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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 28 February 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Troubles: Legacy and Reconciliation

1. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What his Department's planned timetable is for when the Independent Commission on Reconciliation and Information Recovery will be operational. [901645]

7. **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on implementing the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. [901651]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I start by welcoming the return of the devolved institutions to Northern Ireland, following the publication of the "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper earlier this month and the Windsor framework, which was agreed exactly a year ago yesterday. Let me also take this opportunity to mention that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland will celebrate their 25th anniversaries on Friday.

The Government are doing all that we can to support the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery in delivering effectively for victims and families. Significant progress has been made since the ICRIR was established in December last year, and I expect the commission's doors to open on 1 May.

Jeff Smith: In the light of this morning's High Court ruling, does the Secretary of State still think that after 1 May the citizens of Northern Ireland should be the only people in the UK denied the right to seek justice for crimes committed during the troubles, through civil cases and inquests?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Mr Justice Colton handed down his judgment at 10.15 this morning. It is a very complex case. I am told that the judgment runs to over 200 pages, and I am yet to see it. It will take some time to consider, but we will consider Mr Justice Colton's findings very carefully. We remain committed to implementing the legacy Act.

Karin Smyth: It is deeply concerning that the Government's own imposed 1 May deadline means that inquests will be unable to conclude as they otherwise would. We have heard reports that there was only one specialist in the Ministry of Defence dealing with these inquiries, and that possibly MOD delays in providing material have caused additional hold-ups. We really need to understand what the Government are doing to ensure that inquests can conclude by the Government's self-imposed deadline.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I humbly remind the hon. Lady that the original deadline, before we tabled amendments to the Act, then a Bill, in the House of Lords, was 1 May 2023, so there has been an extra year. The Government continue to assist the Northern Ireland courts in good faith on legacy matters. There is no question of the Government deliberately seeking to frustrate inquests. The Act allows a coroner to request a review of a death by the independent commission, led by chief commissioner Sir Declan Morgan, if the inquest has not been concluded via the coronial process by 1 May 2024.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government's legacy Act is opposed by victims groups, all the political parties in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and others. This morning, the Belfast High Court found that the Act's immunity provisions are not compliant with articles 2 and 3 of the European convention on human rights. Given that immunity has always been presented as the central foundation of the legacy Act, what do Ministers intend to do about the judgment, and how can the commission become operational when one of its central powers has just been struck down?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As I say, this is a very complex case. The judgment runs to over 200 pages, which were first being reported on less than 90 minutes ago, so it will take some time to consider, but we remain committed to implementing the legacy Act, including delivering the ICRIR.

Hilary Benn: Recognising that the issues raised in today's judgment will take some time to be conclusively determined by the higher courts—assuming that the Government appeal—does the Secretary of State agree that it would be quite wrong to close the door on inquests and civil cases from 1 May? That will deny citizens in Northern Ireland rights that citizens in the rest of the UK take for granted. Will he therefore extend the deadline, not least to ensure that inquests that would otherwise be stopped on 1 May can continue, so that a decision can be reached?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right that this is a complex case that is likely to head to further action in the higher courts, but I want to consider the judgment carefully, look at all 200 pages, and take the legal advice that he would expect me to take in such circumstances. We remain committed to implementing the legacy Act, including delivering the ICRIR.

The Union

3. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the Union. [901647]

5. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the Union. [901649]

13. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the Union. [901657]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government are fully committed to protecting and upholding Northern Ireland's place in the Union, a commitment we reaffirmed recently in the Command Paper "Safeguarding the Union". That included proposals for new measures in domestic legislation to protect unfettered access to the UK internal market, and to affirm Northern Ireland's constitutional position as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. This Government are convinced that that is the best way we can safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom.

James Daly: What action has my right hon. Friend taken to ensure that no new regulatory borders between Great Britain and Northern Ireland can emerge from future agreements with the European Union?

Chris Heaton-Harris: We have ended the presumption of automatic alignment with EU law by making it clear that the very narrow set of goods rules that apply in Northern Ireland are subject to the democratic oversight of Stormont, including the Stormont brake. Once the brake is triggered for a rule, or where an entirely new rule is brought forward, it will be for the UK to determine at the Joint Ministerial Committee whether that provision should apply in Northern Ireland. Here again, the Government have established the protections available through statute. We believe that there are very strong reasons for saying that we have ended the presumption of automatic alignment.

Simon Baynes: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Minister of State on their very impressive achievement in restoring the Northern Ireland Executive. Does the Secretary of State agree that good cross-border transport links are vital to safeguarding all parts of our Union? In my border constituency of Clwyd South, Iusb think of the electrification of the north Wales main line, which links to north-west England, and improved road links, such as the proposed Pant-Llanymynech bypass between Wales and north Shropshire.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to congratulate my hon. Friend on making some excellent constituency points as well as highlighting the importance of good transport links across our Union. The need for those links was recognised in the "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper, and more recently, earlier this week, when we talked about the reinvestment of money that would have been spent on the northern sections of High Speed 2 into ensuring good connections across our country. Those connections include the A75, which is a vital connection between Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Dr James Davies: The Union is strongest when people can see and feel its benefits to their daily life. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a prosperous Northern Ireland, with a stable, devolved Government, is the surest way to safeguard the Union's integral place in the United Kingdom?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I absolutely, 100% agree with his sentiment. It is a real pleasure to see the devolved institutions at Stormont up and running. You, Mr Speaker, have a new colleague there: the former Speaker was desperate to retire for two years—tributes were paid to Speaker Maskey at the time—but Speaker Poots is now in place. It has been wonderful, too, to see the new First Minister and Deputy First Minister working together to achieve good solutions, on public services and a whole host of other things, for the people of Northern Ireland. The Union is best served by devolved institutions working. I very much welcome everyone's commitment to that cause.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): This morning's High Court ruling confirms what every fair observer knows: that the Government's legacy legislation is not compatible with human rights. It puts the needs of perpetrators ahead of the needs of victims, and it is not supported by any party in Northern Ireland or across the island of Ireland. The Secretary of State cannot truly believe that it serves the rule of law or our shared future in any constitutional arrangement. When will the Government repeal that completely unacceptable legislation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I am afraid that she will have to refer to the answer I gave earlier. The Court judgment was handed down only earlier this morning; it is a complex case and we have more than 200 pages of judgment to consider. I do not even believe that the Government KC has gone through the ruling yet in any great detail. We were not given any notice beforehand of what might be in it, but obviously I pledge that we will consider Mr Justice Colton's findings carefully. As I will continue to say, we remain committed to implementing the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, including delivery of the ICIR.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The recent "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper claimed to "copper-fasten Northern Ireland's political and constitutional place in the Union,"

yet the British-Irish agreement makes it clear that the agreed position is

"for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination".

How does the Secretary of State square that clear contradiction in the UK Government's commitments to all the people of Northern Ireland?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. First, getting the devolved institutions in strand 1 of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement running is of vital importance, because it means that the strand 2 institutions can work properly for everyone in all communities, and it also allows the strand 3 institutions to work in a better way, because they can include

representatives such as the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and bodies such as the British-Irish Council, so there is a whole host of things involved. The constitutional status of Northern Ireland obviously requires the consent of a simple majority of its people. All the provisions of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement still stand.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One thing of great importance to this place is our education system, including the trips that people make to Parliament. We want to safeguard the Union, so what steps are being taken to ensure that students in Northern Ireland have equal access to educational tours of Westminster? Bearing in mind that students in Northern Ireland should have the same access to them as those in England, but that the cost of flying over can be prohibitive, will consideration be given to additional funding to allow some sort of subsidisation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Northern Ireland, being across the Irish sea, is in a geographic location that makes travel difficult to other areas of the United Kingdom. I understand the hon. Gentleman's keenness to help Northern Ireland students benefit from learning across the Union. We put in place a £3.3 billion financial package for the incoming Executive that helps us to achieve some of those objectives by providing support for Northern Ireland, given its unique challenges. However, if he has individual cases in mind, I would be interested to hear about them, and will consider what we might do in future.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the DUP.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the fact that the new UK East-West Council will have its first meeting next month in Belfast? One of its key objectives is to encourage greater educational co-operation across the United Kingdom, as well as binding Northern Ireland more closely into the wider economy and the UK internal market.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in welcoming the new East-West Council and its situation, and I also look forward to seeing the North South Ministerial Council functioning. The UK East-West Council will bring together a wealth of experience and knowledge from representatives of the United Kingdom Government, the devolved Administrations, business and the culture sector, and educational leaders. We are committed to getting it working in March and doing good things.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The Secretary of State referred earlier to the financial package that the Treasury has put in place to support our public services in Northern Ireland, but our commitments on public sector pay mean that there remains a significant gap in the next two financial years. Will he work with us to seek further support from the Treasury, so that we can ensure that the Executive lives within its budget and that we can pay our public sector workers a decent wage for the vital work they do?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Again, I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for all his work to ensure that the devolved institutions—the Executive and Stormont—can come back together. He has achieved an amazingly good, historic piece of work. It is good to see the Executive back up and running, making choices and opening negotiations with the unions to get the public sector in Northern Ireland back on track, on pay and work. I believe that there is a meeting today between the Finance Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I will always happily work with the right hon. Gentleman on all those agendas.

Economic Growth

4. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the Northern Ireland economy. [901648]

6. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the Northern Ireland economy. [901650]

15. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the Northern Ireland economy. [901659]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Government are committed to the economic growth of Northern Ireland, working closely with other UK Departments, the newly formed Executive and NI businesses. Our plan includes boosting trade and investment, building on the success of the Northern Ireland investment summit last year; levelling up Northern Ireland's economy, including through our city and growth deals worth £617 million; and implementing the key deliverables of the "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper. Only last night, I attended Retail NI's supplier showcase, and I am very grateful to have made it back first thing this morning.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that very full answer. Given that the rest of the United Kingdom—the internal market—is the biggest market for Northern Ireland, what role does he see for the new InterTrade UK, particularly with respect to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about Northern Ireland's most important economic relationship being with Great Britain. As set out in the Command Paper, the Government are working to establish InterTrade UK, fulfilling our pledge to grow the economy by ensuring that businesses large and small can maximise the full range of east-west trading opportunities. Implementing the Windsor framework and the Command Paper are, of course, Government priorities, and I am pleased that I am responsible for them. We will update the House in greater detail at an early opportunity.

Marco Longhi: The "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper states that

"there will be no checks when goods move within the UK internal market system save those conducted by UK authorities as part of a risk-based or intelligence-led approach".

Regulation 13 of the Windsor Framework (Retail Movement Scheme) Regulations 2023 requires officials to check the ID numbers on the seals of all retail consignments entering Northern Ireland, and break

open 5% to 10% for visual inspection. Is my right hon. Friend now able to confirm when, or if, that regulation will be removed?

Mr Baker: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for his insightful and well-rehearsed question—well-researched question. *[Laughter.]* Perhaps I should not have got that early flight after all, Mr Speaker.

As we set out in the Command Paper, as we transition to the UK internal market system, we will provide clear legal direction to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and other UK Government authorities, through our risk management approach, to eliminate any physical checks when goods move within the UK internal market system, except those conducted by UK authorities and required as part of a risk-based or intelligence-led approach to managing the risk of criminality, abuse of the scheme, smuggling and disease risks. I recognise the importance of my hon. Friend's question, and I will update the House on our plans in greater detail at the earliest reasonable opportunity, which I hope and intend will be before we break for the Easter recess.

Bob Blackman: It is good news that the Executive are back up and running. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the new Executive take full advantage of all the devolved capability they have, particularly on taxation, to encourage the private sector to grow and thrive in Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: I will certainly give the Executive every support, while of course respecting the devolution settlement. To give my hon. Friend one example, the reason I was in Northern Ireland last night with Retail NI was to promote the Department for Business and Trade's terrific offering in Northern Ireland, which includes a trade and investment hub that covers the UK Export Academy and the export support service. There are now 16 DBT export champions, which includes in-person support. If anyone wishes to learn greater detail, I recommend that they go to the [great.gov.uk](https://www.great.gov.uk) website.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister liaise with the relevant Departments in Northern Ireland to maximise the benefits of promoting and developing the only enterprise zone in Northern Ireland, which is in my constituency, as are excellent broadband facilities—the best in these islands? That way, we can promote our economy, bring inward investment and create prosperity.

