries. In fact, over 200 have served in this Chamber—218 by my count, but that could be contested—including 70 Labour Members of Parliament. I will briefly give an example of one: Manny Shinwell was a trade unionist who served here and in the other place until he was 101 and did great things in the Atlee Government, showing that we are right across the breadth and spread of the political establishment of the United Kingdom.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I will make reference to Jewish politicians in my speech.

Jews have often had to come to this country to rebuild their lives, and that was brought home to me particularly when reading Lord Danny Finkelstein's book, "Hitler, Stalin, Mum and Dad". Danny's family history is sadly not unique but is a clear example of how two families rebuilt their lives after suffering such trauma and whose members went on to make significant contributions to both Jewish and British history, including the establishment of the Wiener Holocaust Library.

British Jews have played key roles and made major contributions over centuries in the fields of business, science, the arts and politics. In business, perhaps the most-loved retail brand we have in this country is Marks & Spencer, established by Michael Marks and Thomas Spencer. The largest supermarket in this country is Tesco, founded by Jack Cohen in 1919. Other businesses of note are the cinema chain Odeon, Moss Bros. and GlaxoSmithKline, all of which were started by Jewish Brits and have provided so many jobs and so much prosperity for this country.

In science, Rosalind Franklin was responsible for the discovery of the structure of DNA. Sir Ernst Chain was the co-developer of penicillin. Lord Robert Winston, now in the other place, pioneered fertility treatment that is responsible for goodness knows how many children born in this country and across the world.

In the arts, Michael Balcon co-founded Ealing Studios, which is one of the most important British studios to this day. The Ealing comedies came from that studio and started the careers of Sir Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers. Samuel Wanamaker rebuilt the Globe theatre just down the river from us, which was perhaps one of the most important cultural contributions of the 20th century. Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" was probably played there, which is another example of witnessing historical incidents of antisemitism. Monty Norman wrote the James Bond theme, which was then rearranged by John Barry.

Actors of stage and screen are absolutely part of our establishment. One of my personal favourites is Dame Maureen Lipman, an outstanding actor but also a campaigner on ensuring that antisemitism is understood. One British Jewish male responsible for bringing us all together every couple of years to sing and hopefully to bring football home is David Baddiel. Obviously, the English Lionesses have brought football home; we are still waiting for the boys to do it, but I am sure they will eventually.

Turning to politics, the first Jewish MP was Lionel de Rothschild, representing part of my seat—the City of London. Lionel first took his seat in 1847, but it was not until the Jews Relief Act 1858 that he was recognised as a Jewish MP. The first Jewish peer was his son Nathaniel.

Westminster City Council, where I was proud to be a councillor for 16 years, has been well served by Jewish councillors, both Labour and Conservative, over the decades, including council leaders Dame Shirley Porter, Melvyn Caplan and latterly Sir Simon Milton, who was a major political influence on me as leader of Westminster City Council and later Boris Johnson's right-hand man at City Hall when he was Mayor of London.

A British Jew who is probably responsible for the start of my political career is my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), whom I met in

our first week at the University of Exeter. In the first conversation we ever had, he told me I was a Conservative and I had to join the Conservative party—and the rest is history.

In my constituency, we have evidence of a Jewish presence since Roman Britain. In Threadneedle Street, the Bank of England stands on the site of the London home of Aaron of Lincoln, a Jewish banker who died in 1186. Those familiar with the city of London will have come across the street called Old Jewry, and the name is hardly a coincidence, because the Great Synagogue of London was based there until it closed in 1272, a few short years before the Jews of England were formally expelled in 1290 by Edward I. It was only in 1656, during the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, that Jews were invited to return.

While Jewish communities would subsequently flourish all over England and further afield in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, I am proud that my constituency was once again the heart of the Jewish renaissance in this country. It is home to Bevis Marks Synagogue, which was built in 1781 and is the oldest synagogue in continuous use in Europe today. The first Jewish Lord Mayor was Sir David Salomons in 1855.

Tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers fought bravely in both the first and second world wars. Five Jewish soldiers have received the Victoria Cross and even now, every year the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women hold a Remembrance Day parade at the Cenotaph on the Sunday after the official Remembrance Day.

Having researched this topic, I could speak for hours on the contributions made by individual Jewish people but I want to pinpoint one person who I think has made the most significant contribution in this country over decades: Dame Esther Rantzen. She started so many incredible campaigns and has made a huge impact on my life, starting with her "That's Life!" programme, where in the early '80s she highlighted the Ben Hardwick campaign, encouraging more people to consider organ donation. I carry an organ donor card because of that campaign. Her seatbelt campaign saw the law changed to make sure that children would be wearing seatbelts in the back of cars; I note that the Father of the House is in his place, and I know he played a significant part in that campaign.

Perhaps the most significant campaign that Dame Esther has been involved in since is Childline, lifting the lid off the heinous crime of child abuse and giving child victims a voice. The work that she has done on Childline, which is now run by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, has changed the way we deal with child social services as well and made a significant difference to many children's lives. She has since moved on to the Silver Line, outlining the loneliness that so many older people suffer, and is trying to help to change their lives. The new film "One Life" tells the story of the Kindertransport, set up by Nicholas Winton, and one scene in the film shows "That's Life!", where all the survivors stand up and thank him. One of those survivors was one Susie Lind, the grandmother of one of my closest friends, Daniel Astaire.

Dame Esther is now sadly at the end of her life, but she has not stopped campaigning, and with her assisted dying campaign she is trying to make sure we all have a

good death. I pay tribute to her and thank her on behalf of the whole nation for her outstanding contribution over the past 50 years.

It is perhaps no coincidence that today is Rosh—I am going to get this wrong—[HON. MEMBERS: “Chodesh.”] Rosh Chodesh, the new lunar month. It is an important day of renewal in the Jewish faith and the Jewish month of Shevat begins today. One of the great verses from the 15th day of Shevat, spoken by Moses, goes as follows:

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your parent who will inform you, your elders who will tell you.”

It is therefore fitting to debate the merits of a British Jewish history month.

We rightly already celebrate the achievements of many minorities in this country, and continue to educate future generations, through Black History Month, LGBT History Month, Pride and Islamophobia Awareness Month. The United States established Jewish American Heritage Month nearly two decades ago, and I believe it is now time we reminded ourselves of the remarkable contribution that the Jewish community has made to our nation, often after suffering the greatest hardships, and to celebrate the value of difference. It is time we used the achievements of the British Jewish community to remind ourselves of the values we all share and remind ourselves that this small minority is British. I hope the Government will take that on board and consider introducing a British Jewish history month.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will start with a time limit of six minutes but that will rapidly decrease to five minutes. Anyone who wants to complain can ask their colleagues to leave, because that is the only way they will get any more time. I call Fabian Hamilton.

3.39 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, which was opened so well by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I thank her and her colleagues for securing the debate.

I am proud to represent the constituency with the largest Jewish population in Yorkshire, and indeed on the entire east side of the United Kingdom. For over 150 years, Jewish people in Leeds have contributed so much to our city’s culture, economy and society. They stood at the frontline of the battle against Oswald Mosley’s fascists in the Battle of Holbeck Moor in 1937, and have often been at the forefront of our local political history across the city.

The Jewish community in Leeds has a fantastic history, and it is going from strength to strength in 2024. That is thanks in no small measure to the hard work and dedication of everyone in the community, but I thank in particular the Leeds Jewish Representative Council and the Jewish Leadership Council for their work to strengthen and represent the Jewish community in my constituency, as well as for the fruitful relationship that we have enjoyed for many decades, especially under the current leadership of Simon Myerson KC and Laurence Saffer, who have done a brilliant job.

In Leeds, we have Reform and Orthodox synagogues, flourishing kosher bakeries and butchers, and the world-renowned Marjorie and Arnold Ziff community centre.

For more than 100 years, the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board and the Leeds Jewish Housing Association have supported at least 20% of the Jewish community in Leeds, providing mental health support, residential care for people with learning disabilities, practical help for struggling families and much more. Given the current cost of living crisis, that work could not be more important than it is today.

I want also to reflect on the legacy of a woman I had the privilege of knowing as a close friend for many years: Sheila Saunders, who died nearly 10 years ago. She was chief executive of the welfare board and the housing association, and, along with her friend Elaine Grazin, helped to found in the 1980s the Leeds Jewish Women’s Aid, the only specialist organisation in the United Kingdom supporting Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence. I still miss Sheila every single day.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster mentioned Danny Finkelstein’s book, which I am proud to be reading at the moment having been given a copy of it. It reflects in many ways the story of my own family. I hope the House will indulge me as I use my last three minutes to tell a little about my family’s history, which, in many ways, sums up the history of the Jewish people in this country—the British Jews, as the hon. Member said earlier.

My father, Mario Reynaldo Uziell, came to this country in 1934 to escape the increasing persecution of Jews across Europe. At the time, his family lived in the Hague, but they moved very quickly to Paris. They lived in several major cities throughout Europe, and my father himself was born in Vienna. When, at the age of 12, he arrived at Brentwood School—a boarding school in Essex—he could not speak a word of English, but he mastered it very quickly. So much so that, by 1942, when he had been in the country for only eight years and still had Portuguese citizenship, he volunteered for the British Army.

However, because his first language was French, the Special Operations Executive nabbed him and said, “You’re a French speaker; we need you to help the resistance in France.” That was dangerous for a Jewish man, but he volunteered to do it none the less. I do not know what part he played in the resistance. I know about his training, but he never spoke about his experience in occupied France—probably for very good reason, and certainly because he had signed the Official Secrets Act.

I still have the document that my father signed in 1948 pledging his allegiance to King George VI so that he could become a naturalised British citizen. There is an example of somebody who started his life as a continental Jew speaking French, whose family originated in Bulgaria, the Ottoman empire and Thessaloniki—then known as Salonika, where my grandfather was born—but who proudly became an Englishman. He never had an accent—he learned English early enough to avoid speaking with any accent, unlike both of my grandparents, one of whom had a French accent and the other a German accent. On my mother’s side of the family, we have a very proud connection to the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, whose Aunt Rose was also my Aunt Rose—Rose Goldberg. She lived until the end of her life—she died only about 15 years ago—in Brondesbury Park, which is very near where I grew up in Willesden.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

Finally, before my time is up, I want to pay tribute to some of the holocaust survivors who found their homes here in Britain, especially three of my constituents, one of whom is no longer alive. One of them is Trude Silman, who is 95 this year. Trude escaped from Bratislava to come to the city of Leeds, and she became the first woman to qualify with a biochemistry degree from the University of Leeds. She is still as clear and articulate as she ever was—a very active mind. The second is Arek Hersh, who was in the Polish ghetto in Łódź and was taken to the concentration camps, and was finally released from Auschwitz when he was 16 years old. The third is Iby Knill, who wrote two excellent books but sadly passed away just two years ago. Along with the many holocaust survivors, they contribute to our collective knowledge of Judaism here in the United Kingdom. They were proud British Jews.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the Father of the House, the time limit will go down to five minutes, which we will have to enforce strictly, or else not everybody will have the chance to speak.

3.46 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North East (*Fabian Hamilton*), and I thank him for what he has done. He reminds me of the book written by our former colleague *Tristram Hunt* about the original champagne socialist, the communist *Friedrich Engels*, and the lives that people had in his part of the world as well as in north London. I also commend the book by *Hadley Freeman*, “*House of Glass*”, which is three years old; it is about how her family came to survive and what their lives have been like.

Were we to be having a debate on the history of Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs in this country, I think we would have the same kind of attendance. What is different about Jewish history is what was put to me by one of my constituents after 7 October: “Why do they keep picking on us?” There are 16 million Jews in the world, of whom about a quarter of a million are in this country. Their contributions have been magnificent, and not just those who are known.

In my previous job—some time back—I put neon lights outside theatres and cinemas in the west end. One day, our painter asked whether he could have a day off. I said, “Of course” and asked why. When he said that his mother had died, I asked whether I could come to the funeral. He burst into tears, because he did not know that anybody else knew that he was Jewish, and he was overcome by the idea that someone would volunteer to come to that kind of family event. I was shocked that someone in my country could feel like that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (*Nickie Aiken*), whom I thank for introducing the debate, mentioned *Esther Rantzen*. I had not actually known that *Esther Rantzen* was Jewish until I went to her wedding—seeing *Desmond Wilcox* trying to become Jewish, in terms of music, dance and everything else, was amazing.

However, it is not just the significant people we need to consider. When I went on almost a pilgrimage to Gallipoli to see the graves and names of the people

from my constituency who had died, I kept coming across memorials to Jews who had served in our armed forces. The same thing applies in every walk of life, whether notable or just noticed if we keep our eyes open.

One of the reasons why I have supported the proposals of the national holocaust memorial commission to have a memorial and a learning centre, and the stipulation by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation that the majority of the money should be spent on education, is that since that proposal first came out, I have gained by knowing how many of my grandfather’s extended family died in the holocaust. We thought it was 11, but that figure went up to 60, and it is now well over 100. That is the kind of education that matters.

I hope that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren—if there are some—will learn about our history and how inclusive it is, and how it is chance that allows some people to go on and put down roots, while others do not get that chance because of ideology or the murderous habits of too many people.

I also want my children and grandchildren to know about the way Jews have been treated in this country over the past 800 years or so, which has not been good and has not been easy. I remember every time I go to church that Jesus was not a white Englishman who belonged to the Church of England. We have to remember our shared history and try to adjust the way we work together, and I do not just want to talk about the Abrahamic faiths, because the same thing applies to other faiths that have different traditions and different origins.

Our future is together, and the sooner we learn what we can about each other and what we share, the better.

Having said that, my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster mentioned *Sir Simon Milton*. I have been to two—well, more than two—Jewish funerals, but I went up to the Bushey New cemetery when the bones were discovered in the Imperial War museum, and its location cannot even be shown for fear that it will be attacked, and when I went to the service for *Sir Simon Milton*, that also had to have strict security. At one of those funerals, a member of the Community Security Trust came up to me and said, “You’re *Peter Bottomley*,” and when I replied that I was, he said, in words that I can hardly say, “You’re one of the people why I believe it’s safe to remain in this country.”

If we can defend each other, we can do better together.

3.51 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The motion that has been so ably put before the House today poses the question of the potential merits of a Jewish history month. Potential merits? We have already heard some wonderful stories. This is not about merit; this is a necessity. We must have such a thing so that we can promote learning, as the Father of the House said, as well as understanding and historical knowledge, because it is through an understanding of the historic place that the wonderful contribution many Jewish citizens have made across these islands that we will ensure that the hatred and antisemitic attitudes that have prevailed too often will be done away with. So I commend the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (*Nickie Aiken*) for moving this motion, and I say, “Yes, absolutely; we must have such a month.”

The Holocaust Educational Trust, which has been cited by Members already, has demonstrated how necessary historical knowledge of the torture and persecution of the holocaust is for the children of today. Taking forward that lesson, let us therefore apply it in this way.

Many people today have proudly boasted of the great contribution that Jewish people have made, and not only in their own lives and those of their own constituencies, but across this country. The President of Israel is Isaac Herzog, who I think previously held three ministerial posts. His father, Chaim Herzog, who was the sixth President before him, was born in Cliftonville Avenue in Belfast. His father, Rabbi Herzog, who lived in Dublin, was known, believe it or not, as the Sinn Féin rabbi because he was so in favour of the new Dáil Éireann that had been created, and he was recognised as such.

It hurts my heart today to see the horrible attitude that some people—I just say some people—from a republican background now have towards the Jewish people and towards the state of Israel. So strong was the history of the Jewish tradition within the history of the Irish that some of the founding fathers of the Israeli state actually hailed from Ireland, both north and south, and they have made a wonderful contribution.

Indeed, in our own history, in our great shipbuilding heritage of Harland and Wolff, guess who Mr Wolff was. He was a prominent Jewish politician from Belfast, and he made a wonderful contribution. He was a close friend of Sir Otto Jaffe, a leading politician and twice Lord Mayor of Belfast. He was also president of the Belfast Hebrew congregation, and he served our country so well.

Let us embrace that remarkable history. Rather than hiding it under a bushel, we must let it shine, so that people can understand that the rich tapestry of the Christian, the Hebrew and the Arabic heritage that pertains on these islands is strong and must be encouraged for all to see, so that we can understand our future.

3.54 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for securing it. I agree with everything that has been said so far on the need for us to have a Jewish history month.

As others have said, the history of Jews in Britain is wound up in the history of this country, and at times, sadly, it is a complex history. In my region of Yorkshire, that is clearly demonstrated by the two cities nearest to me, one of which I grew up in. People will remember the 1190 massacre of Jews in the City of York, but York has a thriving Jewish community today. The history of Jews in York is also seen in place names such as Jewbury, where my ancestors lived. In more recent decades, the relationship has been complicated. We see it now in the rise in antisemitism, but in my birth city, Hull, we had the battle of Corporation Field in 1936, when Mosley and his British Union of Fascists turned up to be met by a crowd of 10,000 people who, I am proud to say, were mainly there to see them off, and that is indeed what happened.

I will talk today about the contribution made by Jews from the City of Hull and Hull's place in Jewish history more broadly. Today, the Jewish community in Hull is small, but its contribution to Jewish history is significant,

especially in the role the city played in the transmigration of Jews fleeing eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century, who passed through Hull largely on their way to North America. So many came to Hull that the city was marketed as Britain's cheapest port. Now, we in the Humber do not like to think of ourselves as cheap, but that is what we were at the time. It is estimated that over 2.2 million emigrants passed through the City of Hull in the century before 1914, and 100,000 through our fellow Humber port of Grimsby. Most were passing through on their way to North America or to other cities, such as Leeds and Manchester, but a small number remained in Hull.

At its height, the Jewish population of Hull accounted for 1% of its people, but they had a huge impact on the life of the city. Let me talk briefly about the public life of some of Hull's Jewish people. Between 1856 and 1983, Hull had two Jewish mayors, seven Jewish lord mayors, and a Jewish leader of the council, who served effectively from 1945 until 1979. This is a very consensual debate, but here I must disagree slightly with my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster, who talked about her cities as the part of the county where Jews have had the most impact. Hull newspaper editor Arthur Tidman wrote in the 1940s:

"There is no town, no city of the UK where Jews have been more closely identified with public life or where their natural abilities have been more freely exercised to the advantage of the community. It is doubtful if any other city can equal the record of Hull in the number of Jewish citizens who have filled the highest civic offices."

Chief among those individuals was Alderman Sir Leo Schultz, the Labour leader of Hull Council from 1945 to 1979. He was elected to the council in 1926. Prior to that, he had won a scholarship to Oxford, but was told that he could not attend because of his background, so he took his fight into politics. He had the foresight before the war to build bomb shelters, in opposition to the Government at the time, who in the end relented and paid for the shelters to be built. People who were bombed out of their homes on the second night of bombing in 1941, including my grandma, might not have survived were it not for Sir Leo's foresight. He had such an impact on our city, remaining as leader of the council until 1979, being knighted and going on to become an alderman. There is a statue of him in the city, and he is just one of a number of individuals, including former mayor Henry Feldman and Alderman John Symons, who have had a huge impact on public life, and not only in our city but in our country.

3.59 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and a pleasure to take part in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for securing it, particularly at this moment. As it comes at a time when we are acutely aware of the critical growth in antisemitism in this country, it would be tempting to focus on that issue alone, but as serious as antisemitism is, I do not think it is the sole reason why we should be thinking about a British Jewish history month.

When I started to think about this debate, I did not realise how limited my appreciation was of the contribution that the Jewish community has made to the rich, diverse culture that we enjoy across the UK. Yes, I was aware of

[Christine Jardine]

most of the entertainment and industrial figures who have already been mentioned. On the political figures, who could not be aware of Manny Shinwell, our Liberal leader Herbert Samuel and others who have graced this place, such as Malcolm Rifkind?

One of my favourite authors, if I may focus on Scotland for a minute, is Edinburgh's own Muriel Spark, who gave us some real gems, including the unique "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie". Spark was among the *crème de la crème* of not just British but international literature, and what a contribution she made. I did not know that my own alma mater, the University of Glasgow, was groundbreaking when, in 1787, Levi Myers graduated without having to take a Christian oath. That attracted an influx of students to Scotland. The majority of Scotland's Jewish community continues to live in and around Glasgow. Many of them are descended from those who came here to escape the Russian pogroms in the 1880s. It was apparently cheaper to live in Glasgow in those days than it was in Edinburgh, and I have absolutely no comment to make about the current situation in the housing market.

A few hardy souls have made it across to our side of Scotland over the years. Indeed, in Scotland, the history of Jewish communities can be traced back to Edinburgh in 1691, when the minutes of Edinburgh town council recorded the application of David Brown, a professing Jew, to reside and trade in the city, and 1816 saw the founding of the first formal Jewish community in Edinburgh, of around 20 families. In 1825, a tenement in Richmond Court in Newington was acquired and became a synagogue with 67 seats. By 1900, the community had reached around 500. In 1909, the Edinburgh University Jewish society was founded. It is the oldest in Scotland and possibly in Britain, and it is currently the fastest growing.