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman makes a great case for his constituency, and I would certainly like to see terrific levels of investment into it. However, I would like us to go further: I would like to see that investment zone reach right across the whole of Northern Ireland. I hope and expect that together, the UK Government and the restored Executive will make the most of that opportunity.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Why do the UK Government think it is good thing for Northern Ireland to have access to parts of the EU single market, but not for other parts of the United Kingdom to have such access, particularly those parts of the United Kingdom that voted to remain in the EU and the single market?

Mr Baker: I am most grateful to the hon. Member for his question, but he will know two things. First, the word “access” is somewhat contested. I would encourage him to go and look at the figures for trade between the United Kingdom and the EU, and satisfy himself of the effect of our leaving the European Union. Secondly, in all seriousness, we should all reflect carefully on the status and circumstances, not only of geography but of history, of Northern Ireland. It is because of the unique status of Northern Ireland that we have been able to agree unique arrangements, and I do not imagine the European Union would have agreed those unique arrangements for any other territory.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): According to a Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report, Northern Ireland received proportionately less than Scotland, Wales and England in the first round of levelling-up funding. In the latest round of funding in November, not a penny was allocated to Northern Ireland, and the Government said this was because the Executive were not sitting. Is there good news for the people of Northern Ireland today? Now that power sharing has been restored, will the Secretary of State update the House on any discussions he has had about ensuring that a fair share of levelling-up funding goes to Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady raises a very important point, and I will be glad to continue such conversations with the Executive. As she knows, we have made available a generous package of £3.3 billion overall. We are having conversations on the detail of those areas of funding that have been repurposed, and those conversations will continue. When we can update the House in fuller detail, we will of course be glad to do so.

East-West Business Council

8. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the proposed east-west business council. [901652]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Government are working to establish an east-west business council, as set out in the Command Paper, fulfilling our pledge to establish a unique forum—for key representatives across the United Kingdom from Government, business and the education sector—to identify opportunities for deepening connections between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK in important areas such as trade, transport, education and culture. I shall be in regular contact with other Ministers across Government to ensure the timely delivery of this commitment.

Steven Bonnar: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence has estimated that 80% of Northern Irish freight exports to England come through Scotland, while a considerable proportion of NI trade with Britain is direct trade between the north of Ireland and Scotland. Given this, what concrete role does he see, or propose, for the Scottish Government on the new East-West Council?

Mr Baker: Of course, the Government of Scotland have their rights and are entitled to be part of these arrangements, and we shall be respectful in engaging with the Scottish Government to ensure they play a full part, fully respecting the devolution settlement.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Northern Ireland Members of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, including the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), play a very important role in improving understanding between the EU and the UK about the way in which the trade and co-operation agreement should work, and in easing the way for a better relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union?

Mr Baker: I do agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I pay tribute to him for the leading role he plays in that forum, and I am most grateful to him. A large number of colleagues, whatever their view on exiting the European Union, have put a great deal of effort into building up the bonds of friendship that are so important as we go forward under the trade and co-operation agreement. I am most grateful to him for highlighting the important work of that forum, and I again pay tribute to him for his leading role.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The East-West Council, as proposed, is something that I am personally very enthusiastic about, because it potentially opens up a space in which Scotland and Northern Ireland can co-operate, along with other parts of the UK, on all that they have in common economically, socially and culturally, and that we will continue to have in common irrespective of whatever constitutional arrangements may be in place in future. Will the ministerial team at the Northern Ireland Office agree to meet me, so we can discuss how Scotland could play a positive role in that and to get the engagement with other parts right?

Mr Baker: Yes, of course. We would be delighted to meet the hon. Member to discuss those matters.

Mr Speaker: We now come to Prime Minister's questions. We are joined in the Gallery today by Dr Andreas Norlén, the Speaker of the Swedish Parliament, and his delegation.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901695] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 28 February.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I know the thoughts of the whole House will be with the friends and families of Lord Cormack and Ronnie Campbell. They were dedicated parliamentarians.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Giles Watling: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. I am certain that everyone in this Chamber will agree, whatever their political standpoint, that we should be able to think, speak and vote without fear or favour, but today I need to ask about the painful subject of dental care in Clacton, which is in crisis. Our integrated care system has found the money, and a private firm has found the students, to massively increase dental appointments in my patch, but paper-pushers in NHS England keep citing spurious reasons to prevent this groundbreaking initiative from being deployed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that is scandalous, should be dealt with and those people blocking it held to account?

The Prime Minister: Our dentistry recovery plan will make dental services faster, simpler and fairer for patients, including in Clacton, and will fund around 2.5 million more appointments. The matter that my hon. Friend raises, as he will know, is a local matter, so the integrated care board will determine whether it wishes to support the pilot proposal in Clacton, but I know that the Minister for Public Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) has written to my hon. Friend about the proposal, and I hope that her letter addresses his concerns.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in his remarks about Lord Cormack and Ronnie Campbell?

Tory MPs spent last week claiming that Britain is run by a shadowy cabal made up of activists, the deep state and, most chillingly of all, the *Financial Times*. At what point did his party give up on governing and become the political wing of the Flat Earth Society?

The Prime Minister: This is another week when the right hon. and learned Gentleman just snipes from the sidelines, because he has absolutely nothing he can say about what he will do. We are getting on with delivering on the people's priorities: the number of small boats is down by a third; NHS performance is improving; inflation is continuing to fall; and while we are delivering a significant tax cut for millions of working Britons, his incoherent energy plans would put taxes up for everyone across the country.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), spent last week in America trying to flog her new book. In search of fame and wealth, she has taken to slagging off—[*Interruption.*] They made her Prime Minister, now they cannot bear talking about her. In search of fame and wealth, she has taken to slagging off and undermining Britain at every opportunity. She claimed that, as Prime Minister, she was sabotaged by the deep state. She also remained silent as Tommy Robinson, that right-wing thug, was described as a hero. Why is the Prime Minister allowing her to stand as a Tory MP at the next election?

The Prime Minister: I do not believe that a single Member of this House supports Tommy Robinson, but if the right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to talk about former leaders and predecessors, the whole country knows his record: he sat there while antisemitism ran rife in his party; and he backed not once but twice a

man who called Hamas “friends”. To their credit, the shadow Chancellor, the shadow Home Secretary and, indeed, the shadow Foreign Secretary refused to back the former Labour leader, but he did not, because he is spineless, hopeless and utterly shameless.

Keir Starmer: I have changed my party for the better; the Prime Minister is being changed by his party. He is letting the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk stand because he is too weak to do anything about it. It is the story of his leadership. When the Tories refuse to accept any blame for the ruin of the past 14 years, one wonders who they think has been running the country all this time. Thankfully, the former Prime Minister is on hand again to help: it turns out that it is all the fault of the media, the corporate world and—bizarrely—the President of the United States.

Winston Churchill once said:

“The price of greatness is responsibility.”

Now, the British public are not expecting greatness from this Prime Minister, just a bit of accountability. Does he not think it would be great if, just for once, the Tories took some responsibility?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about leadership, and about change, but when I learnt of something that I did not agree with, I suspended one of my MPs straightaway. When he learnt of vile antisemitic remarks made by a Labour candidate, what did he do? He instructed his team to defend him, he sent a shadow Cabinet Minister to campaign for him, and he personally backed him for days. That is the difference between us: I act on my principles; he has not got any.

Keir Starmer: I cannot believe the Prime Minister said that with a straight face. The former Prime Minister continued on her American odyssey—this journey into the wild west of her mind—and claimed that Nigel Farage is the man to restore the Tory party. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether he, too, would welcome Mr Farage back into the Tory fold?

The Prime Minister: In our party, we have a proud tradition of diversity and accepting everyone from every background—indeed, it is a proud record that puts Labour to shame. This is the party that delivered the first Jewish Prime Minister, the first female Prime Minister, the first black Chancellor and the first Muslim Home Secretary, and it is now led by the first British-Asian Prime Minister. While it seems that the right hon. and learned Gentleman can only champion men from north London, it is the Conservatives who represent modern Britain.

Keir Starmer: So this diverse Tory party does welcome Nigel Farage. Two months ago, the Prime Minister said that

“the Tory party is a broad church. I welcome lots of people who want to subscribe to our ideals, to our values.”

That is the same Nigel Farage who said he agreed with the basic premise of Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of blood” speech and bemoaned the influence of the Jewish lobby. Is the Prime Minister simply too scared to stand up to the gaggle of Tory MPs who moonlight as GB News presenters, or does he genuinely think that Nigel Farage shares the ideals and values of the Tory party?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to talk about values, but tomorrow in Rochdale the people will have a choice of three former Labour candidates, two of whom are antisemites. The truth is, his party is so mired in hate that despite three ex-Labour candidates standing, he cannot back a single one of them. We expel antisemites—he makes them Labour candidates.

Keir Starmer: The truth is that these are no longer the Tories your parents voted for, and the public can see it. The Prime Minister has lost control of his party to the hordes of redcoats and malcontents. The tin-foil hat brigade on his Benches and the extremists who wrecked the economy are all lining up to undermine him, humiliate him and eventually get rid of him. When will he ever stand up to them and end the pathetic spectacle of a Tory party that used to try to beat Nigel Farage now giving up and dancing to his tune instead?

The Prime Minister: That is utterly shameless from someone who stood by while antisemitism ran rife in his party, oversaw the appalling situation in Rochdale and twice backed the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). In the last few weeks, we have seen Members of Parliament’s homes surrounded, their events disrupted and council meetings threatened. Just last week, we saw the very rules that govern this place abused because of intimidation. While the right hon. and learned Gentleman might want to bend to mob rule, we will face down the extremists and stand up for British values.

Q2. [901696] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Two years ago last Saturday, Russian forces launched their heinous attack on Ukraine. The response of the British Government and the British people has been magnificent. I pay tribute to all those who have done so much, not least in my own constituency of Bracknell, where Ukrainian people have been so warmly welcomed. We must never bow to tyranny, so could the Prime Minister please assure the House that our support for Ukraine and all our NATO allies will continue to be unwavering?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in thanking people up and down the country, including the people of Bracknell, for welcoming Ukrainian families into their homes and communities. During my visit to Ukraine in January I announced a major new package of support, including £2.5 billion of military assistance. Last week, we announced 50 new sanctions that target individuals and businesses that are sustaining Putin’s illegal war machine. Our support to Ukraine will never waver.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Some 30,000 people dead; 70,000 injured; 1.5 million sheltering in Rafah; 300,000 living in feral conditions in northern Gaza; and, of course, 100 hostages still tragically held by Hamas. The horror of those numbers demands that this House have its say, just as it shows that this House should demand an immediate ceasefire. President Biden has indicated that the ceasefire may take place from Monday. Does the Prime Minister share his confidence?

The Prime Minister: We have consistently called for an immediate humanitarian pause, which would allow for the safe release of hostages—including British nationals—and more aid to Gaza. We welcome progress on a deal. As the hon. Gentleman said, there has been progress, and we urge everyone on all sides to seize the opportunity. I have been clear that we must seize the momentum from this terrible tragedy to find a lasting resolution to this conflict that delivers on the promise of a two-state solution, and ensures that Israelis and Palestinians can live in dignity and security.

Stephen Flynn: We are approaching five months since this conflict began. In that time, this House has equivocated and, on three occasions at the United Nations, this Government have abstained when they could have voted for a ceasefire. Abstentionism is not leadership. Should this matter now come before the United Nations, with a ceasefire potentially in sight, will the Prime Minister use his Government's vote to deliver that ceasefire?

The Prime Minister: We support the United States' draft resolution that was discussed with colleagues at the United Nations last week. But just calling for an immediate, full ceasefire now, which collapses back into fighting within days or weeks and does not include the release of hostages, including British ones, is not in anyone's interests. We must work towards a permanent ceasefire. That starts with an immediate humanitarian pause, to get aid in and hostages out. I agree about the suffering of the people in Gaza; in this country we should be proud of everything we are doing to help them and to provide them with the lifesaving aid they deserve.