Sadly, my more recent interaction with the Jewish community has been as a result of the rising tide of antisemitism. I met Rabbi Rose in a pub near that synagogue in Newington to discuss how I can support our local community. I have done a tour of north London with the CST and heard heartbreaking tales from Jewish schoolchildren of the antisemitism they face on an all too regular basis. I met Lord John Mann to discuss his report on antisemitism in the UK, and last year I presented a Bill to try to force social media companies to report on action taken against the abuse of people with protected characteristics, which would include religion.

To return to my original point, antisemitism should be a problem that we overcome, like Islamophobia and every other form of religious, racial or personal discrimination. It should never be the dominant or only factor when we take into account what our Jewish community has contributed to our history, but to do that fully and properly and to value that contribution, we need to set aside some time—a month, each year—to mark it, celebrate it and record it, to ensure that coming generations know about it.

4.4 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and to speak in this debate about Jewish communities and the merits of having a Jewish history month. Both, of course, have great merit.

Recent events alone exemplify why history is so important. As I think Winston Churchill said, those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it. One of the things that characterises Jewish communities around the world, as well as in the United Kingdom, is hope. Indeed, the Israeli national anthem is called "Hatikvah"—the hope, and it is not an exuberant or jingoistic melody; in fact, it is a rather melancholy, moving tune that somehow reflects its message of hope rather than jubilation, as many national anthems do.

Rather than speak about the Jewish community, as many Members on both sides of the House have done, I would like to speak, as it were, to the Jewish community. Some weeks ago, I spoke about why there was cause for hope, despite the increase in antisemitism, and I would like to continue on that theme. I say to the Jewish people of the United Kingdom, and indeed any listening, that many civilisations who have persecuted the Jews have risen and then fallen; the Jews continue to thrive. One needs only to look at the Arch of Titus in Rome to see how empires come and go and rise and fall. The arch was built 2,000 years ago by the Romans under Emperor Domitian to celebrate the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem—it depicts the plundering of that temple—but, just a few weeks ago, that arch, celebrating the destruction of the Jews, was lit up in the colours of the Israeli flag by the Government of Italy to mark the pogrom of 7 October.

There are many reasons to be hopeful. We should ignore the haters in communities around the world who have clearly been responsible for the massive increase in antisemitism. We should ignore the haters on university campuses who are bullying Jewish children. I have heard from those young people who are frightened even to go on campus. Eventually, some of those accounts will become widely known, and they will shock the nation. We should ignore those in the international community, and even in the United Nations organisation, where frankly there are blatant examples of antisemitism and where, just before Christmas, Iran was selected to sit on the Human Rights Council.

We should instead celebrate those who are doing so much; those who are agents of peace and reconciliation whom we do not hear enough about. We should applaud men like the Bedouin—not a Jewish man—Youssef Ziadna, a minibus driver who saved 30 lives from the Nova festival in Israel by responding to a call to pick up a customer from that event. He drove into Hamas's attack and drove out with a minibus full of Jewish people. They are alive because of him. We should applaud the hero Rami, whom I met in Israel a few days ago, who saved over 700 lives by driving to and for, into that war zone, to rescue people.

We should applaud people such as the Crown Prince of Bahrain, who said:

"What Hamas did on 7 October was a war crime and an atrocity, and it is important to get all the...abductees out of Gaza".

It is not easy for some leaders—Arab leaders especially—to say those truths; that is a true leader. There are also the Emiratis. Ali Rashid al-Nuaimi, a top Emirati official, said that the Abraham accords

"are our future. It is not an agreement between two Governments, but a platform that we believe should transform the region".

That was an heroic statement. There is also the Saudi Defence Minister, Khalid bin Salman, who visited the White House and reaffirmed his country's interest in

pursuing the Abraham accords. That is real courage and real leadership—things that the Jewish community should and will value in this country and around the world.

We should applaud our own political leaders on all sides—this is not a partisan issue—for standing up and doing the right thing in the face of dissent. We have of course a great hero in our sovereign the King, who can influence events. He has long-standing personal relationships, a love of the Arab culture and a deep interest in the Muslim religion, but in fact he had the Chief Rabbi as a guest before his coronation so that he was able to walk there as it was the Sabbath. Heroes come in many forms; hope comes through many routes.

4.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for setting the scene so well. I declare an interest, as a friend of Israel. My comments will reflect the support for that wee nation with a big heart, much like Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a case in point, showing not just the importance of the contribution made by the Jewish community to the social, cultural and economic life of the Province, but the interest in the history of contributions from the wider community.

Since its inception, the Belfast Jewish heritage project has attracted hundreds of people on its guided walking tours in Belfast city centre. The tour includes familiar sites in Belfast with a Jewish connection, some of which people born and bred in Belfast have no idea about. For example, the oldest library in the city, the Linen Hall library, was originally the linen warehouse of a textile company called Moore and Weinberg. The Jaffe fountain in Victoria Square is named after Daniel Joseph Jaffe, the founder of the Belfast Jewish community and the father of the only Jewish Lord Mayor of Belfast, Sir Otto Jaffe, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned.

In 2021, the Belfast Jewish heritage project was awarded a grant of £10,000 from the shared history fund, commemorating the centenary of Northern Ireland. The shared history fund was funded by the Northern Ireland Office and administered by the national lottery. A lasting legacy of that grant is the interactive online Jewish heritage map of Northern Ireland, which tells the Jewish story of more than 70 locations right across Northern Ireland.

We have much Jewish history in Northern Ireland, and that is by no means an exhaustive list of the wonderful connections. I think of McGill's farm on Drumfad Road in Millisle in my Strangford constituency, which was used to house children rescued from Nazi Germany, as another place of interest. The Kindertransport children came through there. It is clear that a Jewish history month in Northern Ireland would have no shortage of material and stories, and would have a great deal of support from across the community. I can only imagine the scale of replication in other communities across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as we become aware of how intrinsically linked the people of the Jewish faith are to the fabric of our British culture. That is key in this debate, for which the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster set the scene. They are part of what we are as British people, and we should welcome them, as the Leader of the House said in her excellent contribution earlier today.

The content for the month is there. There is also a need for people to understand the connections between us all. In Northern Ireland I am painfully aware of the problem with identity politics and forgetting the connections that bind us. As one person who was on the Jewish heritage walk in Belfast put it, it was amazing to have an hour-long history tour of Belfast that was not about Protestants and Catholics.

Sadly, there is good cause to enhance an appreciation and understanding of Jewish contribution to Northern Ireland, as it is not immune from the surge of antisemitic incidents and attitudes recorded by the Community Security Trust. There has been so much, going back to 2014, including attacks by vandals, desecrating headstones and the blue plaque to Chaim Herzog being removed. All the things that have happened between Belfast and Israel represent a remarkable connection. Just over a century ago, Belfast had a future Israeli President, Chief Rabbi and Foreign Minister living in it. Disgracefully, the disused Jewish section of the city cemetery has been repeatedly desecrated and vandalised. I would welcome a Jewish history month, because it would increase awareness among the general population of the remarkable place of the Jewish community in our society, challenge antisemitic stereotypes and myths, and inject confidence and pride for the Jewish community itself.

The Jewish people are not some sect to be observed, but a part of us—the best of British. That should be understood and emphasised not simply for a month but on an ongoing basis until these people cease to be ostracised or hated simply because they worship God in a different way from someone else. They are a people used to persecution, but that does not make it right. They have hope in God—the same God that I worship—but let them find hope in this place as we highlight the wonderful good that has been done and is still to come from those who are British and worship their God with dignity and respect, in no way offensive to any other person or religion. I do not have time to quote psalm 27, but I recommend that Members read it afterwards, because it will tell them all about the Israeli people and how their God looks after them.

4.14 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for securing the debate.

Earlier this week, I led a Westminster Hall debate on the appalling rise of antisemitism we have seen in the UK since the 7 October attacks. That debate was sadly necessary given the circumstances, but I am glad that today we have the opportunity for a much more positive debate to acknowledge the enormous contribution of the Jewish community here in the UK.

I wish to open my remarks by recognising the Jewish community in the west midlands, some of whom I met in the weeks following the awful events in Israel on 7 October. Many in the Jewish community have personal connections to those directly affected. Their strength and bravery in the face of terror has been commendable, and today I reaffirm my commitment to stand with the community in their hour of need.

At Singers Hill synagogue in Birmingham, I met Rabbi Jacobs who told me how the Jewish community stood with the Muslim community in the wake of the attacks on innocent Muslims in the days after 9/11.

[Nicola Richards]

The late Rabbi Tann visited the Imam at Birmingham central mosque at the time to show solidarity, leading to the formation of Birmingham Faith Leaders' Group, which continues to this day. Rabbi Tann's gesture was reciprocated in the wake of last year's attacks, with the Imam visiting Singers Hill synagogue for a Friday night service, alongside other faith leaders, to show support for the local Jewish community. This is a more recent development in the history of the Jewish community in the west midlands, but one that they are proud of.

Most know that Birmingham has a long tradition of thriving Jewish communities, but most are not aware that Wolverhampton once had one too. Thanks to the Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain, which has pulled together years of records, we know more about that community. In Wolverhampton, the building of the synagogue still stands, but today it is a church. In 1858, after the community had collected £300, they built Wolverhampton synagogue, which was opened by Chief Rabbi Dr Adler. In 1903, after a fire, it was rebuilt by a local architect. When the community stopped growing and numbers reduced, the congregation merged with Singers Hill synagogue.

Today, we have five active synagogues in the region, all contributing to the community and promoting understanding, tolerance and harmony between people of different faiths in our area. They open their doors to thousands of children each year to learn more about Judaism and, commendably, they organise donations to charities helping to provide for those in need. It is only right to pay tribute to some of our local rabbis: Rabbi Jacobs, Rabbi Hambling and Rabbi Pink. Like all religious leaders, they inspire their communities. They are their support and their guide. They are there for advice, celebrations and difficult times, too.

It is not just religious leaders who do so much for others. Ruth Jacobs is a perfect example of that, through organisations such as the west midlands Jewish representative council, which she chairs, as well as the Nisa-Nashim group, an interfaith forum for Jewish and Muslim women to bridge the divide and discuss their cultural and religious similarities. Ruth's commitment to the community extends to her role as chair of the West Midlands Friends of Israel and her work with the local police and political leaders. She also runs the local Hillel House, which provides housing and support for Jewish students, and hosts many social and religious events. It is people like Ruth who make the west midlands community so warm and friendly, while playing their part in making the region a better place for all communities.

It is not possible to mention all the contributions the Jewish community in the west midlands makes to our region and across the country, but I will try to fit in a few more. The King David School in Birmingham is a beacon of light in the west midlands. It is a Jewish primary school which welcomes all faiths and has a majority of Muslim students.

I would like to mention Mindu Hornick MBE, a holocaust survivor who settled in Birmingham with her family. She has given her testimony of the holocaust to thousands of people across the country and has spoken in countless schools in our region. Many holocaust survivors like Mindu are selfless in the work they do

and we owe them a great deal. She is one of the many UK-based survivors who have given their testimony in conjunction with the Holocaust Educational Trust.

Chai Cancer Care is a London-based charity that offers 67 specialised support services to cancer patients around the country, including in the west midlands. It provides advice, counselling, physiotherapy and other support services from Stirchley in Birmingham. I visited its headquarters in Hendon last year with the Jewish Leadership Council and it is incredible. There are many other Jewish organisations that sit under the umbrella of the JLC that all do incredible work, including Jewish Women's Aid, United Jewish Israel Appeal and the Union of Jewish Students.

Those are just some of the examples of the contribution of the Jewish community in the west midlands and across the country. In the west midlands, we are incredibly diverse. I have one of the most diverse constituencies in the country. The Jewish community in the west midlands is smaller than elsewhere, but it well and truly punches above its weight. As I have given examples of today, the Black Country also has a proud history of Jewish communities. A Jewish history month would be the perfect opportunity to educate others about the history of the community that we may not otherwise know about, as well as celebrating the enormous contribution the community makes today. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster for securing the debate today.

4.19 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): A point that I have made on many occasions is that all too often, public understanding of the Jewish community and the issues that matter to us will be limited to antisemitism and the UK's relationship with Israel, and knowledge of Jewish history will largely be limited to the holocaust. That is not for a second to diminish the importance of those three topics, but to make the case for the fact that Jewish history, Jewish culture and tradition and the Jewish contribution to Britain constitute a much richer tapestry, and we can all benefit from a much deeper understanding of it.

Within the Jewish community in the UK are represented a mixture of different denominations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, practices, histories and languages—and, of course, two of my favourite features of that Jewish diversity: the food and the old adage of “two Jews, three opinions”. With all this to teach and share, our community, tiny in size relative to the population of the UK and the globe, cannot be expected to undertake our endeavours to bring greater awareness alone.

I thought it might be illustrative for the House if, in demonstrating that every part of British history and culture is also Jewish history and culture, I brought together two seemingly unrelated parts of my parliamentary work to highlight the Jewish contribution. As a British Jew and, of course, a member of the all-party parliamentary groups relevant to our community, I am also a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on wrestling. Thanks to the historian Bradley Craig, I know of “Jewish Flash” Al Lipman from Aldgate, who was an immensely popular lightweight wrestling star in the 1940s. In the wake of the war, there was a major show in Manchester in aid of Jewish charities, in which the “good guy”, who was Jewish, defeated the “bad guy”, who was portraying a Nazi.

More recently, we have seen the Jewish global wrestling star Noam Dar, who hails from Ayr in Scotland, wrestles for World Wrestling Entertainment—performing for millions across the world—and has won the NXT heritage cup. He even once wrestled at a Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade camp in Essex, an event organised by, among others, Neil Martin and Robert Rams, two Jewish wrestling fans. Dar was followed in the main event of the second ever JLGB wrestling extravaganza by Simon Miller, who hosts the shows of the UK independent promotion Progress, but has also wrestled across the country. Other British wrestlers and former wrestlers with Jewish links include "The Chutzpah" Lior Ben-David, Aviv Maayan and Max "Voltage" Olesker, of the comedy duo Max & Ivan—of course, there are numerous British comedians who are Jewish or have Jewish roots.

British Jews are also proudly involved in other areas of the wrestling world. Examples are WWE's head of external affairs, TNA's PR man, All Elite Wrestling's press lead—although he is in the United States—the global Jewish wrestling superstar MJF, and the ring announcer Justin Roberts. Israel's best-known wrestling promoter, Gery Roif, came to Britain and visited the House recently. There are others here at home, such as Emily Read, co-founder of the all-women's promotion Pro-Wrestling: Eve, and Adam Cailler, who writes about wrestling for the *Daily Star* following his stint at the *Jewish Telegraph*. There is also the wrestling photographer Oli Sandler, and Danny Stone, the secretariat to both the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism and the APPG on wrestling, is well known across the House both for his expertise in antisemitism and in wrestling. While small in number, British Jews have certainly made an impact on wrestling here in the UK and overseas.

In the hope that this will be the kind of debate that we will see much more in the future, I will not go through all the APPGs and committees in which I take part through a Jewish lens, although that would demonstrate the number of areas in the Jewish contribution to British life—of which there are so many, beyond those that are established or widely understood—that a Jewish history month could explore. Indeed, what has become a running joke with my friend Jonny Newton—occurring on so many occasions that I worry that we are willing it into reality—is the idea of starting a podcast called "Spicy Talmud", in which we would explore the volume-collecting centuries of rabbinic discussion on not just every single worthy topic one could possibly conceive of, but the more esoteric questions and the sometimes bizarre stories that are recounted about whistling frogs, weasels bringing chametz from house to house, snakes going where they shouldn't, and wine-drinking she-dogs.

Thankfully, for everyone's sake, I think it safe to say that we are both far too busy for the foreseeable future, but perhaps there is another way in which the kind of love that we both have, and our wider community has, for Jewishness, and our pride in being part of the Jewish story, can be brought to as wide an audience as possible so we can all share in it together—and what better way to start than with a dedicated Jewish history month?

4.24 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), not least because she has improved my knowledge of wrestling from absolutely nothing to slightly more

than nothing. I celebrate all those Jewish stars of the wrestling world, just as I celebrate all those individuals whom my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and others have listed from the worlds of entertainment, politics, industry and many more.

I am delighted to say that the Jewish population of Buckinghamshire is growing—it grew by 7% between the 2011 and 2021 censuses. I stand shoulder to shoulder with the community, which I am proud to represent. I want to see it thrive and go from strength to strength.

Notwithstanding the powerful comments that have been made about trying to ignore the haters, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) said, we have to acknowledge that Jewish communities in Buckinghamshire and across the country are hurting right now. I was privileged to join the south Buckinghamshire Jewish community at a Hanukkah event at Waddesdon Manor in my constituency in December, led by the wonderful Rabbi Neil Janes. His opening words during the short ceremony really shocked me. He said, "We no longer feel confident to gather as a community." That was in the United Kingdom in 2023. Of course, every community should be confident to gather in the United Kingdom in modern times. They should all be afforded our protection; they should all feel safe.

I put my thoughts about the event on social media, as we in this House have a tendency to do, and I said, not unreasonably, that we must defeat antisemitism. It took 45 seconds for one of the haters—whoever [debbie.bennett21](#) is—to write underneath my Instagram post:

"Strange words 'must be defeated'".

What on earth was going through that individual's mind?

I saw it yesterday under another of my posts, and I have now reported it to the police. A person taking issue with something I said about the conflict between Israel and Hamas—it is perfectly legitimate for someone to take issue with my view on that—asked on Instagram:

"Are you married to a Jew?"

Such outrageous behaviour is happening in our country right now, and it has to be stamped out.

I wanted to say this in the Chamber this afternoon, and to support the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster for a Jewish history month, because one of the most important reasons why we study history is to understand what happened in the past and to ensure that the mistakes of the past, the horrors of the past and the evil of the past are not able to happen again. Yet we see history repeating itself, which is why we simply must have a Jewish history month to celebrate the contribution of all our Jewish communities and everything they have achieved and will continue to achieve.

As Members of Parliament, we all receive very difficult emails. We all have people come to see us at our surgeries in very difficult circumstances, with horrendous stories to tell. It is very rare that those stories reduce us to tears, but I received an email from a Jewish constituent, whose identity I will protect, openly saying:

"I have never felt as scared as I do right now to be in the UK... I've considered converting... I've gone to ground."

She has turned off the ability to be found on social media. That should scare us all. It must put a bounce underneath us to ensure that we defeat antisemitism and enable all Jewish communities, all people of the

[Greg Smith]

Jewish faith, to live freely, securely and safely, and to feel welcome, here in the United Kingdom, whether they are British or otherwise.

4.29 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I must begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for securing this debate. I learned a great deal from listening to the contributions of Members from across the House today. The variety and richness of them reflects a lot of what we are talking about: the richness of contribution to British society.

That is the point I wish to start with: the British Jewish community has made a remarkable contribution to the prosperity of our nation. In the face, sadly, of growing hostility abroad and, shamefully, here at home, it is high time that we as a nation celebrate its part in our national story. So I wish to do two things in the few minutes available to me: highlight the remarkable contribution made by the British Jewish community in Aberconwy today—in doing that I wish to thank Professor Nathan Abrams of Bangor University and the team at Llandudno museum for their important work in tracing the history of the Jewish residents of north Wales and Aberconwy; and raise and then quickly dismiss an objection that we can anticipate to founding a British Jewish history month.

In Aberconwy, although Jewish residents have never numbered more than a few hundred individuals, they have played a prominent role in the recent history of our community. Sadly, Aberconwy is not without its reminders of a darker past. Conwy's castle and walls were, of course, built by Edward I, who was notable for both his oppression of the Welsh and his expulsion of Jewish subjects in 1290. Primarily arriving in Llandudno in the Victorian era, the new Jewish community was soon a key part of the area's booming economy and was actively involved in the development and safeguarding of our local culture.

Families such as the Croops, Gubays, Wartskis and Blairmans founded shops that have become fixtures of our high streets, visible to this day, with the latter two founding international antique businesses that continue to prosper. We can also thank the Wartskis for the synagogue in Llandudno, which opened in 1909. It is a testament to this legacy that modern-day Llandudno has the pleasure of welcoming a large number of Hasidic families each year. In more recent times, the first woman mayor of Aberconwy was Jewish—Vicki Lazar was elected in 1978. Most recently, in a welcome twist of history, in 2012 the care of those battlements in Conwy that King Edward I built was voted into the competent hands of Cedric Rigal, the first Jewish constable and mayor of Conwy, with a rabbi offering a prayer at the inauguration.

However, in making the case for celebrating and formally recognising such contributions in Aberconwy and across the UK, we can anticipate an objection, albeit one raised in good faith. In an era of increasingly divisive identitarian politics, it may well be asked: will such recognition encourage British people to think of themselves, and one another, in terms of ethnic or religious group identity, and does this not risk compounding, rather than easing, division?