Q3. [901697] Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): I am sure that we are all proud of our open Government, the availability of information and our open data, but with machine learning and artificial intelligence becoming more prevalent, does the Prime Minister agree that now is the time to look at licensing this information where it is to be used for commercial gain and to inform intelligence that will disrupt society and our economy?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in his passion for AI. Like him, I am proud of our record at the forefront of the AI revolution, having created one of the world's first AI safety institutes, established the "State of AI" report and hosted the world's first ever global AI safety summit. I will ensure that he meets the relevant Minister to discuss his proposals to ensure that we can harness the opportunities of AI and protect ourselves against the risk that it poses.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Plaid Cymru has signed Full Fact's pledge for an honest general election campaign. One of Full Fact's four asks is to renounce deceptive campaigning tactics. There is evidence of egregious, misleading campaigning in Wales and elsewhere by the Conservatives in recent weeks. We all have a responsibility to campaign honestly, because the alternative is to be complicit in dismantling democracy. Therefore, will the Prime Minister sign Full Fact's pledge for an honest election?

The Prime Minister: I was pleased to be in Wales just last week, and these are the facts on the ground: the Labour-run Welsh NHS is performing the worst in the

United Kingdom; small Welsh businesses, including pubs and restaurants, are facing a crippling rise in their business rates; and Welsh farmers are being decimated by the plans of the Welsh Labour Government. Those are the facts in Wales and we will continue to point them out at every opportunity.

Q4. [901698] Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): There are 4,000 patients in Carshalton and Wallington facing uncertainty after landlords pulled out of discussions the day before their GP practice's lease expired and then issued notice that it was trespassing. The local integrated care board has issued a very weak statement, and the local Liberal Democrat-run council is refusing to meet the practice and me. Those 4,000 patients are now unsure whether they will have a surgery to go to. Can the Prime Minister assure me that when such decisions are taken by landlords, there is appropriate infrastructure in place to support NHS patients before they are cast out to try to find somewhere else to go?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend will know, GP leases are commercial agreements between landlords and tenants, but he is right that everything that can be done should be done to ensure that GP surgeries do not have to close. That is why, in March last year, we commissioned a review into legislation governing these leases. The review will create a new framework that will make leasing to tenants, such as GP surgeries and other groups, easier and more accessible. But I know that his local residents will want this to be sorted as soon as possible, in order to take advantage of the extra appointments that we are creating so that people can get access to the primary care they need.

Q6. [901700] Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): One of the few good things to come out of Wednesday's stamash last week was that the House united around a call for an immediate ceasefire. Now, I welcome that—that is progress. The Prime Minister was just given an opportunity by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) to commit to the UK's representatives in the United Nations and elsewhere articulating that position of this House. If they are not going to do that, what will he say to those of us who say this place really is just a sick pantomime?

The Prime Minister: As I outlined previously, it is not right to call for an immediate ceasefire that would collapse instantly into more fighting and not do anything to get more aid into Gaza to alleviate the suffering that people are experiencing, or to make sure that we can safely remove hostages, including British hostages. That has been our consistent position. We have been calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire which will provide the conditions for a lasting and sustainable peace, but just calling for something that will collapse back into fighting is not in anyone's interests. All our diplomatic efforts, at the United Nations and elsewhere, are targeted at bringing that about. I am pleased that in recent days progress has been made. We should keep pressure on all parties to come to a resolution.

Q5. [901699] Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my enthusiasm about Monday's announcement of 27 new potential bathing water sites across the country, including three in Shropshire: two

on the River Severn at Ironbridge and Shrewsbury, and one on the River Teme at Ludlow? How will those very welcome designations improve the quality of rivers in Shropshire and in the other areas under consideration?

The Prime Minister: On Monday we launched a consultation on the largest ever roll-out of new bathing water sites: 27 potential new bathing waters in England, including an extra one on the River Teme in Ludlow in my right hon. Friend's constituency. He is right that substantial improvements have been made in recent years. Almost 90% of designated bathing waters in England now meet the higher standards of good or excellent, up from just 76% in 2010; all part of our plan for water which, alongside those on the Conservative Benches voting for the strictest storm overflow targets and plans for unlimited penalties for polluting water companies, was opposed by the Labour party.

Q9. [901703] Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The parent of a two-year-old in the UK is currently spending more than £14,000 a year on a full-time nursery place. Last year the Prime Minister promised parents that in April 2024 there would be a new free childcare offer. With only a month to go, parents do not know whether they can access that offer, because of staff shortages and the lack of childcare spaces. Will the parents to whom the Prime Minister made that promise be able to accept the offer that he talked about last year, or is this another example of a broken Tory promise?

The Prime Minister: We are delivering on what we said, which is 30 hours of free childcare a week for working parents of children from when they are nine months old until they start school. That is the largest ever expansion of childcare in our country's history. Perhaps the hon. Lady might want to have a conversation with her Welsh Labour colleagues, who were given the funding to deliver childcare expansion in Wales, and what have they done? They have pocketed the money instead of matching our plans to support parents in England.

Q7. [901701] Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The notorious crossroads between Ulley Lane and Treeton Lane, just outside Aughton in my constituency, is just one of several major road safety and highway issues that have been ignored for decades by Labour-controlled Rotherham Council. I will be presenting a petition to this place telling the council to end this chaotic mismanagement, but may I also ask for the Prime Minister's support in urging both the Labour council and the Labour Mayor to listen to residents and get the junction sorted—to stop the huge tailbacks, save lives, get Rother Valley moving, and end this war against cars in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he is right to champion his constituents in this way. When Labour runs things, it does just run them badly. He can be assured that we have provided Rotherham Council with three quarters of a million pounds for safety improvements to local roads, and we are continuing to provide for his constituents with a further £1 billion allocated to his local area in the second round of the city region sustainable transport settlement.

Because of the decision that we made on HS2, communities, towns and cities across the north and the midlands will receive billions of pounds for transport projects that will make a difference to him and his constituents far quicker than anything else that was planned.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Another 80 victims of the contaminated blood scandal have died since Sir Brian Langstaff made his final recommendations on compensation to the Government in April 2023, which was 321 days ago. Will the Prime Minister join the families who are lobbying Members of Parliament here today to explain why his Government have failed to implement any of those recommendations 11 months on?

The Prime Minister: I am acutely aware of the strength of feeling on this issue, and the suffering of all those impacted by this dreadful scandal. We have consistently acknowledged that justice should be delivered. I gave evidence to the infected blood public inquiry last year, and the Government have accepted the moral case for compensation, which is why on Monday, in the other place, we committed to bringing forward amendments to the Victims and Prisoners Bill at Report stage, with the intention of speeding up the implementation of our response to the inquiry.

Q8. [901702] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister sincerely for the extra £244 million announced this week for transport investment in Shropshire, which comes on top of £300 million for the modernisation of our local accident and emergency services, levelling-up funds to modernise Shrewsbury town centre, and full funding for the north-west relief road, the ring road around Shrewsbury. These infrastructure projects will have a major benefit in Shropshire, and not just for us but for those who follow us. There is, however, one issue that I would like to raise with the Prime Minister: how Shropshire Council is funded to deal with adult social care costs. We have a disproportionately ageing population in Shropshire, and the council is struggling to meet those additional costs. What more can be done to help such councils deal with rising adult social care costs?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does representing his constituents. He is right about the pressures that are faced, particularly in rural areas, which is why the Government provided £600 million of additional funding for local government across the country, ensuring an increase of around 7.5% in resources available to invest in social care, but also an extra addition to the rural services delivery grant—an acknowledgement of the challenges of providing services in rural areas—with more funding for those rural councils to deliver.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Lee Haywood in Dalmarnock is on a communal heat network and has seen both his standing charges and his energy bills absolutely soar. The heat network market framework was introduced in 2021, but the Minister in the Lords said in a letter last week that his “ambition” is that price regulation will only start in spring 2026. Is it this Government's incompetence or Ofgem's lack of powers that is letting down constituents who cannot afford to put on their heating this winter?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, standing charges are a matter for the independent regulator, Ofgem, which is currently looking at all those things as part of a consultation. More generally, it is this Government who are providing considerable support to families across the country, including in Scotland, with their energy bills. I am sure she will join me in welcoming the recent announcement about the fall in energy bills, bringing them back to levels that we have not seen in a long time, on top of the cost of living support that the Chancellor has provided so that everyone in our country gets the help that they need.

Q10. [901704] **Paul Bristow** (Peterborough) (Con): Werrington Fields is a much-loved open space cherished by local residents and used by the nearby school as playing fields. Shockingly, Peterborough City Council proposed to fence off almost the entire area, rejecting a compromise that most residents and the school were happy with. Bizarrely, the local council seeks to blame the Secretary of State for Education, myself and even the Prime Minister. Will my right hon. Friend get behind my campaign to save Werrington Fields and make it clear—right here, right now—that this is a matter entirely for the local authority?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for championing his constituents on this matter. As he knows, last year the Education Secretary rightly rejected Peterborough City Council's application to change the playing field land at Ken Stimson Community School from educational land to public open space. That decision ensured that children will have access to the open space that they deserve, but I am told by the Department that the council can provide for some of that land to be fenced and that the Department would be comfortable with that, provided that the overall site remains educational land. That is something that I know he wants to see, and the Department is ready to work with him to ensure that happens.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): After yesterday's revelation that Nick Read, the Post Office CEO, is under investigation following an 80-page report written by the former head of HR at the Post Office, do the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary have confidence in Nick Read's leadership at the Post Office?

The Prime Minister: It would clearly be inappropriate for me to comment on an investigation before it has been completed. Our focus remains working closely with the Post Office to ensure that it delivers justice for postmasters caught up in this historic scandal, which is why we will imminently bring forward the legislation that we promised.

Q11. [901705] **Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): A few years ago, there was a proposal to build nearly 7,000 houses in a beautiful part of my constituency near the villages of Castor and Ailsworth, against the wishes of local residents. I worked with the local community, and together we were able to stop the development. However, efforts are now being made to include this land in a revised Peterborough local plan. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is very important that the voice of the local community is heard and that it is unacceptable that developments can take place in

this circuitous way, especially when other, more suitable land is available in and around the city of Peterborough?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue, and he is right to say that the local community should always have their voice heard. It is important that councils bring forward local plans, but this must be done in close consultation with local communities, because their voices matter. As I understand it, the Peterborough local plan is still under preparation and there are opportunities to provide comments on the draft plan, so I commend him for continuing to support his local community to ensure that their voice is heard.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The Prime Minister talks about things going backwards. The UK is the only western G7 power in recession, with seven consecutive quarters of no growth. That is the worst since records began in 1955. Can the Prime Minister tell the businesses going bust, the families struggling to pay their bills, and the people being made homeless why this recession, which has his name written all over it, is a good thing for our country?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady might want to check some of the facts that she just outlined to the House; they are not quite right. Perhaps she would like to explain to the country why her party is stuck with a completely incoherent energy policy that will saddle working families with £28 billion of higher tax rises and higher energy bills.

Q12. [901706] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Since 2019, the Prime Minister has had our backs in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, with record funding for our local transport, over £200 million for Stoke and Staffordshire to repair potholes, over £30 million to improve our bus network with cheaper fares and new and extended routes, funding to upgrade Kidsgrove and Stoke-on-Trent railway stations and bringing back the Stoke to Leek line—and this week Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire have seen a tenfold increase in transport funding year in, year out. I know the Opposition like to talk down Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, but isn't it true that this Prime Minister and this Conservative party are the only ones with a plan to improve and better connect our communities and fix our broken roads and pavements?