As the MP for a bilingual constituency, a proud Welshman and Brit, I think that that is a profound misunderstanding of identity. Our British identity is not totalising; it does not demand the erosion of the regional and religious identities that make up our nation. We are privileged in Britain to inherit a nation that evolved long before liberal nationalist revolutions of the 19th century, when nations such as France, Italy and Germany were engaged in assertive state-led nation building. In contrast, Britain emerged slowly, as networks of kin, friendship and trade bound together the destinies of the peoples of our islands. In many European states, for example, standardised education was seized on as a means to erode regional identity, yet here—I speak of north Wales in this case—the fierce independence and plurality of educations have represented distinct religious and philosophical traditions. In north Wales, I would count our fierce tradition of non-conformism in that too.

When a community's story has become intertwined with that of the nation, it becomes part of the story of Britain, and such is the story of British Jews. It is significant and it is part of our story that deserves to be celebrated. In a world in which ethnic grievances are increasingly and easily stoked for political capital, here is a story of resilience and success. The British Jewish contribution to the arts, literature, commerce and science of the UK has enriched and elevated our national life, here and in Aberconwy, and it has improved the condition of humanity the world over. This story should serve to inspire people of all backgrounds. For that reason, I support the motion put before us today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We move on to the Front-Bench contributions of six, eight and eight minutes, although I will not put the clock on. Please could the Minister leave a couple of minutes for the final words from Nickie Aiken?

4.35 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) on securing the debate and on the strength of her opening speech.

I love where I live. I feel privileged every day to represent my own local community, and to represent it in all its fantastic diversity, because East Renfrewshire is home to people of all faiths and none, including a vibrant and growing Muslim community, Christian congregations of all kinds, significant Sikh and Hindu communities, a lovely Baha'i community and the majority of Jews living in Scotland. We are so much better for the diversity of people who have made their homes in East Renfrewshire. That is why I was pleased to join the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster in seeking this debate, because we should celebrate all the communities that make us who we are.

Some people have referenced the timing of the debate in relation to the challenging times we live in. That may be true to some extent, but it is important to look at the issue through a different prism—that of the history of the Jewish community in its own right. So I will give a whistle-stop tour of that rich history in Scotland, particularly in East Renfrewshire.

The former Chief Rabbi, the late Jonathan Sacks, wrote about the Jewish communities of Scotland combining a strong loyalty to their Jewish faith and way of life with

a deep attachment to Scottish culture and identity. That rings true to me and speaks to the long history of the Jewish community in Scotland. We heard about degrees being awarded in the 1700s, and the first synagogues were opened in Edinburgh in 1817 and Glasgow in 1821.

Terrible events in Russia and then Germany, in particular, led to mass movements of people and communities forming across Scotland. In 1914, the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council was formed, the only Jewish school in Scotland opened in 1962, and the fantastic Scottish Jewish Archives Centre was founded in 1982, to collect, preserve and display Scotland's Jewish heritage. It is worth thinking about that centre as this debate in a physical form, as it is a phenomenally interesting place.

Throughout all that, every day contributions and less every day contributions have been made, year upon year, to Scotland by our Jewish citizens, whether in medicine, law, education or business. That particular thread in the tartan of Scotland is woven deep and clear. Given the time of year, I will push that a little further in an appreciation of Rabbi Pete Tobias, not only for his excellent work bringing people together to share Passover Seder, but for sharing with me a very funny Burns supper speech featuring someone named Rabbi Burns.

Today gives us an opportunity to focus on the personal and on people. East Renfrewshire resident, the late Ernest Levy, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, Cantor of the then Giffnock and Newlands synagogue for 40 years, was hugely influential in sharing testimony on the holocaust. He wrote a very important book, launched in the Scottish Parliament, and said at that time that he had never felt so Scottish in his life.

The senior Rabbi of Scotland, Rabbi Moshe Rubin, who has consistently welcomed people of all faiths, warmly extended a welcome to our First Minister, Humza Yousaf, recently, when both men came together at a hugely moving synagogue service, which very clearly demonstrated the importance of common humanity and concern for one another.

East Renfrewshire resident, Henry Wuga, will be 100 years old next month. Along with his late wife, he influenced hundreds of young Scottish people with their tireless focus on holocaust education. Brigadier Monty Cowen is a brave veteran who leads the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and women, alongside doing a great deal of community work. Evie Yedd's work to support our local area in many and varied ways is longstanding. She is the hugely influential leader of the local Jewish Brownie and Guide packs. She makes a profound difference to young lives.

The wide-ranging work of Cosgrove Care makes a positive difference to people with additional needs, and Jewish Care makes great efforts in supporting our community. There is the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities and the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, which work tirelessly to support, to be a voice and to encourage discussion. They work alongside other groups, including Interfaith Glasgow and the Council for Christians and Jews. That cross-community and cross-faith dialogue is vital.

At a recent event, faith representatives and others heard from staff at Woodfarm High School speaking about their work with pupils on the Jane Haining project, ensuring that our young people know our history. The continued efforts locally of Gathering the Voices, Vision School and other educational projects cement

that and cement who we are. Then there are people like my late friend, Frank Angell, whose work in dentistry and education was important and influential. Frank was a political fellow traveller and a scholar and is greatly missed.

I will finish by speaking about Calderwood Lodge Primary School, which, 60 years on, is at the heart of our community, on a lovely new campus with its partner school, St Clare's Primary. A Jewish-Catholic joint campus is a unique thing, and that shared ethos of understanding is valuable beyond words. That is exactly what we should be speaking about today. At this school, children of all faiths and none work and play together, learning about respect and friendship, and about enjoying each other's traditions.

My community is a special one and the contribution of Jewish residents to East Renfrewshire is a huge part of who we are. It is a big part of what makes us ourselves. We absolutely should celebrate all the communities that make up the different constituencies. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster for bringing us here today and I wholeheartedly support her efforts.

4.41 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for securing this debate, which has been hugely interesting. I also thank both my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) who told us about his family history, and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who talked to us about wrestling in ways that I had never thought of before.

On Tuesday, in Westminster Hall, we heard from many Members about shocking incidents of antisemitism on our streets, in schools and on university campuses. That discussion was vital following the rise in antisemitism that we have seen since the abhorrent attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October.

Today's discussion is similarly vital. Now more than ever, it is essential that we recognise and celebrate the rich contribution of the Jewish community across the whole of British civil society—the whole of British life. Just as I did on Tuesday, I wish to thank the Community Security Trust, which works relentlessly alongside the police to gather records of these incidents and to tackle hateful antisemitism. Over the past 40 years, the CST has developed a widely recognised and commended model for combating hate crime, and its work is essential.

There are many other examples of Jewish organisations that have contributed the skills and experience that they have honed within their own community to uplift our society as a whole. This serves to highlight the extraordinary contribution that Jewish communities have made to British social, cultural and political life, despite the adversity that they have all too often endured.

As we have heard, historical records show that there were Jewish people in England at the time of the Norman conquest, but that they were victims of appalling persecution. In 1190, the Jewish community of York were massacred at the site of Clifford's Tower. One hundred years later, Jewish people were expelled on the orders of Edward I—not to return until the time of Oliver Cromwell.

[Liz Twist]

I talk about these shameful episodes, because it is important that we, in this country, recognise our own history of discrimination, prejudice and violence. It is in the face of this adversity that Jewish communities in Britain have contributed so much to our vibrant and multicultural society, across every region and in every sector. In my local authority of Gateshead, there is a large Charedi community, with one of the largest yeshivas outside of Israel. It is long established in the heart of the town.

From their role in the trade union movement to the work of many Jewish communal and charitable organisations today, we have much to thank the Jewish community for. And, of course, to thank those individuals that we have talked about today who have contributed so much.

I want to say a bit about an organisation called Jami, which provides mental health support for the Jewish community in the UK. I was introduced to Jami through the Jewish Leadership Council, which represents many Jewish communal organisations, as part of my work with the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention. Jami's Head Room café in Golders Green offers open access to mental health support to anyone who needs it. I was so blown away when I visited the café that I went on to host a roundtable there, which was attended by other hon. Members and many community organisations. I was really impressed by Jami's commitment not only to its own community, but to working in partnership with other communities, organisations and local authorities. I look forward to continuing to work with Jami.

Many other Jewish organisations are doing fantastic work across the board. I think of Jewish Women's Aid, which provides specialist support to Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse. Such organisations are working in difficult circumstances, as the community continues to feel the impact of the 7 October attacks. As we know, between 7 October and 13 December the CST recorded more than 2,000 antisemitic incidents. More than ever, it is vital to educate people across our communities about the nature of antisemitism and hate crime, and to combat it. Of course that must include a continued commitment to education about the holocaust. Organisations such as the Holocaust Education Trust have done much-needed work to embed learning on the holocaust within our education system and within broader society. On 27 January we have Holocaust Memorial Day, and I know that the trust will be in Parliament in the coming weeks to mark that important occasion.

Amid the threats of holocaust denial and distortion, it is essential that such work continues. That is why we are proud to support the proposals for a permanent holocaust memorial and learning centre. It would be a fitting tribute to the 6 million Jewish people who were brutally murdered during the holocaust, and a much-needed bulwark against misinformation and conspiracy. It is also important to remember the really positive contributions, which we are talking about today, of individuals, organisations and the community. I am pleased to do that.

On the specific proposal of a British Jewish history month, we are enthusiastic about the calls to remember British Jewish history, and Labour will work with Jewish community organisations on the best shape that should take.

As events unfolding internationally risk divisions at home, we would also welcome Government steps to work with local authorities on bolstering community cohesion and bringing people together. Labour is totally united with the Jewish community in the fight against antisemitism, to acknowledge the wrongdoings of the past and, as we have today, to celebrate the rich and diverse contribution of British Jews to our proud multicultural society.

4.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): It is a privilege to respond on behalf of the Government and on behalf of my colleague in the other place, Baroness Penn, who formally holds this portfolio, on this incredibly important issue. Many of us who are here today were also in Westminster Hall on Tuesday to debate a more difficult part of this discussion. It is such a pleasure to be able to celebrate the contribution of the British Jewish community to our country, and I intend to keep my remarks wholly to the positives, having talked about the more challenging issues in Tuesday's debate.

I know from the contributions of all Members that we agree across the House that Britain would not be the country it is today without the enormous contribution made by the Jewish community, and indeed by people of all faiths and ethnicities. It is crucial that we celebrate that contribution. That is why the Government are very supportive of having a Jewish history month—a brilliant idea put forward in this debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I congratulate her on securing this important debate, because British Jews have played a vital role in shaping the life of our country, stretching back more than 2,000 years and producing, as so many colleagues have outlined, leading talents in the arts, law, philosophy, medicine, the media, finance, the charity sector, retail and wrestling.

From Peter George Davis, the founder of the Special Boat Service, to Jack Cohen, the founder of Tesco, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster already outlined; and from Ludwig Guttman, the founder of the Paralympics, to some of our greatest artists, such as Lucian Freud, and poets, such as Siegfried Sassoon, British Jews have made an outstanding contribution to British public life. They have also done so from all sides of this House, as was outlined by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is no longer in his place, from our first Prime Minister of Jewish heritage, Benjamin Disraeli, in the 19th century, to the iron Chancellor Nigel Lawson, to the Liberal leader Herbert Samuel, and to celebrated Labour figures, such as Gerald Kaufman and Manny Shinwell, as was mentioned.

The creation of a designated Jewish history month would give us an opportunity as a nation to celebrate this history and the vibrancy of Jewish culture, traditions, values and the importance of the Jewish community to the fabric of our society today. That could not be more important given the events of the past few weeks. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster said herself, we must remind ourselves of the huge contribution that British citizens within the Jewish faith have made for the benefit of us all, and a designated history month would be a huge step towards that.

This is about celebrating Jewish history and culture, as well as—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, said this—an opportunity to foster greater community unity and cohesion through inter-faith dialogue and understanding at a time of growing division. I know that is something we would very much all welcome. It would of course need to be meaningful and informed by the wishes of the British Jewish community themselves. If this is something that the British Jewish community would encourage the Government to support, we would welcome their thoughts on this motion, as we welcome the thoughts of all right hon. and hon. Members across the House and anyone else inspired to take up this important cause.

I want to spend a few minutes before I close to talk about some of the contributions of colleagues today. The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) spoke about the history and importance of the Jewish community and told incredible and—in at least one instance—shocking stories, which remind us of the very near-term challenges that this community has faced and the importance of supporting them.

The hon. Members for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and for Strangford reminded us of the contribution of the British Jewish community in all parts of our Union, including something I never thought I would hear: the Sinn Féin rabbi. That demonstrates the absolute contribution in so many different ways and with so many different opinions over many decades and centuries. My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) made a hugely important point about the importance of the British Jewish community to our public life and our military life.

Andrew Percy: As the Minister has a little bit of time, because of the time limit, I did not get a chance to mention some of the East Yorkshire Jewish sons who fell in world war one. I would like to memorialise their names, if he will give me a moment: James Aaron, Isaac Reuben, Barnett Rubinstein, Bernard Shalgosky, Solomon Sole, John Stone, David Gordon and Harry Furman. All fell defending liberty.

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend outlines another example of the hugely important contribution the British Jewish community have made to our freedom over so many decades.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) made a hugely important point about how the vast contribution made is often not obvious. Like the challenges she may have had in her home city, I had challenges linking it to my home constituency where I grew up—it has a very small Jewish community. Having looked at some of the history from Derbyshire, it was heartening to hear that, just 20 years ago, when a small group of people from Derby at the other side of the county found in the archives that the citizens of Derby had paid an amount of money in the 12th century to stop British Jews from living there, they compensated the British Jewish community by the equivalent amount in 2002 so that the edict could be removed. Such acts of kindness and recognition show that what has been called a challenging history can be acknowledged and worked through, even in places where there are not large Jewish populations, such as Derbyshire.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) made the important point that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), who does so much on this hugely important subject and who was the genesis of the important debate we had on Tuesday. I know that she and Lord Austin from the other place were keen to acknowledge a gentleman who is in the Public Gallery today—Peter Madeley—a former reporter in the west midlands who has done so much over so many years to report on important issues for the Jewish community.

The hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), as I have already mentioned, gave us some very interesting references to the wrestling community, and pointed out the hugely important history, culture and contribution to Britain from the Jewish community and how deep and broad that contribution is. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) made a hugely important point about the challenges that the community currently face. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) spoke about the importance of shared heritage and the ability to reconcile that in a way that works for everybody, irrespective of faith, culture, ethnicity or background.

Finally, I come to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster. We began our electoral journey together in the same place in Westminster in 2006. I had the privilege of representing a historically very Jewish area of Maida Vale, known in the 1880s as “New Jerusalem”, which contains the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue, and we both had the privilege of serving alongside such luminaries as Sir Simon Milton, Melvyn Caplan, Daniel Astar and the former Lord Mayor of Westminster, Councillor Louise Hyams, who is also in the Public Gallery.

I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. It has been a privilege to be here and to hear about the contributions the Jewish community have made to our country over so many years, decades and centuries. This Government are wholly committed to honouring, celebrating and safeguarding the security of our Jewish communities. That is a commitment that I know everybody shares, wherever they sit in this place, a commitment that we must work together to uphold and a commitment that is demonstrated by our support for the debate today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It has been a privilege and honour for me to chair this debate today.

4.56 pm

Nickie Aiken: I thank everybody across the Chamber for taking part in what I think is a timely and important debate. I thank the Board of Deputies of British Jews, who have been very helpful to me and my team on the research for my speech. I also thank the *Jewish Chronicle* for providing me with my first-ever front-page lead story this week, and the *Jewish News*, which has a triple-page spread on the merits of a British Jewish history month. I hope that they will continue to support our campaign to bring this important month to fruition.

Andrew Percy: As we have a little bit of time, and as my hon. Friend has started thanking everybody, may I also place on record my thanks to the Hull History

[*Andrew Percy*]

Centre, which has incredible resources available on the history of the Jewish community in Hull and helped me prepare some of my words for the debate?

Nickie Aiken: It was a pleasure to allow that intervention.

It is absolutely right that we continue to educate ourselves and future generations on antisemitism and the holocaust, and we will be marking the holocaust later this month, but it is equally important—or perhaps more important—that we highlight and celebrate the achievements and contributions of the Jewish community. The Jewish story in Britain is a positive and a negative one. It is a history of human suffering, of human perseverance and of human strength. Now more than ever, it is important that British Jews know that their incredible contribution to this country is valued and that the history of antisemitism is understood.

I take this opportunity to thank the very special rabbi in my constituency, Rabbi Daniel Epstein of Western Marble Arch Synagogue; I am sure he is not impressed by my Hebrew in this debate, but he provided me with the text from the Torah that I repeated in my speech. The Jewish community in the Cities of London and Westminster and across the nation is very important to me and has been very supportive of me, and has led me to believe that it is now more important than ever that we have a British Jewish history month.

I look forward to working with this Government, who I believe are very positive towards the suggestion, and with Jewish community to make the proposal a reality. We must celebrate the British Jewish community and we must have a British Jewish history month.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have been an MP for 31 years, and it was not until one of my researchers asked for time off because there was a Jewish holiday, and then the other one asked for time off for the Jewish holiday, and then the third one came to ask, that I appreciated that all my members of staff were Jewish. I am incredibly grateful for the contribution that they have made to my office personally. Yet again, this debate demonstrates how good the House is when it comes together.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls for the creation of a British Jewish History Month.

Cost of Living Support: Carshalton and Wallington

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Aaron Bell.*) 5 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I thank the Speaker's Office and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for granting me this Adjournment debate to talk about the cost of living pressures in my constituency and what fiscal support is available to my constituents.

Of course, the Government are absolutely right that the biggest enemy of the cost of living is inflation and the subsequent rising costs of everyday goods. Interest rates affecting rents and mortgages, and the cost of energy to heat our homes, are problems that affect everyone in this country. I welcome the Government's efforts in this area. Indeed, we have seen inflation come down drastically from its peak, and mortgage interest rates are coming down at many banks, but there is still a long way to go. The widespread effects make the cost of living an issue that we cannot ignore. We need to provide people with solutions to get them through this winter and beyond.

Most often, the most vulnerable in our society face the most severe consequences. Older people, who have weaved so much into the social fabric of our communities, have to contend with additional strain. Of my nearly 15,000 constituents aged over 65, roughly 1,800 have a long-term health condition and more than 4,500 are living alone. It is vital that support is there for them.

In recognising the gravity of the situation, I am heartened to share what has already been done by the Government and others to provide direct financial relief to those grappling with cost of living challenges in Carshalton and Wallington. First, I pay tribute to the Government for the 2022-23 cost of living payments, which stand as testament to their support for our constituents. The £650 cost of living payment, payable over two instalments, has been extended to claimants of universal credit, legacy benefits and tax credits. In my constituency, where roughly 8,000 households are on universal credit and 2,800 on legacy benefits and tax credits, that equated to an estimated total payout of about £7.1 million of support. That was exceeded in the following year of 2023-24, when it reached a staggering £9.1 million.

The £150 disability cost of living payment, which was provided to recipients of certain non-means-tested disability benefits, including personal independence payment and attendance allowance, aims to provide relief to 7,600 claimants in Carshalton and Wallington, with a total estimated payout of about £1.1 million last year and £1.2 million this year. In addition, the £300 cost of living payment for pensioners, coupled with the winter fuel payment, targets 10,600 households in my constituency with an estimated total payout of £3.2 million a year.

The £150 council tax discount, payable to all households in properties in bands A to D, stands as an additional measure to alleviate the financial strain on 30,500 properties in Carshalton and Wallington, with a total estimated payout of £4.6 million in 2022-23. In total, the estimated value of those payments to my constituency for the years 2022-23 and 2023-24 equates to £30.1 million. Those figures underscore the Government's commitment to address directly the financial challenges faced by our community, for which I can only commend them.

Furthermore, the energy bill support scheme was designed to give support directly to those facing high energy bills. It was distributed in six equal payments between October 2022 and March 2023, providing an estimated £16.6 million to households in Carshalton and Wallington. The energy price guarantee, worth around £625 per household, significantly reduced bills between October 2022 and June 2023, and contributed an estimated value of £25.4 million to 40,641 households in my constituency.

Altogether, estimated support for the relief of energy bills in my community stands at an impressive £42 million. Those measures, coupled with the ongoing commitment to address the broader cost of living challenges, signify a comprehensive approach to ensuring that the wellbeing and financial stability of my constituents is at the forefront. Contrast that with the actions of Labour and the Lib Dems in my constituency: the Labour Mayor of London has increased his share of council tax on my constituents by a whopping 71% since 2016. That is without mentioning the £12.50 a day ultra low emission zone charge he has put on the poorest Londoners, including small businesses and charities. The Lib Dem-run council has whacked up council tax by 41% since 2010, increased parking charges, and voted in favour of expanding ULEZ to my constituency.

In commending the Government, I also encourage them to go further—to provide help for people and make sure that not only are they aware of the benefits that are available to them, but they know how to access them. We must put the needs of our constituents first, ensuring that they can afford a warm roof over their heads and alleviating the burden of meeting the costs of daily essentials. The support offered to my constituents by the Government has been generous, and I urge my constituents to look at the Help for Households website to see how they could be assisted further, but in order to have sustainable, long-term support, we need to take a number of additional measures.

As well as the support packages I have mentioned, the Government have already met their promise to halve inflation. In addition, the national living wage has been increased; the pensions triple lock has been protected; benefits have been uplifted in line with inflation; a new mortgage charter has been agreed with lenders to prevent unaffordable rises; national insurance has been cut, saving families £450 a year on average; business rates have been frozen; and much more has been done by this Government to try to help.

To build on that success, inflation must of course continue to fall but, as we know, that only slows the rate of growth. Therefore, we must be relentlessly focused on growing the economy—leading to even higher wage growth than we have at the moment—and continue to cut taxes further, leaving more money in people's pockets and being put back into the economy. We must continue to build confidence so that interest rates can come down, build more homes to reduce the cost of housing, and back British business and the risk takers to create high-quality jobs, apprenticeships and opportunities for the next generation.

I commend the Government on the work they have done so far to provide support for my constituents, and indeed for many people throughout the country. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what further steps the Government can take, especially through this winter, to support our constituents through these difficult times.

5.7 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on securing this debate. He is an asset to his constituents, who I am sure are pleased to be represented by him in the admirable way he has done so this evening. He is decent and has a clever mind, but most importantly he has a good heart, and that heart is in Carshalton and Wallington.

I think all of us in this place recognise the difficult times through which the people of this country, and indeed people around the world, have lived over the past couple of years. We have had the covid pandemic, Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, and long-gathering inflationary clouds that have created a perfect storm for us all, but particularly for vulnerable people. However, this Government and this country have consistently fought back—against the virus, alongside our Ukrainian friends and, critically, from the perspective of the Treasury Benches, against the economic headwinds. As my hon. Friend outlined, this Government have provided one of the largest support packages in Europe over the past two years, in contrast to the damaging actions taken in his area by the London Mayor and my hon. Friend's local Liberal Democrat council.

Some 11,300 households in Carshalton and Wallington were eligible for means-tested cost of living payments this financial year, and 8,500 individuals were eligible for the disability cost of living payment. Those households—my hon. Friend mentioned 30,500 properties in his constituency—along with all their neighbours, would have been eligible for the energy price guarantee, the £400 energy bills support scheme and the £150 council tax rebate, along with fuel and alcohol duty cuts. Energy support alone has paid for almost half of the typical family's energy bill from October 2022 to June 2023 through both the energy price guarantee and the energy bill support scheme.

It is in part thanks to those measures that growth and real incomes have been stronger than expected this year—not just stronger than expected by the Office for Budget Responsibility, but stronger than expected by international economic forecasters. Inflation has also come down significantly to less than half its 2022 peak, and in November it fell to 3.9%, which is the lowest rate in over two years. Again, that was not forecast by the OBR or international forecasters. I do not deny that the outlook for real incomes remains challenging—it remains very challenging for many people, particularly vulnerable people in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country—as does inflation, but that is why we announced further support in the autumn statement in November to support the most vulnerable.

The Government will raise local housing allowance rates to the 30th percentile of local market rents in April 2024. In plain English, what does that mean? It means that 1.6 million low-income households will be better off to the tune of about £800 on average in 2024-25. Some, particularly Opposition Members, often say that that is not a lot of money, but I can tell the House that, for those 1.6 million low-income households, it is considerable support that they will welcome, as they will in my hon. Friend's constituency.

The Government will also uprate all working-age benefits in full by the September 2023 consumer prices index rate of 6.7%, which is considerably higher than

[Bim Afolami]

inflation, to make sure that working-age people on benefits are supported properly. That is 3 percentage points higher than forecast earnings for 2024-25 and, again, it will help support the most vulnerable while inflation continues to fall, with 5.5 million households on universal credit gaining £470 on average in the 2024-25 financial year.

My hon. Friend mentioned in his speech that 15,000 of his constituents are over 65, and we are maintaining the triple lock in support of those people and pensioners across this country, who have helped to build this country and have worked hard over years gone by. The basic state pension, new state pension and pension credit standard minimum guarantee will be uprated in April 2024 in line with wage growth of 8.5% in the usual reference period. In 2024-25, the full yearly amount of the basic state pension will be £3,750 higher in cash terms than in 2010 or, to put it more simply, £995 more—almost £1,000 more—than if it had been uprated by prices alone.

That comes on top of cost of living payments this year that are helping more than 8 million households on eligible means-tested benefits, 8 million pensioner households and 6 million people across the UK on eligible disability benefits. For individuals needing further support, local authorities in England continue to provide support through the household support fund, which is backed by £1 billion of funding. This allows local authorities up and down England to provide crisis support for the vulnerable households that need it the most, such as through supermarket or food bank vouchers. This means that, from 2022 to 2025, total support to help households with the cost of living will be over £100 billion—£104 billion—at an average of £3,700 per UK household.

However, I and the Government know that relatively short-term help is not enough. The only sustainable way to help vulnerable people in this country, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, and to improve the living standards is to build a more prosperous future while remaining fiscally responsible. The best way to do that is to grow the economy and get more people into better paid jobs.

On growing the economy, this is not the time for more statistics, but I will say this: taken together, the measures in the autumn statement and the 2023 Budget represented the biggest upgrade in the GDP forecast that the Office for Budget Responsibility has ever scored. That shows the Government's commitment to and delivery of a growing economy, which gives us all a better future.

When it comes to getting people into better paid jobs, from 1 April 2024, the Government are increasing the national living wage by 9.8% to £11.44 an hour for eligible workers aged 21 or over. That represents an increase of more than £1,800 in the earnings of a full-time worker on the national living wage and will benefit over 2.7 million low-paid workers. Just this

month, employees' main national insurance contribution rate has been cut by about 17%—that is, cut from 12% to 10%—and from April the main rate of class 4 national insurance for self-employed people will be reduced similarly, from 9% to 8%. That tax cut is worth £9 billion a year and is the largest ever cut to employee and self-employed national insurance.

The OBR expects that the measures announced at the spring Budget and autumn statement, taken together, will support nearly 200,000 additional people into work by the end of the forecast period. We do not do this for academic reasons or for fun; we do this because we know that giving people more of their own money—allowing them to keep more of their own money—improves their living standards, and we can do this while increasing funding for public services. Despite the difficulties of the last couple of years, over the course of this Parliament public services will benefit from the public purse by an increase above inflation of over 3%. We are doing this while supporting public services, while bringing down the deficit and bringing down the debt, and we can do all of it because of our careful management of the economy. That will benefit the vulnerable people in my hon. Friend's constituency of Carshalton and Wallington and people across the country.

These measures underscore the Government's unwavering commitment to supporting households up and down the country. We firmly believe that the key to a prosperous future lies in creating opportunities for everyone. The boost to the national living wage and the historic reductions in national insurance contributions are powerful tools in driving employment. Getting more people into work is not just good for them; it is good for our economy and for improving living standards, and it is clear evidence of a Government who have been willing to act to the tune of over £100 billion over the last three years. By putting more money into the pockets of hardworking people, we are not only bolstering their financial wellbeing but fuelling economic growth.

As always, we need to balance support for households with fiscal sustainability. The economic position remains challenging. We continue to keep options under review as we take tough decisions to drive down debt, drive down inflation and increase prosperity in every part of the United Kingdom. These are complex issues that affect all our constituents, wherever we call home.

I thank all hon. Members, but particularly you, Mr Deputy Speaker, because you are very kind, and my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington. He cares deeply for his constituents for whom he is a brilliant advocate in this place, and it is an honour to respond to him today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you for your kind words.

Question put and agreed to.

5.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 11 January 2024

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Smokefree Future

1.30 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of a smokefree future.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, for at least the second time. No doubt you would prefer to be participating in rather than chairing this debate on the evidence and recommendations submitted to the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health's manifesto for a smoke-free future.

It is a pleasure to see the new Minister in her place; I thank her for attending a function that we held soon after she was appointed. I welcome the new shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and look forward to what she has to say. I declare an interest as chair of the APPG, which wants to ensure that Parliament has the chance to debate our recommendations, along with the smoke-free generation proposals set out in the King's Speech, and consider what more needs to be done to achieve the Government's Smokefree 2030 target.

I welcome the Government's historic commitment to create a smoke-free generation by raising the age of sale for tobacco by one year every year from 2027. This measure, along with other commitments set out by the Government, will help to close the door on the tobacco epidemic once and for all. With their Command Paper, the Government have demonstrated their commitment to achieving the smoke-free ambition and to ending the harms caused by tobacco. It was a great pleasure to hear my words in this place echoed almost word for word by the Prime Minister at the Conservative party conference. I congratulate his speechwriter on having observed what we had to say in last year's debate.

The smoke-free generation policy was due to be implemented first by New Zealand, but it was abandoned by the incoming Government in November under pressure from their coalition partners. That presents us with the opportunity to be the first to implement the policy, thereby cementing the UK's position as a global leader in tobacco control. In response to New Zealand's decision, we have seen the tobacco industry going into overdrive on its lobbying machine, arguing that the UK should follow New Zealand in rowing back on our commitments and even promising that it would not vociferously oppose the smoking age rising from 18 to 21. That demonstrates how big a threat it is to have the smoke-free generation policy.

Quite rightly, the Prime Minister has rejected the industry's arguments and reiterated the importance of creating a smoke-free generation. I commend the Minister for her robust response to the industry when she called out its attempts to undermine and block this measure. As she wrote in the *i* newspaper:

"The tobacco industry will talk about free adult choice, but we all know there is no freedom of choice once deadly addiction sets in. The industry has a long history of trying to obstruct and delay tobacco reforms. But we have absolutely no intention of going back on our word."

I welcome those words, and I trust that the Minister will echo them when she responds to the debate.

Government action to end smoking is what the public want. Polling carried out by YouGov for Action on Smoking and Health shows that three quarters of the public, including the majority of smokers, support the Government's Smokefree 2030 ambition and that two thirds of people in England back the Prime Minister's age-of-sale proposal, with equivalent levels of political support among voters for all the main political parties at the last general election. This should not be a surprise, because no one wants to see their children smoking.

Just like the public, the majority of independent retailers selling tobacco support the key measures needed to tackle smoking, including raising the age of sale for tobacco to 21, with just over half of retailers in favour and a quarter opposed. Although that happened before the Government announced the smoke-free generation policy, it shows that retailers support the principle of raising the age of sale. That should not be a surprise, either. Tobacco sales now account for a very small fraction of the profits from those shops—less than 10% in 2016—and are dwindling year on year. Most small retailer transactions do not involve the purchase of tobacco at all.

From the 2007 ban on smoking in public places to standardised packaging in 2015, progress on tobacco control has consistently been driven from the Back Benches. Indeed, I am delighted that most of the 2021 recommendations from by the APPG on smoking and health were included in the recent Khan review and are now in the process of being implemented by the Government and the Department of Health and Social Care. They include progress towards much tougher regulation of vaping to protect children, additional funding for stop smoking services and anti-smoking campaigns, the swap to stop campaign, and financial incentives for pregnant women to stop smoking. In particular, I welcome the Minister's decision to expand the offer of financial incentives so that it includes not only pregnant women but, critically, their partners. Dads and partners have a key role to play in determining whether women smoke or are exposed to second-hand smoke during pregnancy. That announcement is to be commended.

However, the Government need to go further. The Government's proposals to create a smoke-free generation and curb youth vaping are welcome, but they will not be enough to achieve the Smokefree 2030 ambition. It is imperative that that ambition is realised for everyone, not just for the next generation. According to Cancer Research UK, the Government are nearly a decade behind achieving their target for England to be smoke free by 2030. The most deprived areas are not on track to hit the smoke-free target of 5% smoking prevalence until after 2050. That would leave the most vulnerable people in our society bearing the brunt of the harms from smoking for decades to come.

In our recently published tobacco manifesto, the APPG set out the action needed to accelerate the decline in smoking rates, in order to get us within spitting distance of a smoke-free 2030. The long wait for Government action on smoking means that achieving

[Bob Blackman]

5% smoking prevalence by 2030 will be even more challenging than when the ambition was first announced in 2019. However, that target is still within reach. The closer we get, the more lives we can save.

Modelling carried out for the APPG by academics at University College London shows that if our recommendations are implemented in full throughout the next Parliament, smoking prevalence in England, which is currently at 12.7%, will be reduced to 7.3% by 2029. That would deliver immediate benefits to health and wellbeing, as well as saving countless lives in the longer term, and would lead to a 5% rate by 2030.

Smoking remains the largest cause of preventable death, ill health and inequalities in the UK. Some 6.4 million adults in the UK currently smoke, approximately an eighth of the population. Most adult smokers want to stop smoking, but on average it takes 30 attempts to succeed; many never do so. It is one of the resolutions that smokers make, and it is sad when they break them very quickly in the new year.

Two out of three long-term smokers die prematurely, often after years of disability from the cancers and the respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused directly by smoking. NHS data shows that in 2022-23 there were more than 400,000 smoking-related hospital admissions in England alone, an increase of 5% on the previous year.

Despite Harrow having a below-average smoking rate, tobacco still takes a heavy toll, causing over 1,300 hospital admissions in 2019-20 alone. People in Harrow suffer many of the same health inequalities as the rest of the country, with those from the poorest backgrounds and those with mental health conditions much more likely to smoke than the general population.

Smoking places a major financial burden on individuals, families and the taxpayer. The average smoker spends just over £3,000 a year on cigarettes, which is significantly more than the annual energy cost for a typical household. That is money that could be better spent on products and services to improve people's quality of life, but instead it literally goes up in smoke to maintain their deadly addiction. In the APPG's latest report we estimate that the cost of smoking to public services and the wider UK economy is £89.3 billion a year, the equivalent of 3.9% of GDP.

What about the direct costs of smoking to the public finances? One of the arguments made by the tobacco industry and its allies is that higher smoking rates benefit public finances because smokers pay extra tax in the form of tobacco duties and then die younger, meaning they use less of their pensions. Those arguments are callous, cold-blooded and not even true. Detailed analysis of the evidence carried out for the APPG shows that, rather than saving the Government money, smoking had a direct cost to the public finances of £21 billion last year: more than double the excise tax revenues. That cost is made up of extra social security payments, lost taxation from smokers who are too sick to work and, of course, significant costs to the NHS and social care services. Implementing the recommendations in our manifesto would reduce the public finance costs of smoking by an average of £628 million a year, which would total £3.1 billion by 2029. The case is clear:

ending smoking once and for all will transform the nation's health and wealth. The only losers would be the tobacco industry.

Local stop smoking services have a key role to play in delivering a smoke-free future, so I am pleased that the Government have committed to a five-year funding plan for smoking cessation services. That new funding will definitely help to drive down smoking rates, generating a return on investment literally from year one. However, we are significantly behind where we hoped to be when the smoke-free ambition was announced in 2019.

As we all know, the public finances are under significant strain, so why should taxpayers foot the bill for measures to end smoking when the tobacco industry could be made to do so? Tobacco manufacturers make an estimated £900 million profit a year in the UK alone, with an average net operating profit margin of about 50%. That far exceeds the average for UK manufacturing, which stands at less than 10%. In the UK, four companies are responsible for 95% of tobacco sales and are therefore responsible for an overwhelming majority of the tens of thousands of deaths a year caused by smoking. Despite their staggering profitability, the companies pay very little corporation tax in the UK. Through the exploitation of their global footprints and tax loopholes, they have been able to successfully avoid a fair tax bill overall. Imperial Brands, the largest tobacco manufacturer by market share in the UK, lowered its tax bill by an estimated £1.8 billion over the last 10 years.

The "polluter pays" principle has been accepted and successfully implemented in other industries, such as environmental health, the soft drinks industry and, most recently, the gambling industry. It could easily be extended to the tobacco industry. It could be implemented by capping tobacco wholesale prices, and hence profits, to bring the profit margins in line with the 10% average for other manufacturers. A "polluter pays" health promotion levy could ensure that the excess profits were turned into Government revenues, raising an estimated £700 million a year. That could fund the Government's smoke-free generation commitments several times over, with money left over for other public health measures.

It is hard to think of a policy that has broader public support. The 2023 smoke-free Great Britain survey conducted by YouGov for Action on Smoking and Health revealed that 76% of adults in Great Britain would support a levy on the tobacco industry, while only 6% were opposed. That includes majority support from voters for all the main political parties. I stress that a levy would not mean an increase in the cost price of tobacco bought over the counter. The Department of Health and Social Care already has the expertise and resource needed to administer a levy in the team that oversees the pharmaceutical pricing scheme.

The primary legislation needed for a consultation on our proposals was part of the Health and Care Bill and was passed by the House of Lords. Unfortunately, due to Treasury opposition, it was voted down by the Government in the Commons. Will the Minister commit to discussing the APPG's proposal of a "polluter pays" levy on tobacco manufacturers with Ministers in the Treasury and with us?

In the short time that I have left, I want to discuss how we can combat youth vaping. For years, we in the APPG have been calling for the Government to toughen legislation on vaping, so I am delighted that

the Government have finally committed to taking action. My views on youth vaping are summed up by the chief medical officer:

“If you smoke, vaping is much safer; if you don’t smoke, don’t vape; marketing vapes to children is utterly unacceptable.”

In our manifesto, the APPG urges the Government to prevent e-cigarettes from being sold at pocket-money prices and to curtail advertising and promotion of vaping, particularly in shops, where most under-age vapers access e-cigarettes. We know that the rise in youth vaping since 2021 has been driven largely by the availability and marketing of cheap single-use vapes, and anecdotal evidence points to the fact that many young people believe that vaping is perfectly safe because the Government are encouraging people to give up smoking and take up vaping. Of course, that is a false conclusion, because it gets people addicted to nicotine and possibly leads on to cigarette use later in life.

There is clearly a need to address the affordability of vapes for young people while ensuring that they continue to be a cheaper option than smoking for adults who want to quit. Given the effectiveness of vapes as a smoking cessation aid, it is essential that any regulation takes a measured approach and ensures that vapes are still accessible to adult smokers. Can the Minister confirm when the consultation response will be published and when we will see the legislation laid before Parliament?

The case is very strong for a “polluter pays” levy and for all the recommendations that the APPG has put forward. I look forward to the contributions from colleagues around the Chamber, to the response from the Opposition and from our excellent Minister, and to achieving what we all want: a smoke-free England by 2030.

1.47 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate, and I declare my interest as a vice-chair of the APPG on smoking and health.

The Government’s announcement of their smoke-free generation policy was welcome after several years of inaction on tobacco from successive Conservative Governments, which have left us playing catch-up to achieve the Smokefree 2030 ambition. Indeed, regulations to protect children from taking up vaping and smoking in the first place would already be in the law today if the Government had accepted my amendments to the Health and Care Bill three years ago. Nevertheless, I welcome the commitment to curb youth vaping with tighter rules around packaging and promotion. The right balance needs to be struck to ensure that vapes are used only by adults who want to quit smoking.

In the north-east, the most disadvantaged place in England, we know better than most that smoking is not only the greatest cause of preventable deaths, but responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between the most and least advantaged in society. Smoking rates are a clear expression of the health inequalities that divide our country. That is why my colleagues and I show up time and again to demand that real and bold action be taken to make smoking history. Children of parents who smoke are three times more likely to take up smoking themselves, more likely to suffer significant income loss and more likely to live a shorter life.

It is high time to break the mould. The Government now need to make the best use of the additional funding that they have attached to the smoke-free generation policy. The Fresh tobacco control programme in my own region is a long-standing example of how budgets can be pooled and partners can work together to bring about positive results. I would be delighted to welcome the Minister to Durham and the north-east to learn more about the work of Fresh, which has been so crucial in reducing smoking rates far more rapidly than the national average.

Preventing the next generation from starting to smoke is not enough. There are 6.4 million adult smokers who need support to quit. The additional funding being provided to stop smoking services is vital, but we cannot ignore the threat to NHS provision of tobacco dependence treatments for in-patients, mental health patients and pregnant smokers. In November, the *Health Service Journal* revealed that NHS trusts were being told that they could raid these budgets to fund urgent and emergency care. At a time when the roll-out of those programmes has already been cut and is well behind schedule in many areas, the Government pay lip service to the need for prevention if we are to reduce pressure on our NHS. It is yet again a Cinderella service, trumped by the need to do more to treat those who are already sick.

What is more, funding for financial incentives to support pregnant smokers to quit and for the Swap to Stop vape campaign is only guaranteed for two years. We need a long-term and sustained commitment to protect our most vulnerable from the harms of tobacco smoke, including unborn babies. I hope the Minister can ensure that those schemes will be funded for at least the full five years needed.

While the measures announced by the Government, which the APPG and Action on Smoking and Health have long called for, will have an important impact, they are not enough to achieve the Smokefree 2030 target of a maximum 5% smoking rate. We need further action. Of course, more action means more funding, which is where the APPG’s recommendation of a “polluter pays” levy on tobacco manufacturers comes in.