The Prime Minister: As ever, my hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Stoke-on-Trent, and he is right: over the next several years, his area will receive 10 times as much as it currently does to invest in local transport schemes as a result of this Government's decision on HS2. But he is also right to say that after years of being neglected by the party opposite, it is this Conservative Government that are levelling up across the country and in Stoke-on-Trent, championed by fantastic MPs like him.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The advent of the Cromarty Firth green freeport is most welcome. What discussions has the Prime Minister had with the Scottish Government, who will be responsible for ensuring that there is a robust road network associated with the freeport and that there will be sufficient housing

for the influx of workers who we hope will contribute to our dream of the fabrication of offshore renewable structures?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the freeport. We are taking advantage of our Brexit opportunities to deliver two freeports in Scotland to attract jobs and investment in the industries of the future. With regard to infrastructure investment, not only do we provide the tax benefits for a freeport but £25 million of seed funding is available to the freeport, in discussions with the Government, that can be used on local infrastructure improvements that make sense to develop the opportunities that the freeport provides.

Q13. [901707] **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): The AUKUS programme is not just a national endeavour designed to keep our nation safe; it is also an international partnership that speaks about our ambitious work across the globe to pursue security and contain threats. I want to personally thank the Prime Minister for his engagement with the Team Barrow initiative, which is bringing together senior civil servants, my council, BAE Systems and myself to drive this programme forward to make sure we can deliver those boats to time and to budget. That means improving and investing in the local area considerably. With that in mind, may I invite the Prime Minister to Barrow to meet not just the fantastic people building the boats of the future but to see how the programme is going to uplift Furness for the future?

The Prime Minister: At a time of great instability around the world, with the war in Ukraine and in the Red sea, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that AUKUS is a game-changing defence and security partnership that will keep us safe and create thousands of jobs in the UK shipyards and the supply chain, building on the investment in places such as Barrow and Derby. He is a fantastic champion of what this industry means in his area, and the Team Barrow partnership is a crucial component of ensuring that AUKUS is a success. That is why the Chancellor provided millions of pounds of funding for a delivery board for Barrow. We have recently discussed this at Cabinet and I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend and his community to see the progress for myself when my diary allows.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Last weekend, the Prime Minister posed for photographs with a group that shares extremist conspiracy theories on climate change and campaigns against net zero. Does he share their views?

The Prime Minister: That is no way to talk about the Welsh farming community.

Q14. [901708] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): My integrated care board tells me that only £2 million of the £120 million of capital that it receives annually is for primary care, which seems an unfairly

small amount for our amazing family doctors and practice nurses who are, after all, the front door of the NHS. Can our local general practitioners have a greater share?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent and continued campaigning on health provision for his constituents. On his specific point, integrated care boards have the power to increase their primary care annual capital management budget, so long as they keep within the overall budget. I understand that he met a Health Minister earlier this week to discuss this further, and I will make sure that his proposals are very carefully considered.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister has just told my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) that, as a Minister, it is inappropriate for him to comment on the bullying allegations at the Post Office, yet he allows his Business and Trade Secretary to comment freely, loudly and often on Twitter. Is he content with her activities and behaviour in this respect?

The Prime Minister: The Business and Trade Secretary set out her position explicitly and clearly in the House last week. Since then, and despite some of the claims made by the party opposite, the Department's permanent secretary has completely refuted the claims that were made. Yesterday, the Post Office's current CEO and the Department's director of business resilience also refuted Mr Staunton's recollection.

Our focus and priority is delivering justice and compensation for those who suffered a historic injustice. We are introducing legislation to right this wrong, and we will make sure that everyone gets the compensation they deserve.

Q15. [901709] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The £132 million allocated to Cornwall from the shared prosperity fund not only kept our promise to the Cornish people to replace EU funding, but has supported dozens of businesses and funded projects across the duchy. However, the current round of SPF expires next year, so can the Prime Minister confirm that his Government will continue the shared prosperity funding and will continue to provide the support that the Cornish economy needs?

The Prime Minister: It was great to visit my hon. Friend in his constituency the other week to see the delights of Cornwall. I wish everyone a happy St Piran's day for next week.

Cornwall has been awarded over £130 million through the UK shared prosperity fund to deliver, I think, a hundred different projects across the county. Funding is confirmed for this spending review period up to the end of March 2025 but, as with all Government funding, decisions regarding the fund's future are a matter for the next spending review. I assure my hon. Friend that we remain committed to an ambitious levelling-up agenda in Cornwall and across the country.

Post Office Board and Governance

12.39 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on what steps are being taken to restore public confidence in the Post Office board and governance following evidence taken at yesterday's Business and Trade Committee.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I sat there for five hours listening to all the evidence that was given to the Select Committee yesterday. Several serious allegations have now been made against the Government, my Department and its officials by Henry Staunton. His most recent revelation is that there is an ongoing HR investigation that involves both him and the Post Office CEO Nick Read. I have to say as a former chair that I clearly found that statement to the Select Committee highly unprofessional.

The fact that Nick Read is being investigated is evidence that no one is untouchable and the Post Office culture is changing. An investigation is of course not evidence that allegations are accurate. While Nick Read has co-operated fully, Mr Staunton tried to block the investigations looking at his conduct. It was this action, as well as his attempt to bypass the formal process to appoint a new director to the board, which led the Secretary of State to lose confidence in Mr Staunton. As was said in the Business and Trade Committee yesterday, board members felt so strongly about Mr Staunton's conduct that they were going to resign. It was right that the Government decided to act.

Mr Staunton has now made a series of allegations which we strongly reject. He is using the Nick Read investigation to divert attention from the issues the Select Committee was discussing about his dismissal. The allegations made are also proving to be a further distraction from the victims of this injustice. His central allegation is that the Government told him to slow down compensation payments. Not a single person backed him up on this claim. My officials are clear that they have never been instructed to do this. Post Office executives are clear that such an instruction was never passed on to them. We have provided a letter from June 2023 from my Department to Mr Staunton telling him the opposite. His only evidence is a note of a conversation which is clearly about operational financing of the Post Office business; this is entirely different from compensation to sub-postmasters. The permanent secretary wrote recently to give her truthful account of what happened. We also released her office's contemporaneous notes of that meeting.

Mr Staunton alleged that the Secretary of State refused to apologise to him after he learned of his dismissal from Sky News; this was not the case. He claimed there was pressure on Nick Read to send a letter to the Justice Secretary; this was not the case. He claimed the Secretary of State told him that someone has got to take the rap for the Horizon scandal and that was the reason for his dismissal; this was not the case.

The Post Office faces unprecedented challenges and needs to work at pace to deliver compensation to the thousands of postmasters who fell victim to a flawed

IT system as well as continue the essential work to implement the necessary operational and cultural changes needed within the business. As we have repeatedly said, Post Office governance is a priority for the Government; that is why we acted swiftly to remove a chair about whom there were serious concerns and allegations and why we are working at pace to appoint an interim chair.

We of course recognise the seriousness of an investigation into individuals at the Post Office. I also recognise parliamentary and public concern and the need to ensure there is confidence in the Post Office leadership. I will therefore ask the Post Office to provide me with the findings of the investigation once it is completed. However, it is right to wait for this investigation to conclude before making any further judgment.

Marion Fellows: I am really disappointed that the Secretary of State herself is not here, but I thank the Minister the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for everything he does for post offices and am happy to work with him going forward.

Prominent Horizon victims are still saying financial redress is far too slow. Legal representatives of victims said yesterday that redress schemes are not working for victims—too much “lawyering” going on, too much obfuscation. Lawyers say complete claims might have settled for less than they were entitled to and might need to be revisited. Neil Hudgell suggested that August deadline target will not be met and the current compensation impasse could continue for another one or two years.

Henry Staunton's claims persist. Why has the Prime Minister refused to back up the Secretary of State, refusing to repeat the claim that Staunton lied? This is the third time we have been here to find out about the circumstances of Mr Staunton's departure. The last time the Secretary of State mentioned investigations into Staunton but failed to reveal an 80-page investigation into current CEO Nick Read. With all we have seen about the Secretary of State's past assurances being undermined, how can we trust her firm assurances now?

Does the Secretary of State have faith in the Post Office board, which is clearly in total disarray? There were even claims that the chief executive officer, Nick Read, had threatened to resign over pay. Victims and the public have lost faith in the Post Office board and governance. When more than £1.2 billion of public money is being spent on financial redress, the taxpayer ought to have confidence that costs will not be driven up further by mismanagement. The evidence from yesterday's Business and Trade Committee shows that the public and victims have no reason to be confident, as incompetence and obfuscation has marred the process until now. Sub-postmasters say that redress schemes are not working. Victims agree. The lawyers say that they are not working and the former chair of the Post Office says that they are not working. Why should we trust the Government, and what will the Minister do to fix this?

Kevin Hollinrake: I should say that the Secretary of State is abroad at a World Trade Organisation conference.

I thank the hon. Lady once again from this Dispatch Box for all that she does on behalf of postmasters. Interestingly, in his evidence yesterday, Mr Staunton said that he had no concerns over the speed of compensation, which I think astounded both the hon. Lady and me. We have been fighting for years to try to

[Kevin Hollinrake]

improve the speed of compensation. That is just one more concern that people might have with Mr Staunton's evidence, but it was clearly stated in one of his responses.

It is right that we constantly seek to improve the speed of compensation and to make sure that it is full and fair and is seen to be so. One reason that I spent all day listening to the evidence yesterday was to make sure that we are doing everything possible to accelerate compensation. I heard some interesting conversations in the evidence session, including ideas from Mr Hudgell and others on how we can accelerate compensation, which we are very keen to do.

The hon. Lady will know that the latest figures were quoted yesterday at the Select Committee hearing. On the group litigation order scheme, for example, 106 full claims have been submitted, 104 offers have been made, and 80 have been accepted without reference to the independent panel, which would tend to indicate that the offers being made are fair. The hon. Lady will also recognise from the announcements that we made on Monday during the statement that we have introduced a £450,000 interim compensation figure for when people submit their full claim for the overturned convictions. When an offer is made, we will provide 80% of that initial offer to claimants in the GLO scheme.

Interestingly, Henry Staunton seemed to think that the biggest concern with the compensation schemes was around the overturned convictions—he clearly said that yesterday—when the hon. Lady and every Member of this House knows that we announced legislation on Monday, and previously, that will overturn the convictions en masse, which is unprecedented. Obviously, that is the key to unlocking compensation. For all those reasons, we should not take Henry Staunton's evidence at face value.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Mr Staunton continues to insist that he was told to delay compensation for the postmasters, but at the Select Committee hearing yesterday he said that, unlike his own notes, the published notes of the meeting with Sarah Munby were not contemporaneous. Can the Minister undertake to provide a contemporaneous note of that conversation to put this accusation to bed once and for all?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her work on the Select Committee. It is one thing to criticise Ministers, but entirely another to sully the good name of a civil servant. Sarah Munby has been very clear in her letter that she published on this matter that Mr Staunton is wrong. She has also been very clear that she has contemporaneous notes of that meeting, and we will be publishing those notes that will clarify and back up the fact that Henry Staunton is wrong and that Sarah Munby is right.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What we saw yesterday was unedifying and, at points, a fiasco. Sub-postmasters watching will have rightly been dismayed and will have felt that, if anything, they were moving further away from justice. The ongoing conflict at the top of the Post Office and the failure of the

Government to get a grip is helping no one and is only further eroding trust in this process. The Secretary of State should reflect on how her approach to the news of recent weeks has only exacerbated that. We, and especially victims, have all had enough of the “He said, she said”. Does the Minister now recognise that the best way to end this is by fully clarifying what the Government have or have not said, through an independent Cabinet Office investigation?

May I also pick up on some very worrying evidence given yesterday by Carl Creswell, the director of business resilience in the Department for Business and Trade? When talking about the financial provisions set aside for Horizon compensation, he said:

“I personally think we will end up spending more money on compensation overall than that £1 billion figure, which was modelled at an earlier stage.”

That is incredibly serious. Does the Minister share that view held by one of his senior civil servants? If so, what conversations has he had with Government colleagues and will we see that reflected in next week's Budget?

Will the Minister clarify whether he or the Secretary of State were aware that Nick Read was also under investigation, as was allegedly stated in the 80-page document referred to by Henry Staunton in yesterday's Select Committee hearing? In response to me during an urgent question on 29 January, the Minister said that Henry Staunton's sacking was not due to a falling out, but that it was

“about very serious governance issues related to the person who headed the board of the organisation, which are obviously confidential human resources issues.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 612.]