As always, more money is needed if we are serious about a smoke-free future. Why, then, are we not seriously considering making the polluter, the tobacco industry, pay to address the damage that its products are inflicting on our communities? The industry makes vast profits in Britain every year. Why is it not being made to pay, instead of the taxpayer? As the APPG report makes clear, a levy on the industry would raise the funding necessary to achieve a smoke-free future for all, not just the most advantaged.

Ahead of the spring Budget, will the Minister commit to discussing the APPG’s proposal of a “polluter pays” levy on tobacco manufacturers? Would she discuss this with Ministers responsible for tobacco policy in His Majesty’s Treasury? As health inequalities worsen and lives remain at risk, the Government must make up for their lost time with bolder action. They must make the polluter pay.

1.53 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Thank you very much, Mr Sharma, for chairing this debate and for calling me to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on moving the debate.

[Ian Paisley]

He regularly secures debates on this subject, and has done so very well again today. I intended to speak on the issue of vaping, which he mentioned at the end of his comments. I agree with his point about children seeing vaping as a gateway into something, and that is very serious and needs to be addressed. It will probably be the real battleground for this issue in the future.

However, I want to turn to something else. With all policies, there are unintended consequences. I have no doubt that the Government's intention is correct, but there are undoubtedly areas that raise unintended consequences.

I first want to turn the Minister's attention to Northern Ireland. The impact on Northern Ireland will be significant, because under the Brexit arrangements—the protocol and the Windsor framework—the sale of tobacco products in Northern Ireland is regulated not by the UK Government but by EU law. It is therefore unclear how the Government would implement a generational ban in Northern Ireland under the current regulations and laws.

As recently as April 2022, the Danish Government tried to implement a generational ban, and the European authorities blocked them on the basis that it would impact Denmark's European neighbours. Given the situation that Northern Ireland has unfortunately been placed in by the Government under the Windsor framework, this generational ban would not be implementable in a part of the United Kingdom, so 3% of the population of the UK do not matter when it comes to this policy. That is the impact that people will see. It one of the Prime Minister's flagship policies, but its application would be prohibited in one part of the United Kingdom. The Government need to look at that issue if they are serious about this policy, and they must comment on how they intend to fix it.

If the UK Government were to find a means of introducing a generational ban in Northern Ireland while still adhering to the Windsor framework, they would therefore show that they are able to breach the final concluded Windsor framework agreement. If they are able to breach it on this issue, all the comments we have heard in this House over the past year—"It is finished," "It is done," "It cannot be changed"—are therefore set aside, as that would show that it can be done.

A generational ban in Northern Ireland would create an absurd situation whereby people living in County Armagh, County Fermanagh and County Londonderry could simply drive a few miles over the border to the local convenience shop or filling station in the Republic of Ireland and purchase cigarettes there, so I do not think the Government have thought through the implications for Northern Ireland. I would be very interested to hear how they intend to pursue these issues and address these matters.

I am an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for retail crime, safe and sustainable high streets, and I think the ban will have another unintended consequence on criminality in the whole United Kingdom, not exclusively in Northern Ireland. Every single day, there are 867 violent or abusive incidents affecting retailers across the United Kingdom. Most people working in retail shops—average corner shops—get abused at some point. I got that statistic from the British Retail Consortium, so it is an accurate figure. *Asian Trader* carried out a survey on the generational tobacco ban in November 2023, and it

found that 86% of retailers believe that a generational prohibition on the sale of tobacco will have a negative effect on their business, and 55% say that it will complicate age checks in store and will lead to violent attacks on their staff. The majority of retailers say that the only way they can enforce a generational prohibition in the long term is through mandatory ID checks. Those are not my views; they are the views of retailers.

Of course, ID checks are an enforcement nightmare. Andrew Chevis, the founder of CitizenCard, the UK's largest provider of proof-of-age cards, said in *The House* magazine in November 2023,

"I have deep concerns from both a retail and enforcement perspective"

about a generation ban. His concern is, of course, for the safety of retailers. I get that. Any of us who have retail or convenience stores in our constituencies—as we all do—will be concerned about these matters.

UK retailers already suffer sky-high levels of violence and abuse, and a generational prohibition could make that worse, as retailers will have to identify young-looking customers before they are able to sell them tobacco, and they will have to be convinced. I will be very interested to see the legislation when it is printed, and I would like the Minister to confirm whether, if a retailer decides, "Oh, that person is over the age, and I can legally sell it to them," but it turns out that that person is not over the age—they were within a generational ban threshold—it is the retailer that has committed the criminal offence and not the purchaser. That goes right the way through.

In a few years, under this generational retail ban, a person who is in their 30s and should not be buying cigarettes in the first place—but they are in their 30s and are buying them—would not actually be committing a criminal offence as an adult, but the retailer would be committing an offence for selling them. That needs to be clear: who is ultimately responsible here when adults are making adult choices? I think that that needs to be cleared up.

As I said, a survey conducted by the British Retail Consortium identified that checking for proof of age is one of the biggest triggers for violence and abuse against UK retailers. I already quoted the figure of there being 867 violent or abusive incidents occurring every day.

The Prime Minister very kindly acknowledged some of these issues, just before the recess, when I had an event in Dining Room B with the retail crime, safe and sustainable high streets APPG. He kindly indicated, from his experience of when he was a kid working in a retail shop, how these things impact detrimentally on members of staff. If the Prime Minister can see that, then I think this issue needs to be properly looked at.

The Association of Convenience Store's crime report is published every year. Its 2023 report says that there were 759,000 incidents of verbal abuse and that 34% of verbal abuse incidents are hate-motivated. It also says that, according to retailers, 87% of convenience store colleagues reported that they had faced verbal abuse in the past year. Therefore, although I think it is an unintended consequence, creating or increasing the opportunity for that sort of abuse to take place is a consequence that the Government have to deal with. Is there a better way of doing this? Is it better, for example, for the Government to say, "You are 21 or 22. You can only buy after you become an adult, at that higher age threshold"?

Bob Blackman: The hon. Member is giving a very thoughtful speech about some of the consequences. Does he accept the fact that, when individuals go into a public house, they will now routinely be challenged and asked for proof of identity if they look young? The challenge is often whether they are over 21, although they could, of course, legally buy alcohol at the age of 18. Many public houses will not serve anyone under the age of 21. Does the hon. Member accept the fact that, because this is already in operation, the retailer should have the right to challenge people who look young so that they can make sure that they are only selling to people who are over the legal age to buy?

Ian Paisley: That is a very good point when it comes to that threshold between 17 and 21 or 22. The problem is that this generational legislation creates a conveyor belt—from 18 to 19 to 20. Eventually you will be 37 and not be allowed to buy a cigarette under the law. But, if the retailer sells it to you, whether you are a young-looking, handsome 37-year-old or an old-looking boy, you will still end up not having committed a criminal offence, even though you have, but the retailer has committed an offence for selling it to you. At that point, where do the ID checks come in?

Perhaps the intention is that there will be a time in the next five, six, seven or eight years when no one will smoke. I want to turn to that. The one issue that I have pushed hard and heavy on since becoming a Member of Parliament is the criminalisation of illicit sales of tobacco that furnish criminals' pockets. It is that illegal crime that really worries me.

The hon. Member for Harrow East, who moved the motion today, quite rightly commented on where he thinks the level of public consumption of cigarettes is. I think that the real figure is startlingly higher, because His Majesty's Revenue and Customs estimates that 11% of cigarette consumption and 35% of hand-rolling tobacco consumption in the UK comes from the illegal trade. People are buying it illicitly, either as stolen products or black market products that have been brought into the United Kingdom. This is happening in a huge number of areas, and it is fuelling criminal gangs.

That is the higher level. There are more people consuming tobacco than some people want to admit but, unfortunately, they are buying it illegally. The Government are not benefiting in terms of tax and legitimate manufacturers are not benefiting. In fact, the companies are disadvantaged because the product is sometimes stolen from their companies, or is a copy—a counterfeit—of their products.

The Government must decide whether they want tobacco to be supplied to UK consumers by a taxed and regulated private sector, as it currently is, or by the public sector as a medicine, which may be one way of doing it, or by the criminal sector, in the same way that cannabis is sold. Those are the choices that the Government ultimately face.

In my view, a generational prohibition will gradually hand even more of the UK tobacco market to organised criminal gangs, who use the money from tobacco smuggling to fund activities including terrorism, people smuggling, prostitution and all sorts of other things. That view is lifted from the US State Department's 2015 report, "The Global Illicit Trade in Tobacco: A Threat to National Security". That is why the gangs deploy such resources. When the South African Government banned

the sale of tobacco during covid, illegal traders quickly stepped in. Today, 93% of tobacco sold in South Africa is illicit trade and counterfeit trade. We need to get this absolutely right or else we create a bonanza for the criminal. The sooner we do that, the better, and I am sure the Minister will consider those issues.

I do not want to criminalise shopkeepers, and I know the hon. Member for Harrow East does not want that, but that will be an unintended consequence. As people get older, it will be very difficult to judge whether they can be sold a cigarette. Shopkeepers will have to ask for ID, and we do not have ID in Great Britain. In Northern Ireland, we have a form of ID in our electoral cards, but they do not carry a date of birth, although they do show that a person is over the age of 18. That would have to be changed if they were to be used in Northern Ireland.

What are the alternatives? Many retailers and others have suggested that raising the age of sale for tobacco products to 21 would be much simpler to implement and would avoid this potential negative consequence, and the nightmare of regulation. It would be far easier to implement and enforce, and would avoid the complete takeover of the UK tobacco market by criminals. I urge the Government to consider those alternatives in pursuing this incredibly important flagship policy. For the record, I do not promote smoking, but I believe in adults making choices. We have to try to solve the real problem, not create another one.

2.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing it. As with most subjects he chooses to discuss in Westminster Hall, I can echo most of what he says—not on all occasions, but on most. I am very pleased to be here to support him.

I am also pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) in her place and I look forward to her contribution—we have been friends for a long time. I am especially pleased to see the Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom)—in her place. She came to speak at an association dinner in my constituency, and she was greatly and well received. In fact, not only was she well received, she left a lasting impression on my constituents. I would fear it if the right hon. Lady came to Strangford to run as a candidate—I say that in jest; I very much appreciate the right hon. Lady.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health, I have spoken many times about my strong support for the UK Government's Smokefree 2030 ambition and my desire for Northern Ireland to follow the other UK nations in setting our own smoke-free target. Smoking is a terrible addiction that devastates communities across the United Kingdom and will continue to do so unless we take action. I welcome the action that the Government have taken, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) eloquently and forcefully outlined the position for Northern Ireland and the issues that we need to address.

I welcome the Prime Minister's world-leading commitment to create a smoke-free generation. I was also pleased to see that the Government's recent consultation on creating a smoke-free generation and tackling youth

[Jim Shannon]

vaping was held in conjunction with the devolved Administrations. The Government recognised that it was important to bring the four regions together. The Government understand the issues and I hope that the Minister will address some of the issues to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim referred. Northern Ireland and the devolved nations have responsibility for their own public health policies, but we will be successful in achieving a smoke-free future across the UK only if we work together. It is no secret that I always refer to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as “better together”. None of my Scottish colleagues is here today, which is a pity; if they were, I would be saying the same thing to them.

I commend the Minister for her vocal support for tobacco controls since being appointed. She was very clear in calling out attempts by tobacco companies to undermine the smoke-free generation policy. That was a clear direction, straight from our Minister and our Government. As the Minister knows, healthcare services are under severe pressure across the United Kingdom. Smoking is the leading preventable cause of death and disease in Northern Ireland; it killed some 2,200 people and was responsible for 35,000 hospital admissions in 2022. Smoking is responsible for more than seven in 10 cases of lung cancer and a similar proportion of cases of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The estimated hospital costs for treating smoke-related diseases in Northern Ireland are £172 million. It has a big impact on the Northern Ireland health sector.

There remain significant inequalities in smoking prevalence: those living in the most deprived areas are two or three times more likely to smoke than those living in the least deprived areas. The hon. Member for Harrow East referred to that, and perhaps the Minister could give us her thoughts on it. Inequalities in smoking prevalence also persist among other groups, particularly those with mental ill health: probable clinical depression is four times more common among current smokers than among those who have never smoked. If we do not take urgent action to reduce smoking rates, our already overburdened health service will continue to be put under huge pressure from smoking-related diseases for years to come.

As the analysis for the APPG on smoking and health demonstrates, smoking not only impacts healthcare services but severely undermines economic productivity. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and I have shared many platforms where I have made that point. The economic impact is clear: smoking places a burden on public finances that far outweighs the income from tobacco taxes, because it reduces direct tax income and increases social security costs.

I also commend “A Vision for a Smokefree Northern Ireland”, which was published by ASH NI and Cancer Focus NI. The vision calls for Northern Ireland to have a smoke-free target of 5% smoking prevalence by 2035. If only that was achievable. It is good to have a goal—we always need a target to aim for—and I hope that we can rectify that soon. Northern Ireland has the highest rates of smoking in the UK. We are nowhere near to being on track. Indeed, we are on track to achieving 5% smoking prevalence by 2042, so it is a brave while away. Therefore we must step up all our efforts, both at the devolved

level and at the UK level, if we want to achieve a smoke-free future, which will mean redoubling our efforts to prevent children and young people from starting smoking and supporting existing smokers to quit and stay smoke free.

“A Vision for a Smokefree Northern Ireland” also highlights the importance of strong enforcement to tackle the scourge of illicit tobacco and vaping products, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim referred. It is one of the big issues for us in Northern Ireland. The sale of illicit tobacco undermines efforts to reduce smoking rates. It is concentrated among poorer smokers and disadvantaged communities, and contributes to higher rates of smoking. Retailers that sell illicit tobacco are much more likely to be happy to sell to children, so the illicit market also poses a particular risk to children’s health, which needs to be addressed. That requires us to tackle not just the supply but the demand for illicit tobacco in communities where smoking is endemic.

The UK has made massive strides in reducing the trade in illicit tobacco over the last few decades. It has reduced the market share of illicit cigarettes from 22% to 11% in some 21 years. However, there is still more to be done. HMRC and Border Force are due to publish an updated strategy to tackle illicit tobacco. Again, that is not the Minister’s responsibility directly, but I am really keen to get some ideas. Northern Ireland, with its land border with the EU, is particularly geographically vulnerable to illicit trade run by criminal gangs. Border Force and HMRC have a key role to play in tackling smuggled tobacco, especially in our most disadvantaged communities where smoking rates are highest. I look forward to seeing the new strategy published in the near future. Maybe the Minister will give us some thoughts on the timescale and when we can aim towards that.

I will ask three or four questions if I may, Mr Sharma. Can the Minister confirm that the new illicit trade strategy will cover illicit vapes, which have become a significant challenge over the last few years and have helped to drive increases in youth vaping across the UK? I look forward to seeing the Government’s response to last year’s consultation on mandating inserts with information on stopping smoking inside tobacco packs. I hope that the measure will be introduced on a UK footprint, benefiting my constituents in Strangford. It is another way of tackling the disease and the problem. It has been required in Canada since the year 2000, where there is substantial evidence showing that inserts are effective in encouraging smokers to quit. The evidential base in Canada shows that the measure has been effective. I think we should be taking every effort to ensure that it happens here.

The Government’s guidance states that responses should be published within 12 weeks or an explanation should be provided as to why it has not happened. Again, if the Minister does not mind, I will ask about that. The 12 weeks was up on Tuesday past. I do not know whether the Minister is able to deliver the news and information we are looking for in the debate today, but I would like to have some update if at all possible. When the consultation closed on 6 December, the Government said that the next steps would be published in the “coming weeks”. That is where we are; we are in the coming weeks, and it would make sense to publish both responses at the same time. To delay the speculation, I would appreciate some clarity.

My second question is: can the Minister confirm when the response to the consultation on pack inserts will take place, and whether legislation to take that important measure forward will be included in the forthcoming tobacco and vapes Bill? I hope that it will be, because deterring children and young people from taking up smoking is vital if we are to create a smoke-free generation. I endorse the Prime Minister's request, as does the House; we see it as a positive way forward, and the introduction of the warnings would be very positive. The APPG on smoking and health recommended that in both its 2021 and 2023 reports. It seems that the inserts would require only small amendments to the existing regulations—I am not a legislative person, but I have been told that that is the case—not new primary legislation, so we could probably do it easily.

There is a growing body of international evidence supporting the effectiveness of what are known as “dissuasive cigarettes”, particularly in making cigarettes less attractive to younger adolescents and those who have never smoked. Again, the Canadian Government recently announced that Canada would be the first country to introduce dissuasive cigarettes. It is quite interesting. I gave the example of what Canada did in the year 2000, 23 years ago, which is what we are looking towards today. Canada is doing it now on dissuasive cigarettes. May I suggest, Minister, with respect, that it may be time for us to do the same thing now, rather than waiting 20 years to do it?

I recognise that the Government already have a substantial legislative programme to enact before the next election. I understand that they are pushed for time and it is difficult sometimes to get everything in on both smoking and vaping. However, I ask the Minister to at least commit to consulting on warnings on cigarettes, to start the clock ticking on that simple and sensible measure. The UK waited for over 20 years after implementation by Canada to consult on cigarette pack inserts. We should not wait another 20 years after Canada implements warnings on cigarettes before we consult on this important measure.

Thank you, Mr Sharma, for giving me the chance to speak, and so early as well. I look forward positively to the Minister clarifying the issues that I have raised as everyone seeks to work together to find a healthier, stronger and smoke-free United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

2.19 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this debate on the APPG on smoking and health's tobacco control manifesto for a smoke-free future.

I welcome the Government's bold smoke-free generation announcement, which has my full support and that of my party. The more we can do to prevent future generations from ever taking up this lethal and addictive product, the better. Parliament will stand firm with the Government against attempts to prevent crucial legislation from passing into law. On that note, I was pleased to see the guidance recently published by the Minister's Department on how all parts of government should act to prevent the tobacco industry's interference in public policy, in line with our international obligations.

My constituency of Blaydon is in the north-east, a region that has traditionally had a higher prevalence of smoking than the rest of the country, although we have made significant progress in narrowing the gap and lots of action is still being taken. That is thanks to the tireless efforts of local councils and NHS trusts in our region working together to continue the work on smoking cessation, and to the huge efforts of Fresh, our brilliant regional tobacco control programme. I thank Ailsa Rutter and her team for all the work they do locally.

Smoking costs my local authority, Gateshead Council, almost £170 million a year in lost economic productivity and NHS and social care costs. That does not include spending on tobacco, which costs the average smoker over £3,000 a year—a total of £54 million in Gateshead. That spending literally goes up in smoke, providing no tangible benefit to the local economy—not to mention the devastating impact it has on the health and wellbeing of my local community.

One of the groups hit hardest by the health consequences of smoking is people with mental health conditions. People with diagnosed and long-term mental health conditions are more than twice as likely to smoke than the general population. For those with serious mental illness, smoking rates are as high as 40%. That leads to people with mental health conditions dying up to 25 years earlier than the general population, depending on their condition, and smoking is a leading cause of this disparity. As we know, smoking can indirectly contribute to poor mental health through illness, unemployment, poverty and addiction. Helping people to break that vicious cycle is vital if we are to improve the physical and mental health of people with mental health conditions and the population more widely.

At the current rate of decline, people with mental health conditions will not achieve the smoke-free target until the mid-2050s, around 20 years later than the population at large. Although it is positive to see “stop smoking” support being rolled out in mental health in-patient settings, I understand that the roll-out of support in community mental health services has been paused. We need to think about how we support people with mental health conditions right across the board, regardless of whether that is in the community or in in-patient settings. That includes tackling the myth that smoking is an effective form of stress relief, which could not be further from the truth.

There is also far too little awareness about the mental health benefits of quitting. It is vital that we get the message out, but we are still awaiting the response to the Government's consultation on pack inserts, which was due early this week, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has already mentioned. I, too, ask the Minister when the response to the consultation on pack inserts will be available. When will the statutory instrument to take that measure forward be laid before Parliament?

I will finish by sharing an anecdote. Other Members have talked about the impact of vaping on young people and the approach that we should be taking, and I had a salutary reminder about that when I attended a Christmas fair in my constituency last year. I was buying bits and pieces to support traders and to make up Christmas eve boxes for some of the children I know. I bought some very pretty knitted bags from a craft store and was absolutely shocked when I got home to find a packet of Barbie candy sticks inside each one. I thought we had

[Liz Twist]

gone well past that sort of thing. Needless to say, I did not use them and they were thrown away. It is important that we are not complacent about how far we have come and how far we have to go, so that really struck me.

It is good to see the bold action that has been set out to tackle such a deadly addiction, but the Government need to do more to ensure that smokers in the most deprived groups are not left behind as we move towards a smoke-free future.

2.25 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to speak in this important debate. It has been great to hear the large degree of consensus across the House on our ambition to secure a smoke-free future. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate and for his work with the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. I also welcome the new Minister to her place.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and the hon. Members for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their powerful contributions on why we need a smoke-free future. They talked about the health impacts that we currently see, but also offered practical solutions.

As we have heard today, smoking is an absolute blight on the health of our society. The “Global Burden of Disease” study found that despite the fall in smoking rates in recent decades, it remains the No. 1 risk factor that causes premature deaths in England. In 2019, tobacco caused an estimated 125,000 deaths in the UK. That is one person every five minutes—a staggering statistic. On average, smokers lose 10 years of life. Not only is smoking an expensive habit, as we have heard, but it is three or four times more common in some of our most deprived communities.

If everyone quit tomorrow, it is estimated that that could lift 1 million children out of poverty. That is to say nothing of the impact on the economy. Not only is it another cost to our NHS, but Action on Smoking and Health has estimated that smoking costs the United Kingdom £32 billion in lost productivity through lost earnings, unemployment and early deaths, and another £15 billion in social care costs. The evidence is overwhelming that for the future of the NHS, the economy and the health and wellbeing of the country, smoking is bad for Britain.

As Primary Care and Public Health Minister, I will drive a prevention agenda forward. The agenda has received many warm words from Conservative MPs and Ministers in the abstract, but very little by way of action over the past 14 years. We in Labour have set ourselves a clear mission to reduce the number of lives lost to the biggest killers. Realising a smoke-free future will be integral to that.

Smoking, of course, is the leading cause of cancer in the United Kingdom. It is strongly linked to cardiovascular disease, which is highly preventable, yet causes one in four deaths in the United Kingdom. Some 15,000 deaths from heart and circulatory diseases can be attributed to smoking every single year, so Labour has set clear targets on both cancer and cardiovascular disease. We

will improve cancer survival rates by hitting NHS cancer waiting time and early diagnosis targets within five years so that no patient waits longer than they should, and we will reduce deaths from heart disease and stroke by a quarter within 10 years. Building a smoke-free future will be key to that to help more people make that journey.

We welcomed the Khan review when it was published in 2022, and we were pleased to see some of the recommendations taken forward. I will not use this debate to discuss the Government’s smoke-free generation legislation. We shall await their response to the consultation when it is published—perhaps the Minister can today share the timeline for that. To be clear, the Opposition support phasing out smoking over time, and we encourage the Government to get on with it.

When we proposed phasing out smoking, some Conservatives attacked us. The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), who cannot take part in the debate today, called it “health fascism” and

“an attack on ordinary people and their culture”.

I ask those Members what freedom they think there is in addiction. Is it in the average 10 years of life lost by smokers compared with non-smokers? Or the millions of children growing up with parents who smoke? It is a shame that the Prime Minister has failed to convince his MPs of the argument for the reforms and is calling a free vote. But he can rest assured that Labour will vote to see this through.

As Members have highlighted today, the legislation cannot be a substitute for smoking cessation services and other public health measures. Two thirds of adult smokers started before the age of 18; the legislation will come too late for them. Adults who have smoked for years and have not managed to kick the habit need help, too. Does the Minister share my concern that local government funding for “stop smoking” services and tobacco control has fallen by 45% since 2015? Has she assessed the impact of that against the 2030 ambition? Can she provide an update on when the major conditions strategy will be published?

One of the clearest cases to do more on smoking is the impact on children. There has been good progress in recent decades to bring down maternal smoking, but there is more to do. Last year, 9% of mothers were smokers at the time of delivery—still some 50% above the Government’s 6% target. At the current rate of progress, we will not hit that goal until 2032. That is why, as part of Labour’s child health action plan, which was launched today, we would make sure that all hospital trusts integrated opt-out smoking cessation interventions into routine care, with a named lead on smoking cessation, meaning that parents would have all the support they needed to quit and every interaction with the NHS actually encouraged quitting.

Children born to households that smoke are more likely to be born with heart defects, born underweight, or grow up to be smokers themselves—if they grow up at all. Smoking in pregnancy doubles the likelihood of stillbirth. It increases the risk of pre-term birth and miscarriage, and trebles the risk of sudden infant death syndrome. The health of Britain’s children should be non-negotiable. For my part, I want to ensure that children born in Britain today are part of the healthiest generation to have ever lived. But to do that, children

deserve a smoke-free start. Can the Minister tell us what she is doing to ensure that every expecting mother is offered the smoking cessation support they need, and that partners, as we heard from the hon. Member for Harrow East, are also encouraged to quit?

For far too long, public health has been either an afterthought or a battleground on which to have ideological arguments. Strategies have been announced and binned in short order, health inequalities have widened, and the long-term crisis in the NHS has deepened. But, just as the last Labour Government delivered one of the most significant public health interventions in history in the smoking ban, the next Labour Government will grasp the smoke-free challenge. We will get serious about prevention, deliver equitable access to smoking cessation services, and take on tobacco companies that profit at the expense of public health. As part of our child health action plan, Labour will make sure that Britain's children get the happy and healthy start in life that they deserve.

Recently, a school in my constituency had to apologise after handing out a leaflet to a child suggesting smoking as a self-help measure—absolutely shocking and bizarre. That is why Labour has decided to legislate to make tobacco companies include information in tobacco products that dispels the myth that smoking reduces stress and anxiety, and to crack down on businesses marketing vapes to children. We will ensure that the incremental ban on smoking comes into force so that the next generation are not addicted to tobacco. The last Labour Government led the way in tackling smoking, and the next one will do so again.

2.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship today, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing a debate on such an important issue, and pay tribute to his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. He really has been tireless in holding not only Health Ministers' feet, but the Prime Minister's feet, to the fire and making sure that we keep tobacco control a top priority. I am also grateful to the hon. Members for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for their participation today. I welcome the chance to update the House on our progress towards a smoke-free future. I welcome the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) to her place, and look forward to working constructively with her on the tobacco and vapes Bill and other things. I hope there will be much that we can agree and collaborate on.

I want my legacy as Public Health Minister to be weighed and measured by everything we have done to protect the vulnerable in society. Critical to that, of course, is keeping our children safe. We already know that in the United Kingdom, smoking kills around 80,000 people every year, causing one in four cancer deaths; costing £17 billion a year in ill health, lost productivity and demands on the NHS and social care; and putting a huge burden on our health service. Like many others, I have been appalled in recent years to see the number of children vaping treble. It is estimated that no fewer than one in five children have now used a vape.

That is why, in October, the Prime Minister announced action across four areas: first, creating a smoke-free generation by ensuring that children turning 15 this year, or younger, will never legally be sold tobacco products; secondly, supporting existing smokers to quit through significant new funding and support; thirdly, protecting our children from vaping by reducing the appeal and availability of vapes; and fourthly, introducing new action to enforce these rules.

I will address each priority area in turn. First, let us be crystal clear: the tobacco and vapes Bill will save many lives. Unlike other consumer products, there is no safe level of nicotine consumption; it is a product that kills up to two thirds of its long-term users and causes 70% of lung cancer deaths.¹ We are not doing this blind. We already know that action to increase the age of sale works. When the age of sale was raised from 16 to 18 years old, smoking rates for 16 and 17-year-olds in England fell by almost a third. This is a tried and tested policy, and while we have seen some progress, I know there is a lot more to be done—almost 13% in that age bracket are still smoking.

Our modelling suggests that this measure to increase the age of sale will reduce smoking rates in England among 14 to 30-year-olds to close to zero as early as 2040. I am sure that is not early enough for my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, and colleagues across this Chamber, who would like to see that happen sooner—as would I. Nevertheless, that is what the modelling suggests. It is progress in the right direction and will save many lives. I am committed to publishing an impact assessment very soon that will set out for colleagues a more complete picture of the costs and benefits of the Government's smoke-free generation policy.

No one doubts that smoking massively increases the risk of stillbirth; a number of colleagues have raised that today. Smoking also causes asthma in children, and is strongly linked to dementia, stroke and heart failure in old age, as well as to disability and death throughout the life course. Non-smokers, including children, pregnant mums-to-be and their babies are exposed to second-hand smoke, putting them at serious risk through absolutely no choice of their own. This is not about freedom of choice; it is about protecting the vulnerable. Almost every minute of every day someone is admitted to hospital because of smoking, and up to 75,000 GP appointments can be attributed to smoking each month—that is over 100 GP appointments every hour. Reducing that burden will therefore save the NHS money that we can reinvest into research, frontline care and cutting waiting lists.

This measure is not just the right thing for our children's health; there is a very strong economic case for it too. Analysis by Action on Smoking and Health has estimated the cost of tobacco to society to be £17 billion a year. That figure is out of date, and I think my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has just updated it—the Department is very swiftly trying to verify that—but the last published data showed that the directly attributable cost of smoking to society was around £17 billion a year. That dwarfs the £10 billion a year the Treasury receives from taxes on tobacco products.

That cost of £17 billion includes £14 billion lost to productivity through smoking-related lost earnings, unemployment and early death, as well a direct cost to the NHS and to social care of £1.9 billion and £1.1 billion

1.[Official Report, 25 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 6MC.]

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

a year, respectively. The cost of smoking to the economy and wider society is equivalent to the annual salaries of over half a million nurses, almost 400,000 GPs, 400,000 police officers, or 400 million GP appointments.

Reducing smoking rates will bring down those costs and help our economy to become more productive. The smoke-free generation policy could provide cumulative productivity benefits of a staggering £85 billion within the next 50 years. That is why the Government are taking such bold and historic action through the tobacco and vapes Bill.

As well as stopping children starting, our second aim is to do more to help current smokers to quit. Quitting smoking is the best thing a smoker can do for their health: someone who quits before turning 30 could add 10 years to their life. That is very reassuring to me; I started smoking at the age of 14 and gave up as my 21st birthday present to myself, by which time I was smoking 40 a day. I was a student—how did I afford it? I have no idea! I am so glad I stopped. For anyone who doubts how addictive it is, I turned 60 last year and still—

Bob Blackman: Surely not!

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I know. You can't believe that, can you?

Even to this day, talking about smoking all the time, I sometimes think, "Ooh a cigarette." That is how addictive it is—40 years on and I still think, "Ooh!" It is that addictive, and that is absolutely appalling.

We have announced that we will more than double the funding to local stop smoking services across England to a total of £138 million a year, which will help around 360,000 people to quit every year. We are backing these efforts with substantial new money to support marketing campaigns. These measures are easy, common-sense and cost-effective ways to help people to kick the habit.

As colleagues will know, I am passionate about helping new mums, mums-to-be, new parents, new families and their babies, which is why I have asked officials to redouble our efforts to tackle smoking in pregnancy. Women who smoke during pregnancy are two and a half times more likely to give birth prematurely, and smoking is a significant driver of stillbirth. I want to do everything I can to spare parents the awful and heartbreaking tragedy of losing a baby, which we have heard so much about in this place only recently.

On average, just over one in 10 mums smoke at the time of delivery, but that number is as high as one in five in certain parts of the country, as some colleagues have spoken about already. We know that pregnant women who receive financial incentives are twice as likely to successfully quit throughout pregnancy compared to those who do not, so we are working to roll out a national financial incentive scheme by the end of 2024 to help all pregnant smokers and their partners to quit. This will build on our work over recent years to develop high-quality stop smoking support for pregnant women and their partners, with programmes such as the NHS long-term plan commitments on maternal smoking and the saving babies' lives care bundle.

Thirdly, as I said at the start of my remarks, youth vaping has tripled in recent years. One in five children have now used a vape. I am especially worried about the damage being done to children's bodies by illegal vapes, which is a growing concern for mums and dads across the country. The health advice is clear: young people and those who have never smoked should not vape. We have a duty to protect our children from underage vaping while their lungs and brains are still developing. There is not yet enough evidence on the long-term impact of vaping on young brains and lungs. I will not stand by while businesses knowingly and deliberately encourage children to use a product that is designed to help adults quit smoking. Those business do so with full knowledge that our children will become addicted to nicotine—well, not on my watch.

We have announced that we will take tough new action to reduce the appeal and availability of vapes through the tobacco and vapes Bill. In our recent public consultation, we sought views on restricting flavours, point-of-sale displays and packaging. On a visit to retail outlets in Hackney, I saw sweet counters and vape counters side by side, with the vapes in pretty packaging with cartoon characters and in little things that look like Coke cans. These vapes are not designed for 60-year-old smokers; they are designed for children, to get them addicted to nicotine.

The consultation has revealed something we already know: there are serious and justifiable environmental concerns over disposable vapes. It is a simple truth that more than 5 million disposable vapes are either littered or thrown away in general waste every week. That number has quadrupled in just the last year. Being sold at pocket-money prices, easy to use and widely available, disposable vapes are, of course, the product of choice for children. More than two thirds of current youth vapers use disposable products. We must and will take action.

Fourthly, a strong approach to enforcement is vital to ensure that our policy actually takes effect. The underage and illicit sale of tobacco, and more recently vapes, is undermining the work the Government are doing to regulate the industry and protect public health. We are cracking down on this evil and illicit trade by backing enforcement agencies including Border Force, HMRC and trading standards with £30 million extra per year. We will introduce powers in the tobacco and vapes Bill to give on-the-spot fines to tackle underage sales. I am pleased we can count on the strong support of trading standards officers right across the country.

Our public consultation closed on 6 December and we received nearly 28,000 valid responses. I am happy to assure all colleagues that we will publish our response in the coming weeks, ahead of the introduction of the tobacco and vapes Bill. I believe that our actions in this space show that the Government are willing to take tough, long-term decisions to protect our children and safeguard the health of future generations.

I will now answer some of the questions raised by hon. Members today; I thank them again for their contributions. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, our public consultation closed on 6 December and within the next few weeks we will publish the consultation. Of course we will then bring forward the Bill, which is, as everybody knows, a top priority for the Prime Minister.

As for the point about a polluter pays levy, the Treasury has looked at that in detail, but so far it has decided against it. I absolutely assure colleagues that I will take that point away and consider it again.

I thank the hon. Member for City of Durham for her invitation to visit her constituency, which I would be delighted to accept. She highlighted the fact that the discrepancy in life expectancy between different parts of her constituency is 50% attributable to smoking, which is a shocking figure. That is not uncommon around the country, so we need to tackle that issue.

I say gently to the hon. Member for North Antrim that when the legal age for smoking was raised, it reduced illicit tobacco sales by 25%; the evidence suggests that far from increasing criminality, raising the legal age for smoking decreases it.

The hon. Gentleman also asked a question about Northern Ireland specifically. I am pleased to tell him that in the Bill we propose to give Northern Ireland the powers to regulate in the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom. There has been a lot of consultation with the devolved Administrations and once the Stormont Assembly—which I urge him to get back up and running—is back up and running, Northern Ireland will be able to legislate to have exactly the same regime as the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ian Paisley: I do not know whether it is relevant, Mr Sharma, but for the completeness of the record I ought to have referred to my registered interests. I chair a charitable trust on employment and skills development that is named after Tom Gallaher, a leading industrialist of his age who was a tobacconist. I should just declare that on the record.

On the point that the Minister has just raised, may I ask her to go back to the Department and get advice for us? If Northern Ireland is restricted from regulating on this issue, because of our EU connection through the Windsor framework, even the Assembly would not be able to legislate on it, in the same way that the Danes were unable to do it. I really seek advice on that from the Minister.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on that point to give him absolute clarity.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for his contribution today. I very much enjoyed the visit that I made to his constituency, which was a long time ago—indeed, many years ago. He spoke about the importance of the four nations working together. I completely agree with him; the UK is much stronger together. I hope that in my remarks I have answered his other questions.

I also thank the hon. Member for Blaydon for her support for the Bill and for pointing out that it is vital, particularly in the north-east where smoking prevalence is higher than average in many other parts, that we really take steps to tackle the issue. I echo her expression of gratitude to local councillors, the NHS and to Fresh, the charity in her constituency, for the work that they have done to try to tackle smoking.

As I have said to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston, I hope we can work together constructively to ensure that we introduce these changes as soon as we can.

In closing, I will quickly address the New Zealand Government's announcement that they will no longer introduce the smoking measures that had been planned there. There have been many calls, not least from the tobacco industry—I wonder why!—for us to row back on our plans following that decision. In response to those calls, I stress that the New Zealand plans included a licensing scheme to limit quite significantly the number of retailers able to sell tobacco and plans to limit the amount of nicotine in consumer products. Our Government are introducing a smoke-free generation, by protecting future generations from the harms of smoking while leaving current adult smokers the freedom to continue smoking if they choose to do so.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response to the debate. In my contribution, I gave a couple of examples from Canada that we had followed here, and I urged the Government here to follow the new ideas in Canada to dissuade people from smoking. Has she had an opportunity to look at some of the Canadian legislation? I am very simple: if I see something good, I think, "Let's do it". If it works there, it should work here as well.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree. We should always keep an eye on what other nations are doing.

I reiterate that our position remains unchanged. This will be world-leading, and we want to be a trailblazer in the absolutely crucial area of protecting future generations; protecting the health of our nation; protecting our future children and babies; and, at the same time, protecting our NHS. Let other nations follow our example. I look forward to working with colleagues right across the House as we bring that to fruition, and I thank them for their contributions.

2.50 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for their responses. I will politely and gently point out that every single measure on smoking has always been led from the Back Benches. I well remember that some 11 years ago I was sitting where I am sitting today, leading a debate on the standardised packaging of tobacco products, and both the Opposition Front Bench and the Government Front Bench said, "We have no plans for and do not support standardised packaging of tobacco products." Two years later, it was introduced. Indeed, the smoking ban, originally put forward under a Labour Government, came from Back-Bench pressure, and the Minister at the time was trying to prevent it. We must be clear that Back Benchers lead the way on tobacco legislation.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It is important that we ramp up and keep the pressure on Government to take action. It is good that we have seen actions over the last few months on introducing the Khan review, but we must remember that the proposed legislation does not introduce every single measure recommended in it. I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to have another look at the Khan review to see what else can be done, possibly without the need for legislation, and to have discussions again with the Treasury on the "polluter pays" levy. After all, we would all like

[Bob Blackman]

to see more money invested in the health service: let us get it from the tobacco industry, rather than the hard-pressed taxpayer.

I urge the Government to ensure that we take action on vaping and on youth vaping in particular. I am really concerned, as the Minister quite rightly said in her speech, that there is not yet evidence on the damage done by vaping. It must be safer than smoking, so giving up is a good thing to do, but damage is being done and addiction is being heaped on people. In many ways, what we see in vaping is what used to happen with the packaging of tobacco products: they were made to look sexy and cool for young people. We barred that and, as a result, youth smoking dropped. That is vital.

I also welcome the fact that there is cross-party support for the legislation, so we can ensure that we get it through quickly and on to the statute book. However, let us be clear: we need to go further in order to achieve a smoke-free England. It is for not just the next generation, but every future generation to come. Our all-party parliamentary group's manifesto sets out the measures that we need to take that will just about get us to a smoke-free England in 2030. However, we need action on those measures soon if we are to achieve that, so I commend the manifesto to the House and look forward to the full implementation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of a smokefree future.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

New Dementia Treatments

3 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of new dementia treatments.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the chance to introduce this debate.

It is timely to be having this debate at the beginning of this year because in 2024, almost for the first time since dementia became an increasingly widespread condition as people live longer, there are the first glimmers of hope. Alzheimer's Research UK, which is one of the leading dementia charities, alongside various others such as Dementia UK, is openly talking about a tipping point. We must hope it is right, because the cold statistics and the human cost of dementia show that we desperately need progress on diagnosis and treatment for the set of diseases that cause the condition.

The figures are stark: nearly 1 million people in the UK live with dementia, and on current trends that number will have increased to 1.6 million by 2050. As I speak, in the UK there are no treatments that can slow, stop or cure dementia, and we have been living with that situation for a long time.

We all have constituents who are affected—there are 1,600 people living with dementia in my constituency of Ashford—but I first took a special interest in this issue for the worst possible reason: my father suffered from dementia in his last few years, so I saw close up and over a long time how cruel and debilitating a disease it is, not just for the victim but for the families and those closest to them. I am conscious that others in the Chamber will have had similar experiences. One in two of us will be directly affected, either by developing the disease ourselves, caring for someone with the condition or, in some particularly tragic cases, both.

The history of this disease could hardly be bleaker. It is the dark side of the historically wonderful fact that life expectancy has been rising very fast in recent decades in not just this country but many other countries too. One of the problems we face is that our health system has not been devised to cope with this disease.

Despite that bleak background, there is now a glimmer of hope—indeed, several glimmers of hope. The first is that new ways of diagnosing the diseases that cause dementia, such as blood tests for Alzheimer's, are showing promise. The second, and the main cause of optimism among those who are involved in dealing with dementia day to day, is the development of treatments that slow the course of the disease. Since the treatments are the new things on the horizon, I will return to that subject in a moment.

The third glimmer of hope is that we are developing new insights that show how we can reduce the prevalence of dementia in the first place by addressing the factors that affect our brain health over the entire course of our life. I was fascinated to read that some experts think 40% of dementia cases worldwide could be preventable. That is clearly a long-term figure that we should bear in mind.

Although all three of those changes are important, for the purpose of today's debate I want to concentrate on the treatments.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member on securing this important debate. Is there not an enormously important fourth strand of this: effective management of the condition and the various aids, adaptations and regimes that enable people to continue to function longer, for the benefit of themselves, their families and wider society?