Will the Minister confirm whether he had sight of the confidential human resources report referred to in yesterday's Select Committee hearing? If so, why was he selective in his update to the House?

Finally, it is very important to make sure that we restore trust, by urgently bringing forward legislation. I hope that, unlike yesterday's unseemly events, our focus can return to making sure that we exonerate the sub-postmasters and deliver the recompense that they rightly deserve.

Kevin Hollinrake: When the hon. Lady says that I was “selective” about what I said, is she accusing me of being economical with the truth? If so, I would take exception to that. It would be absolutely wrong for anybody in this House to disclose information about an investigation that has not concluded and where the presumption of innocence must apply for the individuals concerned. If she thinks I should come to this House to talk about those kind of sensitive, confidential matters, she does not understand how the corporate world works.

Rushanara Ali *rose*—

Kevin Hollinrake: I will not give way, as I am answering the hon. Lady's question.

Mr Speaker: This is not a debate.

Kevin Hollinrake: I did find what happened yesterday unedifying, but that was about one person; everybody else who gave evidence yesterday was clear that there was no sense ever of trying to slow down compensation. Neither do I think the hon. Lady is right to say that postmasters are further away from getting compensation;

it is quite the opposite. To imply that and so raise questions about the compensation scheme could lead to people not coming forward. We welcome the fact that 1,000 more people have come forward since the ITV series. People are closer to compensation, not further away, and the actions we are taking, through the compensation advisory board, the overturning of convictions, the Horizon shortfall scheme, which is nearly completed, and the GLO scheme are all moving on. If she wants to end the, “He said, she said”, perhaps she should end it, because we want to move on and pay compensation.

As for the figure of £1 billion, is the hon. Lady saying it is serious if we have no cap on compensation? I do not think that is serious at all; of course we have no cap on compensation. The £1 billion is a maximum budget, but if that needs to be increased, it should be. If she is saying that we should not increase it if people deserve more, she should put that on the record. It would be an entirely irresponsible thing to do. Every time I have dealt with this matter over the Dispatch Box with shadow Ministers, it has been constructive and collaborative, and I resent the tone she has taken in this case.

Mr Speaker: Let me say, in fairness to the Minister, that he has come here on more occasions than anybody else I have known. He has absolutely ensured that the House has been kept informed—he goes without question on this.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I commend the Minister, not only for the consistent and compassionate approach he has taken to this matter, but for his attendance at yesterday’s session. It lasted for five hours and he was there for the greater part of it. He is right to say that much of what we heard yesterday was a real distraction from the key objective of the Government and the Committee of making sure there is speedy compensation for our postmasters. It was clear that the former chairman and possibly the chief executive exhibited limitations in their roles and were perhaps unsuitable for the roles to which they were appointed, so are there any broader lessons we might deduce on how we go about recruitment for publicly owned organisations such as the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his work on the Select Committee. He is a doughty champion in this area and many others relating to the Committee’s work. There are some lessons we need to learn; the Post Office certainly requires the right kind of skills and the right kind of person to turn it around. That is clearly a work in progress and I do not think people will be confident that that is happening until it has actually happened. Words are no longer enough; we need actions, be it on the turnaround of the Post Office or on the compensation schemes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for joining us for most of the five hours of hearings yesterday, but he will know as well as I do that what we saw yesterday was complete chaos at the top of the Post Office, when what we needed was a clarity of purpose about paying redress fast and fairly. Not a single witness yesterday said that

they were satisfied with the speed of any one of the three processes. In fact, the lawyers for the claimants said that it may now take one to two years in order to complete the payment of redress, and we heard evidence of offers being made that were, frankly, insultingly low. That is true across each of the three schemes.

Most worryingly, we heard that the Post Office chief executive had not had regularly meetings with the Secretary of State or received a clear written instruction to accelerate every one of the three schemes; there were no deadlines and no targets, and there are no incentives to get the redress schemes done and dusted. That is not good enough. Will the Minister again reflect, when he brings his Bill before the House, on the need to eliminate the Post Office from this process to the maximum possible extent and ensure that there are a legally binding set of timescales under which claims are given the information they need and processed, with offers made and offers settled? I say that, because we cannot go on like this.

Kevin Hollinrake: I do think the chaos was caused by one individual. I sat through the whole session; for the bit I was not in the room with the right hon. Gentleman, I was watching on television. It is right for people to be able to say that they are not satisfied with the speed of compensation. I have said that time and time again from this Dispatch Box, and we are keen to accelerate the process and make sure it is fast and fair.

We are aware of the recommendations from the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on an appeals mechanism for some of the schemes where people feel the compensation is too low. We are looking and will continue to look at that. Every compensation scheme I have dealt with, such as the Royal Bank of Scotland global restructuring group scheme and the Lloyds-HBOS scheme, has been too slow, because of some of the complexity involved. We heard some good suggestions yesterday about how we might remove some of that complexity, which I am very keen to do. We heard some positive remarks from the individuals concerned, for example, from some of the solicitors, and from the Post Office on the fixed-sum awards—the £650,000 for the overturned convictions and the £75,000 for the GLO scheme. We heard how that was reducing the amount of disclosure that was required—that is one of the limiting factors. This should mean that the timescales that some people put on the table of one to two years should be rapidly reduced, and I am very keen to build on that work.

As the CEO confirmed to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) yesterday, I meet him every month, and we speak about the need to accelerate compensation every single time. We have targets for when to pay the compensation by: August for GLO cases, and for all cases ideally by the end of the year. As we heard yesterday, 1,000 new claimants have come forward since the ITV series, which makes it difficult to put deadlines on payment. I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman wants a legally binding target. I am happy to discuss that with him, but we have just removed one legally binding target because not everything within the process is within our gift.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend has a passion to get this right, and to right the wrongs of the past. Does he agree that we must do all

[Dean Russell]

that we can to ensure that sub-postmasters who were victims of the awful Horizon scandal are exonerated, and compensated fully, fairly and with haste?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this issue as one of my predecessors; I know that he was as keen as I am to ensure that full and fair compensation is paid to all individuals. As I said, there is no limit to the amount of compensation that we will set aside to ensure that people are compensated properly for this horrendous scandal.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): In the week that we heard that more than 250 postmasters whose lives and reputations were damaged by Post Office Ltd died before they could get justice, yesterday we found another layer of Post Office Ltd's organisational dysfunction. On 19 February, the Secretary of State informed the House of bullying accusations against Mr Staunton, only for us to find out yesterday that those accusations related to another individual entirely. Could I first ask the Minister, for whom I have the greatest respect—not just for the manner in which he goes about his business with regard to the Horizon scandal—whether the Secretary of State misled the House by telling Members that Mr Staunton was under wider investigation for bullying? Secondly, will the Minister now respond positively to requests from the Scottish Government and the Northern Irish Executive to reconsider introducing legislation that could lead to a swift UK-wide exoneration for the postmasters affected?

Kevin Hollinrake: To be clear, we terminated Mr Staunton's role as chair of the Post Office not because of bullying accusations. There was an 80-page report, which he referred to yesterday, and which I have not read. He freely admitted in yesterday's evidence session that he was named in that report. To what extent, I do not—[*Interruption.*] Well, that is what Mr Staunton said; he said that it was to a very minor extent. I do not know that, I do not think the hon. Gentleman knows that, and I think we should wait for the investigation to conclude before we make a judgment on that. The point was not about the allegation itself; the point was that, as Mr Staunton admitted yesterday, he interfered with the investigation. That is unacceptable, and if we had not acted in the way that we did, I think that the hon. Gentleman and others would be calling us to account for why we did not act when somebody had tried to suspend or interfere with an investigation into his own conduct.

I am aware of the Scottish and Northern Irish Governments' position on legislation. Of course we will continue to discuss that with them. There are some separate devolved issues around the judicial systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland. That is the reason we have done it differently. We are happy to continue our dialogue on it.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): From my time as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department, I know the determination of the Minister and the Secretary of State to get compensation to these wronged postmasters as quickly as possible. In yesterday's Select Committee session, Mr Staunton spoke about

lobbying for a pay rise for Mr Read, which I know must have been quite galling to many of the sub-postmasters. The Minister reportedly refused to grant that pay rise. What sort of pay rise did Mr Staunton think would be a fair, equitable agreement at that time?

Kevin Hollinrake: I think on two occasions Mr Staunton lobbied for a pay increase for Mr Read. He sought to double the overall package of Mr Read on those occasions.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Yesterday's Committee meeting was bizarre in many ways. It was five hours long and, as happens only rarely, the people in front of the inquiry had to swear on the Holy Bible. That is how bad it was. The recently dismissed former chairman revealed a number of things that were quite alarming. First, he revealed that the current chief executive is under investigation. Perhaps the Minister can explain why we were not aware of that. Secondly, he revealed that the current chief executive had threatened to resign on more than four occasions, not because of the lack of progress on any financial redress for postmasters and postmistresses, but because he said his wages were too low. The chief executive also said that he was proud that he had a hardship fund for workers in the Post Office. Can the Minister clarify whether there has been an approach by anyone on behalf of the current chief executive for a pay rise, and what the response was?

Kevin Hollinrake: First, may I correct the record? In response to the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), I said that the fixed sum award was £650,000; it is £600,000.

It would be wrong to disclose an investigation into somebody's conduct before that investigation had concluded. It would be extraordinary to do that in any work context, be it in the public or private sector. I am happy to have a conversation with the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) about the hardship fund. If he is talking about the Post Office paying salaries to postmasters, most postmasters are self-employed, not paid a salary directly, and have a number of different streams of income into their business. These are businesses in their own right, of course, but there is a hardship fund for certain postmasters in certain situations.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I echo the comments about the Minister and his assiduous work on this issue, both as a Back Bencher and now as the Minister. Does he agree that perhaps it is necessary to look at how many people are working on the compensation scheme on the Post Office's side? I have raised the matter with him before. A lot of it is expert work, but if anything can be done to build the resource, that would be helpful, particularly for my constituent, whom we have discussed before. On disciplinary and grievance procedures, is it not normal that they are private until the point when a decision is made?

Kevin Hollinrake: On the last point, my right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right; he clearly understands these situations very well. They should of course be kept confidential, which is why it was highly unprofessional of Mr Staunton to say what he said yesterday. On my right hon. and learned Friend's first point—I cannot remember what it was now.

Sir Oliver Heald: Resource—getting more lawyers in.

Kevin Hollinrake: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that we have the resources available to settle compensation claims quickly. Certainly, a file note that I took away from yesterday's session was about the number of individuals looking after compensation from Addleshaw Goddard's end, although it is turning around the offers increasingly quickly. Responses to full claims now happen within 40 days in 85% of cases. There has been an improvement. We are keen to ensure that every part of the process has the resources it needs to pay the compensation fairly and quickly.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Surely what we saw yesterday was a glimpse of senior management in the Post Office who are now completely dysfunctional. As such, it is difficult to see how anyone can have confidence in their administration of the various compensation schemes. Would it not be a sensible first step to restore confidence in that most important national institution—the Post Office—to take all role for them out of the administration of the compensation schemes and appoint an independent commissioner? Nothing starts to get better for the Post Office until the schemes are successfully delivered and wound up.

Kevin Hollinrake: I think what we actually heard and saw was a dysfunctional former chair of the Post Office; that is what we saw. Interestingly, to the right hon. Gentleman's point about compensation schemes, the former chair said at one point during his evidence that he had no concerns about the speed of delivery of the HSS—which was extraordinary, because I have many concerns about it.

I hear loud and clear calls from across the House about the role that the Post Office is playing in compensation schemes. These are sensitive matters, because people in the Post Office are employed to manage and administer the compensation schemes. I hear the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) loud and clear. We are looking at it, but I reassure him that all three schemes have independence in them: an independent panel in the HSS; an independent panel and a reviewer, Sir Ross Cranston, on the GLO scheme; and the independence on the overturned convictions in Sir Gary Hickinbottom. Both latter people are retired High Court judges, which should give claimants and the right hon. Gentleman, I hope, some confidence that the schemes will operate properly.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister has referred to Mr Staunton, who it seems had serious character defects. How was he ever appointed in the first place, and who provided the character references and oversaw that appointment process? May we have an inquiry into that?