Damian Green: The right hon. Gentleman is completely right. There are new management techniques. I did not want to extend the debate too widely, but I am struck by the way that technology—not cutting-edge technology but technology available to all of us, such as smart speakers—can remind people that they need to take a red pill at 11 o'clock or remind relatives that the fridge has not been opened for five hours, meaning that someone has forgotten to take out their lunch. It can help with all those kinds of day-to-day issues and, if used properly, enable people to live in their own homes for longer, even if they are suffering this disease. I agree that that is a very important potential set of breakthroughs.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to add my voice in support of more research in this area. Is it not the case that, despite improvements, the amount of money spent on research and the structuring of proper research trials—which, by their nature, have to go on for many years—is a drop in the ocean compared with the savings we can make in the health system, improvements to people's lives, and in the social care system? Is that not yet another motivation that makes this topic incredibly important?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend has huge expertise over the entire health field and therefore in this area as well. He is completely right, and I will come on to savings, particularly potential savings in the social care budget as well as the health budget, in a couple of minutes. It is one of the points I want to emphasise to the Minister.

To return to the treatments, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has already started consideration of lecanemab and donanemab—I wish treatments had more pronounceable names—two very important breakthrough drugs, and I believe a final decision is expected by the middle of this year. Inevitably, at this early stage of the development of drugs in any particular field, there are many more out there. Another 140 drugs are undergoing clinical trials around the world at the moment. They will not all work, but some of them will, so in scientific and research terms, this is genuinely an exciting period in this field.

Perhaps the most significant point I want to make to the Minister is to express the hope that the way in which the system decides whether to approve a drug is fit for purpose for this type of drug. That is genuinely in question and gives rise to the point my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) made about costs. There are inevitable gaps in our knowledge about the efficacy of new treatments in an area where, up to now, there have been no treatments. Much of the usual comparative work one would expect to be done in clinical trials cannot be done in these circumstances, so there is a task for Ministers to make sure that NHS bodies and the industry develop a joint plan to allow these new treatments to be available to the NHS at a reasonable price.

There is also an important specific point that could affect whether the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence gives financial approval to these treatments in the first place. The bulk of the current costs of dementia falls on the social care system, particularly on unpaid carers. Estimates suggest that around £22 billion a year of costs fall on informal or formal social care. The direct costs to the NHS are only £1.7 billion a year—a small fraction of the cost to the social care system. The current NICE assessment process will take into account only the NHS costs, and clearly that could adversely affect a decision about whether drugs are affordable.

Whether the current NICE system provides the proper result for this type of drug and disease would be questionable at any time, but it is particularly questionable when other arms of government are concentrating on getting more working-age people back to work. More than 1 million people between the ages of 25 and 49 are out of work because of caring responsibilities, and some of those will be caring responsibilities for people suffering from dementia, perhaps in its early stages, when we are not using technology well enough to allow people to lead more or less normal lives.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and a particularly pertinent point about NICE considering only the cost to the NHS. Is that not even more surprising given that NICE stands for “National Institute for Health and Care Excellence”? Clearly, the guidelines need urgent revision.

Damian Green: I am delighted to have my hon. Friend's support. Since the old Department of Health was renamed the Department of Health and Social Care, it has been particularly important that, in all its manifestations, and indeed in all the manifestations of the bodies that report to it, the Department should reflect the treatment of health and social care as equals. That is a wider point that my hon. Friend should not tempt me to; I can go on at great length about it, and do not wish to in this debate.

As I said, caring responsibilities are a significant reason why so many people of working age are not working. I cited the figure for those between 25 and 49, but if we extend the age range up and down, less than a fifth of people who care for someone with dementia are in paid work. If someone is caring for someone with dementia, it is very likely that they will not be in paid work. I am grateful that others support my point that NICE should be instructed to consider the full cost of dementia to social care, as well as the NHS, to arrive at a proper evaluation of the economic case for the new treatments.

The prospect of these drugs becoming available also throws a spotlight on the need for better and, in particular, earlier diagnosis. At the moment, the drugs are effective only in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and there is nothing like enough capacity for timely diagnosis. The latest NHS figures suggest that more than a third of the over-65s estimated to have dementia do not have a recorded diagnosis at all. There are significant regional variations within that figure. Some areas of the country are much worse: for example, diagnosis rates in Herefordshire and Worcestershire are as low as 53%.

[Damian Green]

There is also evidence that minority groups, including black people and those of south Asian heritage, have higher rates of under-diagnosis. Without an increase in the effectiveness and timeliness of diagnosis, the beneficial effects of the new treatments will therefore be massively reduced.

For the new hopes I am discussing to be realised, we therefore need a revolution in our diagnostic capacity. At the moment, the most effective ways of diagnosing dementia—namely, PET scans or lumbar punctures—are accessible only to 2% of those seeking a diagnosis. The best short-term solution is to increase access to lumbar puncture, which is much cheaper and more scalable than expanding the expensive scanning equipment. Alzheimer's Research UK suggests that the annual capacity for lumbar punctures should be increased from 2,000 to 20,000 a year. I am conscious that the Government are analysing the responses to the consultation on the major conditions strategy and that dementia is one of the six conditions covered by the strategy. My appeal to the Minister on that front is that, as we do in many cases in health and social care, we think at least as much about prevention as we do about cure.

Given the demographic pressures, it seems unarguable that, if we carry on as we have done since the NHS was created, concentrating almost entirely on treatments while relatively neglecting public health and preventive measures, we are heading for even more difficulties in the long run. But that is a much wider debate. In the specific area of preventing dementia, a number of factors, including hearing loss and high blood pressure, can and should be part of a preventive approach, which would reduce demand for expensive treatments in the long run and, even more importantly, allow people to continue to lead more or less normal lives.

One other point about the new era that we are hopefully entering with these treatments is that, as a country, we are well placed to contribute to the vital research that is needed. We have the scientists and the companies, but too few people are currently aware of the possibilities. Only 2% of people with a dementia diagnosis are currently registered to hear about clinical trials. The total UK share of the current clinical trials for dementia around the world is 7%. I hope that the Government will look at that aspect as part of the overall plan for dealing with dementia, which we are looking forward to.

Before I sit down, I should emphasise that I do not want to be ungenerous or over-critical about the Government's action in this area. I am conscious that the Government have committed to doubling the funding for dementia research to £160 million by the next financial year, and I also very much welcomed the launch, last summer, of the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission; I am glad that the Government have put £95 million behind that. I know, of course, that the Minister and the Government widely recognise the horror of this disease, the fact that it is becoming more widespread and affecting more and more families and the fact that not just more money, but more creative thinking, will be needed to turn the tide.

I want to end on a hopeful note. This generation has the chance to see the end of the terrible situation whereby a diagnosis of dementia is a life sentence of an inevitably long degeneration. This absolutely needs to

be a turning point for the millions of people who are touched by this dreadful disease. I hope that the Government and the medical authorities recognise the scale of the opportunity that scientific advance has given to them and all of us. This year could be key to setting the UK on a path to a more hopeful future. I am very confident that the Minister will be determined to lead us on that journey.

3.18 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) on securing this very important debate and on his excellent speech. I learned a few things from that speech, and I had thought I was quite well informed on the developments in dementia research.

As some people may know, my mum, Angela, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease when she was 64. I, along with my stepfather and brother, cared for her until she died in 2012. It was that experience that drove me, first of all, to be the first MP to become a Dementia Friends champion. As the right hon. Member knows, I was subsequently elected as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia.

When we talk about dementia, we are using a collective term that covers the common symptoms associated with a range of brain diseases. The most common of them is Alzheimer's disease, but there are dozens of others. My mother-in-law was diagnosed with vascular dementia in her 80s, and there is also dementia with Lewy bodies, frontotemporal dementia and, as I say, dozens of other conditions. Each of those diseases has a different pathology and, as a consequence, the specific therapies that we are talking about today will not necessarily be appropriate for them; they will need to develop their own specific therapies.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member for Ashford that this is a time of hope, because we are making groundbreaking discoveries and there have been developments in the therapies. I also totally concur with him about the importance of prevention. We know that what is good for our heart is good for our head as well. The previous debate that you were chairing, Mr Sharma, was about smoking and tobacco use; we know that has a significant impact on dementia prevalence.

I will reiterate some of the points that the right hon. Gentleman made about dementia. First, on prevalence, there are 900,000 people living with dementia in the UK, and that is likely to increase. I will pick him up on his point that life expectancy is increasing. It is not increasing; it is flatlining and has been since 2017. In areas such as mine, it is actually going down. The prevalence of dementia is reflected in that trend. I point people to the excellent work of Professor Sir Michael Marmot, who this week published his update that the picture is not changing, unfortunately.

People with dementia account for more than 70% of those in residential care homes over the age of 65, and 60% of those receiving home care. As we will have seen from today's NHS performance data, it is estimated that a quarter of NHS beds are occupied by people with dementia, who remain in hospital on average twice as long as people who do not live with the condition. Again, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that,

unfortunately, that reflects the crisis we have in social care. We just cannot discharge people from hospital knowing that they are not going to have the support that they need, whether that is in the community or in specialist residential care beds. In addition to his point about NICE, we also need to be serious about the future of social care reforms, particularly the reforms recommended back in 2015 by Andrew Dilnot.

Most importantly, we need to recognise that dementia is now the UK's biggest killer. It has overtaken heart disease and cancer as the biggest killer in the country. We also need to understand that dementia is not a natural and automatic part of ageing. Although, yes, because we are an ageing society, there will be an increase in the prevalence of dementia, it does not mean that we automatically get it as we get older. It is clear that dementia is the most significant health and social care challenge of our time.

I was disappointed that dementia has not had the political priority that it deserves. I was disappointed that the Government decided to absorb dementia into the major conditions strategy, and not give it the focus and attention that it deserves for all the reasons that the right hon. Gentleman has given. Unfortunately, that reflects a number of things, not least what is wrong with our political system and the short termism driven by where we are in the political cycle.

Despite the serious challenges, this is an incredibly exciting time for dementia research. I advise people to look at the all-party parliamentary group's report on dementia research, which we conducted a couple of years ago. It went right through all the developments, from prevention and looking at biomarkers all the way through to the quality of care and the evidence base around that. There is a lot to be excited about.

In the past 18 months, we have seen the announcement of two effective disease-modifying treatments for early-stage Alzheimer's that have been proven to slow the progress of the disease by 20% to 40%. That is really significant, and I share everybody's excitement about it. Lecanemab and donanemab target and remove a protein called amyloid, which is what builds up in our brain and is harmful to it. It basically stops neurones communicating—not just with each other in the brain, but with all different parts of the body as well. They are really important drugs that will reduce the build-up, or clogging-up, of the neurones. As an aside, when I was undertaking personal care for my mum as she got to the late stages of her life—lifting her, lifting her head, and so on—I could feel the change in the shape of her head, because her brain was shrinking; it was just imploding on itself. I hope that gives a sense of what is happening in somebody with Alzheimer's and of the ravages of the disease.

To have two new disease-modifying drugs for Alzheimer's disease in the space of a year is a turning point in the fight against the disease and could mean the beginning of the end of this devastating condition. Science is proving that it is possible to slow down the progression of the condition, and lecanemab and donanemab are the first of what we hope will be many more effective treatments. Hopefully, one day, Alzheimer's disease could be considered a long-term but manageable condition alongside diabetes and asthma.

Lecanemab has already been approved as a safe drug by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States. As we have heard, we expect the Medicines and

Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to make a decision very soon. Then, of course, there is the clinical guidance associated with the implementation and use of these drugs, which is undertaken by NICE. I have to say that I had not picked up that, as the right hon. Member for Ashford said, it would look only at the impact on social care. I hope the Minister will respond that she will be writing to NICE to say that is just not acceptable. As co-chair of the APPG on dementia, I am quite happy to write a letter along those lines as well, together with the chair of the APPG on adult social care, the right hon. Member for Ashford. It just cannot happen. I urge the MHRA and NICE not to procrastinate, and to try to get this sorted as soon as possible without compromising the validity of their assessments.

However, very worryingly, even if these drugs were given clinical approval tomorrow, we would unfortunately not be in a position to make use of them. That is the state of our health system at the moment. For lecanemab and donanemab to be effective, they require an early diagnosis of dementia and a specific sub-type diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. In England alone, a third of people with dementia do not have a diagnosis, and many only have a non-specific diagnosis of dementia. Currently, none of those individuals would be able to access these novel therapies.

A few months ago, the APPG on dementia produced a report on diagnosis rates and the inequalities in the diagnosis rates. I heard of a diagnosis rate lower than the rate of 50% in Hereford mentioned by the right hon. Member for Ashford: a rate of 40% in Devon. The top marks go to Stoke. For whatever reason, Stoke seems to be doing very well, with a diagnosis rate of over 80%. Oldham, at 78%, has got a little bit of catching up to do to Stoke, but we are quite pleased with the direction of travel. We have not recovered to the pre-pandemic diagnosis rates. We all need to recognise what we can do about that.

I urge the Government to look at the following three areas as a matter of urgency. First, not enough people are being diagnosed at an early stage of disease progression. Many memory services are struggling to meet current demand, let alone the expected increase if disease-modifying treatments do become available. Secondly, there is a lack of sub-type diagnosis. As I mentioned at the start, there are more than 100 different diseases that cause dementia. Too often people receive a general diagnosis of dementia without a sub-type. Without that, it is impossible to determine an individual's suitability for the new drugs.

Thirdly, there is insufficient access to positron emission tomography scanners and cerebrospinal fluid testing—the lumbar puncture testing that the right hon. Member for Ashford mentioned. As I mentioned, a specific diagnosis is required and the PET scanner and CSF test are the only tests that can give evidence of the presence of amyloid in the brain, but access to those tests is woefully restricted due to lack of equipment. I had not picked up on the cost-effectiveness, so I thank the right hon. Member for raising that.

Workforce and diagnostic barriers can be overcome with clear and decisive action from Government. I want to see at pace an expansion of diagnostic capacity so that everyone with suspected Alzheimer's disease can access a test to confirm eligibility for treatment at an early stage in their disease progression. We must address the current inequalities in diagnosis across the country.

[Debbie Abrahams]

We need a transformational change to the diagnostic workforce to ensure sufficient workforce capacity with the necessary skills and expertise to administer the required specialist tests and make diagnoses. Meaningful involvement of the people living with Alzheimer's disease and their carers must be central to plans for system preparedness, with continuous consultation from the outset and ongoing oversight through an established group.

I am sure we would all agree that we are at a pivotal moment for dementia in this country. Lecanemab, donanemab and the treatments that might follow have the potential to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, but we need to act now to ensure we are ready to deliver them as soon as they become available. We have come such a long way in the past 20 years, with incredible advances in scientific research that has culminated in the discovery of those novel drugs. Such effort cannot be wasted by Government inactivity and failure to respond.

Simply put, scientists are doing their job to give us new treatments, but now it is up to the Government to do theirs and ensure the system is ready to deliver therapies to the people who need them. It is time to make dementia a priority and we should make a start.

I thank the Alzheimer's Society for its support with the APPG.

3.32 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I pay tribute to work of the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). They are formidable chairs of their respective APPGs on adult social care and on dementia. I know that the Minister has great respect for them, as we all do; they do fantastic work. Sharing the experiences of supporting family members was very apparent in this debate, and my hon. Friend's image of holding her mother and feeling the ravages of the disease was incredibly well put. We have heard very moving statements this afternoon.

We are holding this debate at a crucial time for our country. We are a world leader—sometimes we overuse that term—in life sciences research that offers people living with dementia the prospect of new treatments as a lifeline. Finding a cure is where we all want to get to. The new treatments provide real hope and opportunity, but how do we get there? We have touched on that. New treatments and research help, but the workforce is where we will make a big difference. That is why we have committed to recovering clinical trial activity in the UK and delivering on the NHS long-term workforce plan.

We want to make sure it is easier to conduct lifesaving research in the UK for conditions such as dementia by implementing a more efficient set-up process so that people can sign up to participate in trials more easily, but that has to be supported by ensuring our NHS has the staff it needs to enable more clinical trials. Without the workforce to deliver new treatments, those living with dementia and their families will continue to face delays and we will not be able to access the benefits of early diagnosis. That is why I am pleased that the Government have finally accepted the need for a long-term workforce plan in the NHS.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth said, it is disappointing that the Government shelved the plans for a dedicated dementia strategy. England remains the only nation without a specific dementia plan. That is very short-term thinking, and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister about that. In 2022, I said:

“We cannot give confidence to people suffering with dementia and their carers without a much clearer plan that is in place very quickly.”—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 141.]

That remains the case today.

Although we currently have no treatments to slow or cure dementia, as we have heard, there is hope on the horizon after the recent breakthroughs with drugs that target the underlying causes of Alzheimer's disease, which are a hugely welcome step towards combating it. We need to ensure that our health service is ready and able to deliver the new treatments and technologies when they become available. The treatments, if approved, will depend on early diagnosis, which can be determined only by a PET scan or a CSF test. As the right hon. Member for Ashford said, the health service was not set up in 1948 to cope with dementia and similar diseases, so we need a 21st century service that can. It would be helpful to hear what plans the Minister has to ensure that the NHS is ready to deliver the new treatments. Has she had any discussions with NHS England about delivery ahead of the potential MHRA decision this year on the drugs currently under consideration?

There are too many people living with undiagnosed dementia. Part of the problem is the lack of scanning capacity for accurate diagnosis of dementia sub-types. We have one of the lowest per capita ratios of diagnostic scanners in the OECD, behind Russia, Slovakia and Chile. What steps are the Government taking to increase that diagnostic infrastructure? We have put forward a clear and costed plan to double the number of scanners, and, as with many of our other policies, the Minister is welcome to borrow it.

In a response to a written question last month, the Minister restated the commitment to double funding for dementia research, but I would welcome an update on whether that is on track for delivery this year. Further research continues to be vital to ensure that people living with dementia receive an early and accurate diagnosis. We have heard today about emerging techniques and new technologies, but we have to be able to access them.

It is estimated that more than 1 million people aged 25 to 49 are out of work due to caring responsibilities, so we need to alleviate the challenges and economic strain as a result of those caring for people living with dementia. It is not good for them, their families or, indeed, our economy. New treatments bring hope, but to benefit from them, we need a Government with the competence and foresight to seize the opportunity. Transforming dementia diagnosis and care is vital to improve the lives of those living with dementia and those who care for them. The bulk of the cost of dementia falls not on the NHS, but on unpaid carers and the care system, as hon. Members have said so eloquently today.

After 14 years, Mr Sharma, you would expect me to say that the Conservative party is not capable of making the NHS fit for the 21st century, let alone making the most of the new opportunities that our life science sector present for people. We want to make the NHS fit for the future, so that we are able to benefit from the

exciting new treatments being developed and that all those with dementia and their families can be confident that they will receive the support they deserve.

3.39 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) on securing this debate. I also commend the campaigning of several charities in this area, including Alzheimer's Research UK, the Alzheimer's Society, Dementia UK, Age UK and many others that do so much to raise awareness of dementia, fund research, and support people with dementia and their carers.

I commend my right hon. Friend on his speech. Like many, he has his own experience of dementia with his father, which has clearly informed the significant work that he has done in this area. He spoke about some of the statistics, which I will come on to, and about how a dementia diagnosis can be a bleak prospect. He also spoke about some glimmers of hope for people with dementia and for us as a society—for instance, the fact that dementia can be preventable for some people; our growing understanding of the importance of brain health and how we achieve it; and the progress being made towards treatments that can genuinely make a difference in the future for people with dementia. I heard his specific question about the evaluation by NICE of the treatments and whether the evaluation approach is fit for purpose; I will come on to that shortly.

My right hon. Friend also talked about the importance of better and earlier diagnosis. Indeed, he mentioned that, at the moment, more than a third of people who have dementia are estimated not to have a diagnosis, although, clearly, the other side of that is that about two thirds of people do have a diagnosis. Although we know that the pandemic hit our ability to diagnose people, we have seen some recovery in the diagnosis rate since the pandemic. It is now at the highest level for three years. He rightly said that, overall, for this area, as for many others, prevention is at least as important as a cure. He spoke about the opportunity, in that dementia diagnosis should no longer be a life sentence for this generation, which is an uplifting prospect for all of us involved.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who spoke about her experience with dementia and how she cared for her mother Angela when she had Alzheimer's, until she died. I have huge respect for her, knowing how difficult that must have been. She is also extremely knowledgeable about dementia and spoke about the many different sub-types of dementia, and I thank her for her work as the chair of the all-party group on dementia.

The hon. Lady spoke about hospital stays for people with dementia; a significant number of people are in hospital with dementia. As part of my brief, I have oversight of discharges from hospital and urgent emergency care, and I have spent a lot of time thinking about the flow through hospitals. I think a lot about people with dementia and how we can support them to be discharged to the best place for their care afterwards, or how we can avoid long stays in hospital for them. It can then be so difficult for them to be discharged, given the potential deconditioning that happens to people in hospital.