Kevin Hollinrake: Thankfully, not me. I have nothing against Mr Staunton personally. He had a strong track record as the chair of various large organisations, as he said yesterday. I think we would all agree that the Post Office is a specific organisation with specific challenges. Yesterday's evidence from Ben Tidswell, the senior independent director, was interesting. He felt that Mr Staunton's behaviour changed in November last year and became far more "erratic"—his word. I do not know the reasons for that specifically, although

Mr Tidswell suggested some yesterday. Whatever the reason, Mr Staunton's recent conduct is not consistent with remaining chair of the Post Office. That is why we decided to act.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his work in this area. He has been assiduous in his attention to detail—I cannot say the same of the Secretary of State. Nevertheless, yesterday was unedifying, and we are sick to death of the "He said, she said" business—we are not interested, except that two witnesses yesterday took the oath and spoke to the same issue: as to whether Mr Read had ever tendered his resignation or threatened to. It was totally conflicting evidence from the two people; they both cannot be right, so I suggest that one might have been a little economical with the truth. From Dr Neil Hudgell, though, the message came loud and clear: these schemes are way too "over-engineered" and far too "bureaucratic", and that has led to the delay in getting the money out of the door. I have to correct the Minister—only 20% of the fund is out of the door as yet. We have to speed it up.

Finally, I ask him to take on board the words of the predecessor Select Committee, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, in February 2022, which said that the best way through this was to remove the Post Office from the system. Now, it may be too late to do that, but my goodness, was not the Committee right to say that? Can we find ways to relegate the role of the Post Office, because that is the only way we will get justice for postmasters? Ultimately, that is what this is about—getting them compensated.

Kevin Hollinrake: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman's final point, and a number of the points he made. It is fair to say that on the compensation schemes, we could use the old phrase, "If you were going there, you wouldn't start from here." I think that Sir Wyn Williams has said that, but the best way now is to say, "When you're going through hell, keep going." We have to improve the schemes we have got. The hon. Gentleman made an interesting point about the Post Office, and he will have heard what I said earlier. I think the fixed-sum awards do take the Post Office out of the schemes completely, because no disclosure is required for them.

On tendering resignation—again, I thought it was extraordinary that a chair would disclose confidential and private conversations that he has had with the chief executive. I have to say for the record that Mr Read has never tendered his resignation to me or to the Secretary of State. Others would be better than me to comment on the nature of those conversations, but I do not think that it was right for Mr Staunton to comment at all.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State has given me 100% support in everything I have done in trying to address these matters. I accept what Neil Hudgell said—I spoke to him afterwards, and we have spoken before about the schemes being over-engineered—and he suggested some ways to try to accelerate compensation. We are of course looking at those to see what the best way is to ensure that they are not over-engineered, but deliver rapid and fair outcomes as quickly as possible.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): My primary interest is in compensation payments being made expeditiously across the entire United Kingdom, and in Northern Ireland in particular, where I have been lobbied directly

[*Ian Paisley*]

by a number of the sub-postmasters who have been treated so vilely. After the statement of 10 January, I asked whether the Minister would ensure that no delays would be allowed whatever, and he affirmed from the Dispatch Box that that was exactly the Government's intention. Will he reaffirm that no delays will be allowed, irrespective of the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland? No devolved Minister or devolved court was involved at that time. Will he reaffirm that the payments will be made, and that our sub-postmasters will not have to wait a day longer than anyone else?

Kevin Hollinrake: I will be very pleased to ensure that that happens. I met the Northern Ireland Justice Minister virtually a few days ago to discuss these matters. I know that the Northern Ireland Administration's preference is for UK-wide legislation; we do not think that is the right approach, but we will continue to work with the Administration to ensure that they can deliver the right legislation or process to make sure that the compensation is paid. Clearly, once convictions are overturned anywhere in the United Kingdom, people enter exactly the same compensation scheme—they can get rapid compensation through the fixed-sum award of £600,000, or go through the full assessment process. We are determined to make the process quicker, easier and fairer. I am happy to work with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that that is the case.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work on the Horizon scandal, and for answering my letter concerning a constituent. In that answer, he confirmed that former post office clerks and those working for a franchise who lost money, jobs and reputation through the Horizon scandal are not eligible for compensation under the current scheme. Will he look into ways to include them in a compensation scheme?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for representing her constituents so effectively. I am keen to have continued conversation with her. All the schemes that have been established thus far require a contractual relationship between the Post Office and the individual, and I know that was not the case for her constituent. A number of Members of this House have addressed the issue, and we will continue to look at it.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Whether we are talking about my constituent Roger, a former postmaster whose case certainly needs review, constituents in communities such as Clarkston and Neilston, who have experienced the most recent post office closures in East Renfrewshire, or the brilliant postmasters operating locally, none of them deserves this mess. This is turning into a regrettable circus to all looking in from the outside. What assurances can the Minister give me today that that will not be allowed to divert or distract from a genuine focus on the swiftest possible resolution, and on delivering a sustainable future for the Post Office?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point and for representing her constituents so well. Yes, absolutely, we understand that this is distracting, or could distract, from work to ensure not just that we

make right the wrongs of the past, but that the Post Office has a strong future, as she put it. I totally agree. We think that the Post Office does have a strong future. Revenue streams have been affected by changes in how and where people acquire certain things or access certain services, but the banking framework—we encourage the Post Office to be more ambitious in its negotiations with the banks on the remuneration that flows from the framework to postmasters—and the parcel hubs are an opportunity for the future. We believe that the Post Office has a strong brand and strong future. We are keen to support its efforts to ensure that the future is bright for all postmasters.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I declare my interest as a member of the Horizon advisory board. Welcome back to the Minister. He should bring in his sleeping bag—he is here that often. I was at the five-hour marathon yesterday, and I was totally unconvinced by Henry Staunton's accusations, and his allegations about delaying compensation. Like the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), I wonder why Mr Staunton was appointed in the first place—to any board, for that matter. However, to come to the point, Mr Staunton did raise the point that the chief executive is under investigation, following an 80-page report. I accept that the Minister cannot talk about that individual—that would be wrong—but he knows that the culture at the Post Office is rotten, and it is important that the cloud be lifted quickly. When the Secretary of State came to the House on 19 February, did she and the Minister know that Nick Read was under investigation? Is it true that the former HR director who wrote that report has left the Post Office with a settlement, and does that settlement include a non-disclosure agreement?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to come to the Dispatch Box any time I am required to, or feel that there is a need to, which, as the right hon. Gentleman says, is quite often at the moment.

I was aware of the investigation relating to Mr Read and Mr Staunton. That was not the reason why the Secretary of State decided to part company with the chair; that was about interfering with the investigation. The right hon. Gentleman asks about the HR director. I do not know about those matters, but I am happy to look into them and come back to him.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am sure that the Minister will agree that everything we are seeing and hearing about the Post Office inquiry is further undermining the confidence of those who were affected by the Horizon scandal. As the Minister says, 1,000 more people have come forward; they have no more confidence than anyone else in the governance of the Post Office. One of them, a constituent of mine, had been with the Post Office for almost 20 years, and was about to be offered redundancy. She was asked to take over a sub-post office for two months to make up the 20 years. During those two months, she became embroiled in the Horizon scandal. She was not charged, because her Post Office managers pleaded on her behalf, but she lost her redundancy, and she is now completely confused about where she stands, and has no faith in the governance to fix the problem. Is the Minister prepared to meet me to discuss that case, so that I can assure my constituent that it is being dealt with?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, of course I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady and her constituent. Given what the hon. Lady has said, the place for her constituent to go is the Horizon shortfall scheme, which will be happy to look at that particular situation. Of the 2,417 people who applied to the original scheme, 100% have had offers and 84% have accepted those offers, so she can be assured that there will be fairness. We are looking to ensure that the scheme is fair and is seen to be fair.

The other schemes are also delivering outcomes more quickly than they were. There were 106 claims in the group litigation order scheme; 80 offers have been accepted, and compensation for overturned convictions is a fixed-sum award of £600,000. The fact that 1,000 people have come forward for compensation since the ITV series indicates that people do have confidence that they will be compensated fairly, but I absolutely understand that we have work to do to ensure that people feel that way across the board.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has been incredibly honest and forthright in all his answers, and we have every faith in him, given his conduct and all the information he has brought to the Chamber, for which I thank him. As locally elected representatives, we are accountable to our electorates. How will the Minister ensure that those who are paid from Government funds are accountable in the same way? What more can be done to hold those decision-makers to account?

Kevin Hollinrake: As ever, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. On the point about Government funds, I guess that he is referring to executives in the Post Office. Clearly, that is the Government's responsibility as the single shareholder. We have a representative on the board in Lorna Gratton from UKGI, in whom I have a great deal of confidence. I think it fair to say that my Department and its officials have learned a lot from the process and from what has gone on, and that is right. We should be clear that mistakes have happened, and apologise for the way that they have contributed to the scandal.

I am very keen to ensure that there is continued accountability. We have, at significant expense to the taxpayer, set up the public inquiry, which was called for by Members across the House. It will take evidence in public, so that the public can see what is happening, and will conclude by the end of this year and report next year. We will then have a lot more answers to the hon. Gentleman's question, as well as accountability not just for Post Office executives in future, but for Post Office executives of previous years.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): That concludes proceedings on the urgent question. I thank the Minister for his now daily appearance, as well as the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali).

Ukraine

1.24 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Two years ago, Putin thought his tanks would roll easily into Kyiv and Ukraine would fall within days. He did not expect Ukraine's brave resistance, he did not expect his military to let him down so badly, and he did not expect the west to stand so firmly in support of Ukraine, with unprecedented sanctions and massive aid to help Ukraine to resist.

Today, Ukraine stands strong and united, and we in the international community stand just as firmly in our support. Even now, Putin tries to pretend he is winning this illegal war, even though Ukraine has retaken half the territory seized in 2022 and largely pushed the Black sea fleet out of Crimea; even though he has failed in his attempts to stop Ukraine exporting grain; and even though his actions have united Europe, convincing Sweden and Finland to join NATO and the EU to begin accession talks with Ukraine. It speaks volumes about this neo-imperialist bully that he stubbornly continues, despite the cost to Ukraine and his own people. In recent months, Putin sent around 50,000 young Russians to their deaths in order to take Avdiivka, a town whose pre-war population was just 35,000. We must and will ensure that he fails, for this is the biggest test of our generation. Putin's brazen violation of the UN charter strikes at the heart of the rules on which our security and prosperity depend, and our adversaries are watching.

Today, we stand at a critical juncture. Putin should be in no doubt of where we stand, or of our resolve. That is why we announced on Thursday 22 February over 50 new sanctions targeting those supporting his war effort. That includes the arms manufacturers, electronics companies and diamond and oil traders that are sustaining Putin's illegal war. It brings the total number sanctioned under our Russia regime to 2,000, including banks that account for more than 90% of the Russian banking sector, not to mention more than 130 oligarchs, who together were worth around £147 billion at the time of the invasion.

Last month in Kyiv, the Prime Minister and President Zelensky signed a new agreement that builds Ukraine's military capabilities, and announced a new wide-ranging partnership—an unbreakable alliance, to last 100 years or more. It includes our new £2.5 billion military support package, of which at least £200 million will be spent on a major push to produce thousands of military drones for Ukraine, including surveillance, long-range strike and sea drones. Britain was the first country to sign a long-term bilateral security agreement with Ukraine, as we promised in Vilnius. France, Germany, Italy, Denmark and Canada have now followed suit.

Last week, we witnessed time and again that we and our allies share the same conviction—the same determination—that Ukraine will prevail. At the Munich security conference, the Foreign Secretary made the case for a major uplift in European defence production, so that Ukraine gets all the firepower and equipment necessary to prevail. At the G20 Foreign Ministers meeting, it was clear that there are few illusions about what Russia is doing. At the UN, Britain underlined how dangerous Putin's actions are for the entire world. To mark the second anniversary of Putin's barbaric

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

invasion, G7 leaders held a joint call with President Zelensky, renewing our pledge to make Russia pay. On Monday evening in Paris, the Foreign Secretary urged European partners to do more to show Putin that we will not let him win. All these efforts are having a real impact: the European Union has agreed a €50 billion multi-year funding package, Germany has doubled its military aid, and in the coming weeks, we expect several more of our partners to sign bilateral security agreements with Ukraine.

We will keep up and step up the pressure, and there is more that we can do. That means ensuring that we use sanctions to stop businesses funding Putin's war machine, and engaging other countries to do the same; pursuing all lawful routes to use sanctioned Russian assets across the G7 to support Ukraine, and working with our partners to achieve that aim; and, along with those partners, giving Ukraine more of the munitions and equipment that will make the biggest difference. That is more ammunition at speed, more simple-to-use weapon systems such as drones and Soviet-era kit, more support—including training on F-16s—and more of the systems that have the biggest strategic impact, such as Storm Shadow long-range missiles. Through all this, we are sending an unambiguous message of our enduring support for Ukraine. That message was writ large in blue and yellow last Saturday when we projected the words "Slava Ukraini" on to government buildings up and down the land and our embassies worldwide, telling Ukraine, her people and the world that the United Kingdom, our allies and our people are here for them for as long as it takes.

I cannot end without acknowledging the terrible impact of Putin's despotism on ordinary Russians as well. More than 300,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded in Ukraine, many more than in the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the war is robbing Russians of resources that should be spent on pensions or teachers. Putin's Kremlin has systemically repressed the freedoms of its own people over the past two decades. We saw that most recently and tragically with the death of Alexei Navalny earlier this month—a man who fought with incredible courage to expose corruption throughout his life, calling for free and fair politics and holding the Kremlin to account. The British Government are calling for a full and transparent investigation into the circumstances of his death, and the Prime Minister has emphasised that we hold the Russian state accountable for its role in his death. We immediately announced sanctions against six individuals heading up the penal colony where Mr Navalny died following years of mistreatment at the hands of the Russian state. Britain was the first nation to introduce sanctions in response to Mr Navalny's death, and we are working with international partners to co-ordinate the next steps.

I end by reiterating the UK's call for Russia to release all those imprisoned on political grounds, including the dual British-Russian national Vladimir Kara-Murza, who is serving a 25-year sentence. The Foreign Secretary will meet his wife and his mother on Friday to express our solidarity and support. As the Foreign Secretary stated in New York, Putin tries to portray this as a battle between Russia and the west, but that is the central lie of this war. Our quarrel is not with the

Russian people; our dispute is with those within the Russian state who are promoting their aggressive agenda at home and abroad to serve their own personal interests. Britain stands with all those who have fallen victim to Putin's aggression and cruelty—in Ukraine, and in Russia.

I commend this statement to the House.

1.33 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, but once again, the shadow Cabinet Minister for international development is updating the House on one of the most important foreign policy issues of our time. I did not get a clear answer yesterday, so I will ask him again: when will the Foreign Secretary take questions from Members on both sides of the House?

Last week marked two years since the start of Putin's full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine. The bombed-out cities, the raped civilians, and the children kidnapped to Russia show the barbarity of Putin's rogue regime. Ukraine's resilience in the face of hell is testament to the enormous courage of its people. We echo the Minister's statement that Ukraine's actions to retake half the territory seized in 2022—pushing back the Black sea fleet—and the unity shown by Europe, have demonstrated the pretence of Putin's attempt to claim that Russia is winning the war. But we cannot be complacent; the situation requires that our support to Ukraine should remain strong. Labour's message to Ukraine is simple: whoever is in government, Britain will support Ukraine until it prevails.

We support the further and significant military and financial support that the Conservative Government have announced, as well as the further sanctions. Britain is united on Ukraine, but, as the official Opposition, we have the job of highlighting where more can be done. We commend South Korea on sending more shells to Ukraine than all of Europe combined, but the war must be a wake-up call to all of Europe: there is more that we, along with our allies, must do together.

We welcome the French President bringing world leaders together this week. In that spirit, Labour has outlined plans for a new UK-EU security pact to complement NATO ties and strengthen our whole continent. I ask the Minister what his Government are doing to work more closely with the European Union on our collective security, and whether the Foreign Secretary would attend foreign affairs councils of the European Union if invited to do so. Labour warmly welcomes Sweden's accession to NATO, which strengthens our whole alliance, but what recent conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with his NATO counterparts regarding a pathway for Ukraine's membership?

More sanctions are welcome, but enforcement remains the weak link. Last December, an Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation report showed that there had been zero enforcement measures for post-February 2022 sanctions breaches in relation to Russia. Can the Minister confirm whether that is still the case, and can he update the House on the effectiveness of the sanctions being implemented against the Lukashenko regime in Belarus?

One man, Vladimir Putin, holds ultimate responsibility for the death of Alexei Navalny. We welcome the sanctions against six individuals that the UK announced in the

wake of Mr Navalny's death, but they are not enough. Why will the Government not commit to reviewing sanctions on Russia, considering every individual on the full Navalny list? Why will they not back Labour's calls to support a new international anti-corruption court, and why will they not back our whistleblower reward scheme to crack down on enablers? Following European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's positive statement today, and the passing of 250 days since Labour's motion to require the Government to bring forward legislation to ensure the seizure and repurposing of Russian state assets, why will the Government not finally turn rhetoric on seizure into action?

Finally, I welcome the Government's highlighting Vladimir Kara-Murza's case; tomorrow, I too will meet with his wife, Evgenia Kara-Murza. Over the weekend, there were reports that Members of Parliament were concerned that the Government were not taking the lead on efforts to secure his release from Russian prison. Can the Minister reassure us by outlining the strategy and the steps that Ministers are now taking, before it is too late?

Mr Mitchell: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the cross-party support that he has given to what I have said. He is quite right to ask piercing questions, but the fact remains that the House is united on this issue, meaning that Britain speaks with one voice and with great effectiveness.

Once again, the right hon. Gentleman chides me for not being the Foreign Secretary. I am not the shadow Cabinet Minister for development—his hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) occupies that position. He sees the Foreign Secretary often; I think he is about to see him again, and the Foreign Secretary is an ever-present presence at both ends of the House. Of course, he will be available to Members of this House for questioning in the way that has been discussed.

The right hon. Gentleman expressed very strong support for the further military provisions we have supplied and for the further sanctions. He talked about the wake-up call for Europe, and I very much agree with him. He asked about our working with the European Union and other European countries. He, like me, will have been delighted to see the €50 billion that the EU has allocated over the next four years for non-military activity, and there will be further announcements, we believe, in respect of military support. He will also have seen that, along with the £2.5 billion of military support announced by our Prime Minister, President Macron has announced a similar figure and Germany has very significantly increased the amount of military support it is providing for Ukraine. Clearly, there is great co-ordination and a rising recognition across Europe and throughout NATO that this is a struggle in which all of us are involved.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the effectiveness of sanctions. Some 2,000 people or entities have been sanctioned, including 90% of the Russian banking sector. In stepping up sanctions, which are developing all the time, we will be introducing an ability to sanction ships. On the effectiveness of sanctions, Russia would have had an additional \$400 billion without the sanctions that have been imposed; money to prosecute the war that it does not now have. Last week, a Turkish company, three Chinese entities and two Belarus entities

were sanctioned. Although, as I am sure he would agree, we do not discuss the development of sanctions across the House, I can assure him that this is proving to be very effective and is denying the Russian war machine vital supplies.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the deputy Foreign Secretary's focus on the progress that Ukraine has made against overwhelming odds in the face of one of the biggest militaries in the world. I have just returned from Ukraine with the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and while there, it was my honour to meet some of the soldiers who were gravely injured last summer defending Avdiivka. They shared stories about how those in their units who are still on the frontline and have just had to withdraw were left bleeding out for six to eight hours, sometimes more, because there is not enough ammunition to medevac those who have been hurt. What happened in Avdiivka should shame the international community, not Ukraine, because what it is doing is incredible. Globally, people seem to forget that this is not a Disney movie: the good guys do not just win; it is down to us to make sure that they have the tools to fight. Over the weekend, I put proposals to the Defence Secretary on where I believe we can obtain more ammunition.

Bitterly, it is 80 years since the UK last went to the US to petition it to help defend security in Europe. I urge the deputy Foreign Secretary to help me advise how the UK is battling, as we need to do, some of the pernicious narratives that are arising. First, in the US, people are forgetting the threat of Putin. We must remind them that the threat of Putin is what they are ultimately fighting against. Secondly, in Europe, we see a pernicious narrative about how the Baltics and Nordics will defend themselves in two or three years' time when Russia rebuilds itself. That cannot be the focus. We have to end Putin now, and we have to stop the ability to invade Ukraine now. What is my right hon. Friend doing to fight these narratives?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee very much for her perceptive and wise comments. To take her last point first, she is of course absolutely right that we are hoping Congress will follow the lead by passing the relevant Bills swiftly, following its return from recess. United States's support is absolutely vital for Ukraine's success, as she so rightly says. I am very glad that she has been able to see for herself what is happening. Sometimes, we understate the extent to which Putin is being beaten back. Although the Russian advance into Avdiivka did take place, those 2 km cost between 40,000 and 50,000 Russian deaths.

One fifth of the Black sea fleet has been destroyed, Crimea is no longer safe for the Russian military to operate in and grain supplies are moving across the Black sea. Revenues for Ukraine are at pre-conflict levels, and unlike in year one, this winter the lights stayed on and the bombings by Russia were unable to achieve the same effect as they achieved before. This war is not affordable for Russia: 40% of Government spending is now spent on the war, or 6% of GDP. This is all in pursuit of the worst atrocities—unmatched—that we have seen in Europe over the last 80 years. It is important to point out that Britain has supplied not only £2.5 billion of military matériel, announced by the

[Mr Mitchell]

Prime Minister, to be supplied this year, but 300,000 artillery shells. That is a measure of our determination to ensure that Ukraine has everything we can offer it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Minister for prior sight of his statement. I want to put on the record, once again, our steadfast and unyielding support for the people of Ukraine in defending themselves, their homes and their country against Putin's illegal and aggressive war. I share the concern expressed by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), that Putin's plan appears to be to keep the war going until Ukraine's democratic allies lose interest and somehow let support slip away. That simply cannot be allowed to happen.

I have spoken to colleagues who have just returned from Kyiv—they were attending events to mark the second anniversary of the war—and they report that, at this critical time, Ukraine needs our help now every bit as much as it did on the day Putin attacked. First and foremost, we must guard against complacency. We cannot let the Ukrainian people down simply because we lose interest, because if Ukraine loses, we all lose.

I very much welcome the UK Government's financial and military support package and the new €50 billion multi-year funding package from the European Union, as well as the fact that Germany has committed to doubling its military aid. I share the Minister's hope that many of Ukraine's allies will now follow that lead, most notably the United States. Its prevarication has surely only emboldened Ukraine's enemies and depressed the Ukrainian people further.

However, there is still so much we can do. I take the Minister's point about the sanctions regime, but what about using frozen Russian assets to assist Putin's war victims, most notably the £2 billion sitting in a London bank two years on from the sale of Chelsea football club? As we look ahead, has the FCDO's atrocity prevention monitoring body been keeping track of breaches of international law and war crimes being committed by Russia in Ukraine? With a marked increase in the targeting of civilians in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv and Lviv, are the UK Government preparing a case for the International Criminal Court against Russia for the deliberate targeting and bombardment of civilians in Ukraine?

Mr Mitchell: I want to thank the hon. Gentleman for his supportive comments. As I said to the shadow Foreign Secretary, the fact that the House speaks with one voice on this matter gives Britain much greater authority in the councils of the world.