The hon. Lady rightly talked about how dementia is now the No. 1 cause of death in the UK, but it should not be seen as inevitable for us as we age, and in an ageing society. I heard her three asks, calling for dementia to be diagnosed more often at an early stage; for us to do better at diagnosing sub-types of dementia; and for us to improve access to PET scans and lumbar punctures for diagnosis. I will come to some of those points in a moment. I can definitely agree with the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), that we have heard speeches from formidable colleagues in the debate, as well as from a number of others who joined us and contributed through interventions.

I will start with the impact of dementia. We know that close to 1 million people in the UK suffer from dementia. Around 900,000 people over the age of 65 and almost 50,000 people under the age of 65 are estimated to have dementia. We expect those numbers to increase to more than 1 million by next year and more than 1.5 million by 2050.

The stats are one thing, and they clearly point to the scale of dementia in our society, but they do not necessarily bring to life the human cost of dementia—what it means for people who have it, their families and friends, what it means practically for someone with dementia and those close to them, and what the challenges are of living with dementia or caring for somebody with it. There are significant financial burdens, both on people working who are then diagnosed and may be unable to work, so they have lost income, and on carers, who may have to cut back their work hours or leave work altogether. There are then the financial costs of professional care, whether that is state-funded social care for those who receive it, or self-funded care.

Most significantly, there is the emotional cost of dementia—what the diagnosis means for the individual who learns what is making life so difficult for them and knows the prospects ahead as the disease progresses, what it means for those they love, and what the experience is like for people who are close to them and care for them. It can be very difficult to care for somebody while at the same time feeling as if the person they know and love is being stolen from them. That emotional cost is unquantifiable, but we know that it hits very hard.

Like other hon. Members, I feel that I have painted a pretty bleak picture of what dementia means to our society, but I have no doubt that there are real reasons for optimism. First, we now understand that a significant proportion of dementia—it is estimated to be around 40%—is either preventable or at least delayable, and that we can actually make a difference. Secondly, real progress is now being made in the research into treatments, and there is the prospect of treatments becoming available that will genuinely make a difference to the progress of the disease. There are real reasons for optimism, although, as a Government Minister, I feel that optimism on its own is not enough.

The question that I am sure hon. Members would like me to answer is what we are actually doing to realise this potential and turn the optimism into improved outcomes. To prevent and delay the onset of dementia, we are and have already been acting and intervening to influence the risk factors. We know that we can influence them. For instance, the known risk factors for dementia, similar to other conditions such as cardiovascular disease, include high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, smoking, poor diet and lack of physical activity. These are things that we can and are intervening in.

[Helen Whately]

For instance, we offer a health check for all adults aged between 40 and 74 in England to identify the early signs of stroke, kidney disease, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and, indeed, dementia. Dementia was incorporated specifically into that health check, in part to raise awareness of the fact that people can make a difference and reduce their risk of dementia, and to motivate people to take steps to reduce that risk. There is a much greater awareness that people can make a difference and reduce their risk of suffering from heart disease or diabetes. Alzheimer's Research UK has found that about 70% of people know that they can reduce those risks, but less than a third of people know that they can reduce their risk of and prevent themselves from getting dementia. We have offered that health check to over 9 million people, and about 3.7 million people have had it already. We will continue to encourage people to take that up.

Looking ahead, there is more that we can, should and, indeed, will do to prevent people from suffering ill health, prevent dementia and help people to maintain their health. That is at the core of our major conditions strategy, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford referred. Crucially, that includes dementia, alongside the five other major conditions that represent the major burden of ill health in the country, including cancer and cardiovascular disease.

The hon. Member for Bristol South questioned the point of having a standalone dementia strategy. Actually, it is very important to include dementia with other major conditions and major causes of ill health, partly because we are moving towards having a society in which many people suffer from multiple health conditions. In fact, many older people will have dementia alongside other health conditions, so it makes sense to look at people's health in the round, not just pick one condition.

As I mentioned a moment ago, dementia is a common risk factor for many major conditions, so it makes sense for our health system not to look at any condition in isolation, but to look at how we can improve people's health in the round and reduce their risks. The major conditions strategy is absolutely the place where I point right hon. and hon. Members to look at our evolving Government strategy to address some of the health and lifestyle factors, to move into prevention and to support people in the event that they receive a dementia diagnosis.

The other area where there is cause for optimism is the progress that is being made in the research and development of new treatments. Finding a treatment to slow or, indeed, cure dementia, rather than just manage it, would change the implications of receiving a diagnosis and make such a difference to thousands or even millions of people in the UK and globally. This is a challenge that we share with many other countries, particularly those in the developed world, and we are rightly collaborating internationally on research.

Since 2018, the Government have spent over £454 million on supporting dementia research. In 2019, we made a manifesto commitment to double our funding for dementia research to at least £160 million a year. We have since launched the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission, backed by £95 million of Government funding. The UK Dementia Research Institute, of which the Government are a founding member, recently announced a new partnership with the British Heart Foundation to establish

a centre for vascular dementia, backed by £9 million-worth of funding. Vascular dementia is the second most common form of dementia, affecting around 150,000 people in the UK. We are determined to be a world leader in dementia research and to be recognised as such.

I turn to some of the new treatments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford referred to lecanemab and donanemab as two of the treatments about which there is great excitement. Crucially, the Government want to make sure that treatments are made available to people as soon as possible through the national health service. It is important to sound a note of caution, because we know that such treatments do not come without side effects; in fact, the trials saw some significant side effects, such as the risk of brain bleeds. As ever, it is very important that we follow the proper processes that we have in place to assess the use of treatments by the national health service. That includes both licensing through the MHRA and evaluation by NICE. For the two drugs I mentioned, those processes will happen during the course of this year.

My right hon. Friend asked what NICE takes into consideration in its evaluation. I can assure him and other Members that NICE takes into account all health-related costs and benefits, including the health benefits to carers of a treatment. It also considers the publicly funded cost of social care, so there is a social care element taken into consideration by NICE. I say that very specifically: I wanted to make sure, so I have double-checked in order to be accurate in saying it in this Chamber this afternoon.

I acknowledge and recognise the points that my right hon. Friend and others have made about the impact on unpaid carers and the economic cost. It is true that there is a limit to the costs that NICE considers. Clearly, looking at all the possible broader economic costs involved would have implications not only for dementia treatments but for the many other treatments that NICE considers. As that is a very big question, not just one that is pertinent to dementia, it is probably worthy of a separate conversation in its own right. Nevertheless, I assure him and other hon. Members here today that the publicly funded cost of social care is taken into account by NICE in its evaluation process.

There is also the question of the readiness of the national health service to make drugs available if they are successful through both the licensing process and the NICE evaluation. I assure hon. Members that NHS England is indeed working to ensure that the NHS is ready to support the adoption of new treatments, including the diagnosis processes that will be needed, while recognising—I believe the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth referred to this—that new treatments are likely to require greater access to forms of diagnosis such as PET scans and lumbar punctures, and also recognising that such treatments are likely to require earlier diagnosis in order to be effective.

One thing that I look forward to is that, particularly as treatments that require an earlier diagnosis become available, more people will come forward to seek a diagnosis, as they recognise that getting an earlier diagnosis will really make a difference, and then there will then be access to treatment. I feel optimistic that we will see a virtuous cycle where people learn that getting an early diagnosis can really make a difference in getting access to treatment.

Debbie Abrahams: I am reassured to some extent by what the Minister says, and I am grateful for her tone and her positive approach. Given the inequality—let us call it what it is—in current diagnosis, and these are non-specific dementia diagnosis rates, have she and her Department conducted any analysis of the gaps in more specific PET and CSF testing? Can she publish that data or write to us with it? That would reassure us, because rather than just hoping something will happen, we could identify it: “Yes, in Greater Manchester we are at 90% of the level we need for all these tests,” and similarly in Kent and so on. If she could do that, it would be very helpful.

Helen Whately: I fully appreciate the hon. Member’s question, and I can assure her that I do look at the variation in diagnosis rates between different areas, as she rightly pointed out in her speech. I would be happy to write to her with further detail on the specific question of more sophisticated diagnosis techniques and our readiness for new treatments and for carrying out earlier and more sophisticated diagnoses.

I assure hon. Members of the Government’s ambition for the UK to be a world leader in dementia research, diagnosis and treatment; I would also like us to lead the world in the prevention of dementia. That is why the Government are investing in research. We are getting ready to make new treatments available and building on what we are already doing in prevention with our major conditions strategy. Given the scale and impact of dementia on our society, successful prevention and treatment are not just a nice-to-have, but an imperative for individuals, for their families, friends and loved ones, and for our society.

3.59 pm

Damian Green: I will spare hon. Members the thought that I could go on for another half an hour, I think, under the rules—[*Interruption.*] I can hear shouts of “More!” from the Minister. I thank all those who have taken part, particularly my fellow APPG chair, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). There is clearly a Venn diagram with an overlap between the APPGs on adult social care and on dementia; we share an interest in this as chairs, as well as an interest driven by personal history.

I hear what the Minister says about the NICE funding decision-making algorithm. Through her, I urge NICE to be as open-minded as possible as to what costs it takes into account. I do take the Minister’s point that one can perhaps extend the boundary of what costs are caused by any particular medical condition beyond what is reasonable. However, I think the costs to the economy of those who are not working only because they are caring for someone with dementia are a genuinely legitimate cost that could be taken into account when assessing the economic viability or effect of introducing a particular treatment. I hope that the NICE guidelines can reflect that. Otherwise, I am very grateful to have had the chance to raise these subjects in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of new dementia treatments.

4.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 11 January 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands):

Commencement of a period of public engagement

The Department for Business and Trade (DBT) is seeking views from businesses, individuals, and other interested stakeholders on the general review of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP).

The UK signed its accession protocol to CPTPP on 16 July 2023, kick-starting the UK's membership of a modern and ambitious trade deal spanning 12 economies across Asia, the Pacific, and Europe when the UK accedes. With the UK as a member, it will account for 15% of global GDP (based on 2022 data).

This comprehensive agreement will support UK businesses by making it easier for them to trade with CPTPP parties. It will facilitate innovation and provide consumers with more choice. CPTPP could generate long-term benefits for both the UK and other CPTPP economies; supporting UK jobs and providing opportunities for growth across the UK, with all parts of the country expected to benefit. The Government are now taking the steps needed to ratify the agreement, which is expected to come into force in 2024, subject to parliamentary approval, and we are committed to ensuring Parliament has extensive time to scrutinise all aspects of the agreement.

CPTPP is designed to be a living agreement, evolving to maintain its high standards. In reflection of that, the CPTPP text mandates that the agreement should be reviewed at least every five years—this is referred to as the “general review”. It has now been agreed amongst CPTPP members that the first general review of the agreement will begin in 2024, and CPTPP members recently agreed the terms of reference for that review. While the UK is not yet a ratified member of CPTPP, we expect the review process to conclude after the UK is a ratified member and thus are ensuring that the UK is fully involved in the review process from the beginning, informed by stakeholder views.

To provide stakeholders with the opportunity to express their views, the Government will be running a period of public engagement on the general review.

This will run for six weeks, with the aim of ensuring that stakeholder views are received before the review process begins. The engagement period will be open between 11 January and 22 February.

Publication of report pursuant to section 42 of the Agriculture Act 2020 on the protocol on the accession of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership

The Government have, today, laid before Parliament a report on the protocol on the accession of the UK to CPTPP (the accession protocol).

The report is required under section 42 of the Agriculture Act 2020, prior to the accession protocol being laid before Parliament for formal scrutiny under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRaG).

The Government have always been clear that we will not compromise on the UK's high environmental protection, animal welfare, human health and food safety standards in our trade negotiations. This report, which draws on independent advice from the Trade and Agriculture Commission, the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland, confirms the Government's view that the UK's accession to the CPTPP (via the accession protocol) is consistent with the maintenance of UK statutory protections in these areas.

This report is intended to inform and support scrutiny of the accession protocol prior to its ratification and entry into force. The accession protocol was signed on 16 July 2023 and will be formally laid before Parliament in due course for scrutiny under the provisions of CRaG.

[HCWS180]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Civil Nuclear Road Map

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): Today, we are publishing three key documents which signal the biggest expansion of nuclear power for 70 years and reinforce the UK's position as a leader in the civil nuclear renaissance: a civil nuclear road map, a consultation on alternative routes to market, and a consultation on a proposed policy for siting new nuclear power stations.

The measures we announce today will help to reduce electricity bills, support thousands of jobs and improve UK energy security. This includes exploring building a major new power station and investing in advanced nuclear fuel production. This sets us on a path towards deploying our huge ambition of up to 24 GW of nuclear power in Britain by 2050 as part of a cleaner, cheaper, more secure energy system for the future.

The civil nuclear road map is an unprecedented, world-leading initiative that sends out an electrifying signal to the industry. It sets out our strategy for the deployment of the best new nuclear reactors in the UK, and how His Majesty's Government intend to work with the nuclear sector to deliver this ambition.

The road map establishes our vision for a vibrant nuclear sector, providing detail on the policies we are pursuing to enable delivery, covering areas such as siting, regulation, financing, the joint work we are undertaking with defence nuclear colleagues to develop the required nuclear skills and supply chain in the UK, and how we are taking care of our nuclear legacy through policies on decommissioning and waste management.

We envision a vibrant, world-leading nuclear sector, setting the gold standard for other countries. Announcements we are making in the road map include a commitment to reform the regulations, financing and decommissioning of civil nuclear to make it more streamlined and agile, removing red tape while retaining

the UK's world-class standards of safety. For example, these measures could cut the approval times for reactors that are already approved by overseas regulators by up to 50%.

We are also announcing our commitment to reduce global dependence on Russian fuel and grow the UK supply chain by investing £300 million, alongside industry, in British production of clean, green high assay low enriched uranium fuel for innovative new reactors, offering a commercial alternative to Russia for ourselves, and our allies and partners.

This is just the beginning of the UK standing at the forefront of nuclear innovation and excellence. The road map also sets out our long-term ambition for nuclear, providing high-level timelines and key decision points for a wide range of nuclear technologies over the next decades, including small modular reactors (SMRs), advanced modular reactors (AMRs), and gigawatt-scale projects. In particular, it sets out our intention to explore a further GW-scale project after Sizewell C and our plans to make investment decisions concerning 3-7GW every five years between 2030 and 2044.

Advanced nuclear technologies, such as SMRs and AMRs, present the opportunity to decarbonise across the energy sector, from grid electricity through industrial heat to entirely new industries such as the production of hydrogen and synthetic fuel.

Last year, we set up Great British Nuclear (GBN) as an arm's length body responsible for helping deliver new nuclear projects and help lead our energy revolution. But we are also keen to harness innovation in the private sector and help developers bring forward new nuclear projects outside of GBN's ongoing SMR selection process.

We are therefore today also launching our alternative routes to market consultation with the aim to understand how Government could support the private sector to bring forward advanced nuclear projects as well as explore the uses and services they could provide the economy.

Finally, in recognition of our enhanced nuclear ambitions and the exciting potential offered by advanced nuclear technologies, we are launching a public consultation on a proposed new policy for siting new nuclear power stations.

This consultation marks an important first step in the process for developing a new nuclear national policy statement for England and Wales. The results of this consultation will be used to inform the drafting of the nuclear national policy statement document, which we intend to publish for further consultation. This will be part of the suite of energy national policy statements, and linked to the overarching energy national policy statement, which has recently been revised. Our intention is to designate the new nuclear NPS in 2025, subject to parliamentary processes. For the first time, we intend for the NPS to provide a planning policy framework for SMRs and AMRs as well as traditional gigawatt-scale power stations.

To achieve the UK's nuclear ambitions, the Government believe that additional sites will be required for new nuclear projects, along with greater ongoing flexibility in the site selection process to enable new technologies.

In the siting consultation, we are excited to introduce a positive shift in approach. The new NPS will empower nuclear developers to identify potential sites for development, fostering developers' innovation and flexibility.

While the existing designated nuclear sites may possess many inherent positive attributes, potentially making them a consideration for future development, this change allows for exploration of diverse locations. By entrusting developers with this responsibility, we aim to streamline the process, encourage creative solutions, and enhance the overall efficiency of nuclear development, ultimately contributing to the growth and sustainability of the industry.

We propose that siting of new nuclear would continue to be constrained by robust criteria that determine where development can occur and developers would be empowered to undertake initial screening of sites based on the criteria, with advice from the regulators and statutory agencies.

It is our intention that safety will remain paramount, with the highest safety, security and environmental standards overseen by the independent nuclear regulator and environment protection agencies. Public consultation and community engagement would also remain an essential part of the process.

Copies of these three documents consultation will be published on gov.uk. A copy of the civil nuclear road map will be laid in the House. Copies of the consultations on alternative routes to market and proposed policy for siting new nuclear power stations will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS177]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Government Wine Cellar 2020-22

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I have today placed a copy of the report on the Government wine cellar for the financial years 2020-21 and 2021-22 in the Libraries of both Houses.

This biennial report meets our commitment that there should be regular reports to Parliament on the use of the Government Hospitality wine cellar, covering consumption, stock purchases, costs, and value for money.

Between the financial years 2011-12 and 2018-19, the cellar was self-financed through sales of stock and funds paid to Government Hospitality for work undertaken on behalf of other Government Departments. Sales were not possible in 2020-21 and 2021-22 due to covid-19. Sales resumed in financial year 2022-23 and we anticipate further sales during 2024.

The report notes that:

Consumption levels dropped in 2020-21 by some 96%. There was an increase in 2021-22, but usage levels were still down on the average annual amount by over 60%.

Use of English wines in 2021-22 accounted for 62% of the total.

English wines further constituted 100% of wine purchases in 2021-22.

Funds from other Government Departments represented the only receipts (2021-22—£8,875).

All events organised by Government Hospitality during this period were done so in strict accordance with covid-19 restrictions.

[HCWS181]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Safe and Legal Routes to the UK

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): In accordance with my obligations under section 61 of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, I am today laying before Parliament a report on safe and legal routes to the United Kingdom. The report will also be available on gov.uk.

The UK has a proud history of providing protection for the most vulnerable. Since 2015, we have offered over half a million people safe and legal routes into the UK. This includes those from Hong Kong, Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, as well as family members of refugees.

Through our global resettlement schemes, which includes the UK resettlement scheme, the community sponsorship scheme and the mandate resettlement scheme, we have welcomed over 28,700 refugees since 2015. Through this period, we are the sixth largest recipient of United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) referred refugees, third only to Sweden and Germany in Europe.

This report reaffirms the Government's commitment to providing safe and legal routes for those most in need. Under the Illegal Migration Act, the only way to come to the UK to claim protection will be through safe and legal routes. This will take power out of the hands of criminal gangs and protect vulnerable people.

As part of this commitment, section 60 of the Illegal Migration Act commits the Government to introducing a cap, in consultation with local authorities, on the number of people brought to the UK through safe and legal routes each year.

This is so that we can get a realistic picture of the UK's capacity to welcome, integrate and accommodate resettled refugees. It is only by determining a realistic picture on capacity that the UK can continue to operate safe and legal routes and ensure these routes form part of a well managed and sustainable migration system. This is in recognition of the significant pressures facing local authorities and public services right now, including as a direct result of highly resource-consuming illegal migration. The cap is amendable should there be an international crisis that warrants a bespoke UK response.

The consultation to set the cap has now closed. The Government are currently reviewing responses from local authorities across the UK. A consultation summary report will be produced in the spring with draft regulations

laid in Parliament before the summer recess. Parliament will then have an opportunity to debate and vote on the cap before it comes into force from 2025.

Through the establishment of the cap, and by bearing down on illegal migration, we will be able to do more for some of the most vulnerable refugees from across the globe, receiving more refugees from UNHCR direct from regions of conflict and instability. As we get control on numbers, we will keep under review whether we are able to do more to support vulnerable refugees and whether we need to consider new safe and legal routes.

[HCWS179]

TRANSPORT

Cranston Inquiry: Channel Incident of 24 November 2021

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): On 9 November 2023, I announced the establishment of an independent, non-statutory inquiry into the circumstances of this tragic mass-casualty incident, which resulted in at least 27 fatalities. My thoughts continue to be with the loved ones of those who died, with the survivors, and with those who responded to an extremely distressing event.

The inquiry will be chaired by Sir Ross Cranston, who will bring great experience and expertise to the role. Sir Ross has had a distinguished judicial career, with experience sitting in the Queen's bench division of the High Court, and as the judge in charge of the administrative court. Sir Ross is also a former Solicitor General for England and Wales. The inquiry will now be known as the Cranston inquiry.

The terms of reference, a copy of which has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, enable the inquiry to focus on investigating this individual incident, with the aim of ensuring that the rights of those affected are upheld and allowing the survivors and family members of the deceased to be heard. Crucially, it will also examine the circumstances in which the deceased lost their lives and what lessons can be learned to prevent incidents like this in the future.

In conducting the inquiry, Sir Ross will consider the investigation into the incident already carried out by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch.

The Department will provide support and ensure that the inquiry has the resources it needs to investigate the incident. Sir Ross and his team will now proceed with the important work of establishing the inquiry's processes and procedures.

[HCWS178]

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