The hon. Gentleman warns against complacency, and I hope he will agree that Britain has shown no signs of backsliding on this. No country has done more than the UK. We were the first to supply tanks and long-range missiles, we are assisting in scouring the world for Soviet legacy stock, and Britain recently announced £200 million for drones to be made both in the UK and in Ukraine. I can tell him that the European peace facility, which will provide funding for Ukraine's armed forces, is progressing. He will also know that Britain

and the Nordics together have set up the international fund for Ukraine, which has now raised more than £1 billion. So I hope I can satisfy him that there is no complacency whatsoever.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Chelsea fund. I can tell him that there is immense frustration that the Chelsea fund is not out and operating at this time. We are doing everything we can, within significant and irritating levels of difficulty, to get it deployed. We will do that as fast as we possibly can. He ended his comments on war crimes. The Government, along with our allies, are doing everything we can to ensure that there is no question of Putin not being held to account when this dreadful conflict is over.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement? In an interview this week, Ukraine's national security adviser warned that the Kremlin is better equipped than ever to disrupt elections using artificial intelligence. Can the House get an update on the UK's readiness to deal with this kind of assault on our democracy?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. He is right to flag up the deep concern that exists about that issue. It is not for me to answer his specific point about the steps the Government are taking to protect us from that, but certainly there are other Ministers more directly associated with it who will be able to give him a full update.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Notwithstanding the Minister's upbeat tone, in his response to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), he acknowledged that vital American support is still being held up in Congress because of Trump-supporting Republicans. Does he agree that self-preening British politicians who fawn at Trump do nothing but give succour to Putin and his murderous regime?

Mr Mitchell: We are doing everything we can to ensure that we play our part in persuading our many friends in Congress to support this measure. The right hon. Gentleman will have seen what the Foreign Secretary did when he was there, and he may well have seen the powerful article that was widely available in the United States. I hope he will conclude from that that we are doing everything we can to pursue the result that he and I both want.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that estimates for the cost of restoration and rebuilding of Ukraine are now reaching \$1 trillion. I warmly welcome the Foreign Secretary's suggestion that we start using frozen Russian assets of up to \$350 billion for that purpose now. Can my right hon. Friend say what progress is being made to achieve that?

Mr Mitchell: I hope that in due course we will have more to say on the specific provision my right hon. Friend asks about. He will recall the Ukraine reconstruction conference that took place in London last year, where we announced a number of specific measures to lay the foundation for Ukraine's long-term future. I hope very much that the £250 million of new capital that was

announced then, along with the £500 million UK loan guarantee via the World Bank, is seen as a down payment on that effort. In respect of the use of wider funding, he may be sure that his words are being heard.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May I back the comments of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)? You can back Trump or you can back Ukraine; you cannot do both. No Member of this House should try to ride two horses at once on this conflict.

I am probably one of the few Members of Parliament who have been to Avdiivka, Kramatorsk and Slovyansk, going back over six years. That long line of blood in the loss of Avdiivka two weeks ago can be drawn back to two things: first, weapons being held up vis-à-vis what is going on in Washington in Congress; and secondly—this is another frustration that Ukrainians told me about this weekend when I was there with the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee—the slow yes they get from Europe. When Europe and the west decide to provide certain types of capability, it is a slow yes to providing it, and then even slower again to getting it into Ukraine to be used. That is what will see towns such as Kramatorsk go next.

There is rightly a determination to win, but there is an anxiety in that country that I have not experienced in all the times I have been going for six or seven years. What is the Minister's plan, not just to keep doing more of what the Government have been doing on weapons, which I commend wholeheartedly, but to turn the slow yes into a fast yes, so that Ukraine can achieve the victory it needs?

Mr Mitchell: In respect of the first part of what the hon. Gentleman said, he underlines the point that I have repeatedly made today about the importance of the American contribution getting through Congress and arriving in material terms at the front as swiftly as possible. On his second point, we are doing everything we possibly can. The Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister have clearly been in the lead in the support that Europe is giving to Ukraine. We are seeking to persuade in every way all our friends and allies to do the same. I submit to him that in recent months there has been a welcome increase in that support from our European allies, and I hope he will share my pride that the United Kingdom is right at the forefront of those pressing for more and better in the future.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I flee the Chamber for a 2 o'clock meeting of the Liaison Committee, which I must attend immediately after this question. May I point out to my right hon. Friend the Minister that it was notable how swiftly No. 10 played down President Macron's suggestion that French or NATO troops might be directly deployed to the conflict in Ukraine? Can that be used to demonstrate how vacillation in Washington will lead to escalation in Europe? Could the European members of NATO perhaps explore some kind of lend-lease arrangement with the United States, as we had in the 1939 to 1940 period?

Mr Mitchell: First, may I wish my hon. Friend every success in his outing at the Liaison Committee this afternoon? He is right that we need to stretch every sinew

to ensure we give as much support as we can in the way he suggests, but I must re-echo the words of the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, when he said yesterday that there are no plans for NATO combat troops to be on the ground in Ukraine.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I add to the consensus that Parliament has expressed so far this afternoon in supporting this statement and the Government's position on Ukraine. Sky News reported last week that UK-exported equipment may be winding up in Russia, such as drone equipment that has been exported to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Armenia. Exports of heavy machinery to Kyrgyzstan have grown by 1,100% in the past year. What more will the Government do to keep dual-use goods from ending up in the occupied oblasts of Ukraine, given that end-user declarations are plainly not sufficient?

Mr Mitchell: First, I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his support. As I have said, it greatly strengthens the British Government's position that there is that support across the House. The point he makes underlines the importance of moving sanctions along all the time to take account of things we discover that are happening, such as clever ways of breaching sanctions and ways of closing down loopholes. That is very much what we are doing. I mentioned earlier that we are seeking to introduce powers to sanction individual ships. We know that companies are involved in circumventing western sanctions. We take steps all the time to close down those loopholes, and we will continue to do so.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On those who are circumventing sanctions, perhaps through third countries in central Asia or elsewhere, does the Minister of State believe that the current penalties for breaching sanctions are sufficient? If not, when might the Government bring forward new legislation or take action to increase those penalties? Will the Government make public those who breach sanctions and British companies that try to avoid these sanctions, so that they are shown to have done what they have done, so as to send a signal to other people who might be tempted to do the same thing?

Finally, on Vladimir Kara-Murza, I thank the Government for taking more action than they perhaps previously have. I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary and those on other Benches for the cross-party support. There has been talk of a potential prisoner exchange between the United States Government and the Russian Government. Vladimir Kara-Murza is a joint British and Russian national, but he was living, and his family still live, in Washington DC. He worked there. I urge the Minister—he does not have to make public comments now—to explore the principle of working with the Americans to ensure that, should there be any prisoner swap, Vladimir is part of that exchange.

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments about Vladimir Kara-Murza. He will know that we have sanctioned 11 individuals, including two individuals involved in Mr Kara-Murza's earlier poisoning. We do not engage in prisoner exchanges because doing so would put a target on the back of so many British citizens. However, he may rest assured that we are exploring all possible ways of getting Mr Kara-Murza out.

[Mr Mitchell]

On my right hon. Friend's comments about sanctions, of course, sanctions are designed to close down support for Putin's illegal war machine. Whenever we can, we do prosecute people who break our laws, but as I have mentioned to right hon. and hon. Members, we are seeking all the time to ensure that the sanctions regime is as effective and all-engrossing as it can possibly be.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): May I, from the Democratic Unionist party Benches, thank the Government for their work in sending military aid, financial aid, and moral and political support to Ukraine, as well as the efforts to try to keep some of our reluctant allies supplying the goods and military equipment they have promised? The Minister has given an upbeat version of the story in Ukraine at the moment, but the fact is that retreats have been forced on Ukrainians because of the weight of Russian military might. What steps is he taking, first, to stop those who are inadvertently breaking sanctions, which is helping the Russian military, secondly, to release funds which frozen at present but could be used and, thirdly, to encourage other European countries to give the military aid they have promised but has not yet been delivered?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Member and his hon. Friends for their support of the Government's position. He described my summary of the situation as upbeat. I hope he will accept that it is also candid. I am trying to paint for the House a picture of what is happening on the ground and the steps that the House rightly expects the Government to take to forward the endeavour that has brought the House together so comprehensively.

On the development of sanctions, as I have said, they are becoming increasingly effective and sophisticated as they bear down on loopholes or ways of getting round them. That has denied the Russian war machine some \$400 billion, which is something like four years of running costs for this war. I hope the right hon. Member will see that that is the result of the painstaking work that we, along with our allies, are undertaking to make the sanctions regime as successful and effective as possible.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the vital role of international support for Ukraine, it was good over the weekend to be part of a four-party delegation to Kyiv, showing the House's united support for the war effort. It is rightly described not as a war between Ukraine and Russia but as a war between Putin and democracy. We all know that if Putin wins, Europe will again go down the dark path we went down nine decades ago.

I welcome the statement. On support, I want to focus on drones and how we have seen them almost transform what happens on the battlefield. What particular discussions are being had about enabling increased production of drones to be used offensively against Russian forces and about technical countermeasures to protect forces that are finding themselves under constant attack?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend very much for his remarks. He will know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement, who is in his place, launched the drones strategy last Thursday. I hope he

agrees that it is highly effective and just what is required given the importance and effectiveness of drones and drone technology. I also thank him for being part of the important four-party delegation, about which I had heard, and for the eloquent way in which he set out why the position and the action we are taking, in what is an existential challenge to our generation, are so important.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Sky News recently reported on sanctions evasion and things being moved via Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Uzbekistan to support Putin's war machine, which I suggest is facilitated more often than not by professional enablers right here in the UK through the use of shell companies, limited liability partnerships and Scottish limited partnerships. I have been banging on about that for years. The loopholes evidently still exist and are still being abused, and they come from here. What conversations has the Minister had with Companies House and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to close those loopholes, shut down those companies and go after the people and the professional enablers who sit behind the sanctions-evading mechanisms being carried out here?

Save The Children estimates that 20,000 children have been forcibly removed from their parents in Ukraine and sent to Russia. What diplomatic efforts are the Government making to reunite those families?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Lady's second point, it is absolutely appalling that large numbers of children have been taken in that way. We are in frequent discussions with the International Red Cross to try to ensure that all possible progress is made in respect of their return.

In terms of the examples given of the technical ways in which sanctions can be evaded, the hon. Lady asked me whether conversations are going on about closing down those loopholes. They certainly are, and I think we will see that at each turn of the ratchet we get more effective in closing down loopholes and stopping people evading the sanctions and the will of the House, which is so important in depriving the Putin war machine of the fuel it needs.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly highlighted the strengthening of NATO, with Finland and Sweden choosing to join since this illegal invasion was launched by Putin. Looking ahead to July's NATO summit in Washington, will the Government intensify work so that it results in a stronger alliance and more support for Ukraine? Any other outcome only weakens our collective security.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we will do everything we possibly can.

I end by saying that the key steps we will take will be to strengthen Ukraine in its fight, to ensure that Ukraine wins the war if Putin prolongs it and to lay the foundations for Ukraine's long-term future. Recently, we have seen British International Investment—the Government's development finance institution—and the International Financial Corporation from the World Bank joining together to facilitate trade finance. We saw the \$500 million UK loan guarantee via the World Bank. We are determined not only to prosecute in every way we can support for

Ukraine in this existential struggle, but to look to the future and lay these foundations for Ukraine in the longer term.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions. Slava Ukraini.

Defence Acquisition Reform

2.8 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on our plans for reform of the Ministry of Defence's acquisition system.

Nimrod, Snatch Land Rovers, Ajax, Crowsnest and Morpheus—the narrative of our acquisition system has long been dogged by major programmes that were variously over-complex, over-budget and over-time. Of course, military procurement is inherently complex, and external factors—supply-chain disruption in particular—have caused delays across the board that are likely to continue hitting programmes for the time being.

It is also true that our system has excelled at procuring vast quantities of ordnance into Ukraine. We have not stood still. We have been identifying and addressing systemic issues that impact on delivery, we have been driving pace and agility through streamlined processes and increasing the capability and capacity of our senior responsible owners, and, over the last six years, Defence Equipment and Support has come a long way in its internal reform efforts.

None the less, the long-standing weaknesses of defence acquisition are well known. They include a tendency for exquisite procurement—potentially too bespoke to export, leaving industrial capacity vulnerable—and, as Sheldon's Ajax report assessed, personnel wary of speaking up as problems emerge. In my view, the most significant issue is a model of delegated authority implemented after Lord Levene's 2011 report, which was supposed to drive financial responsibility but instead makes prioritisation hard to achieve in practice. With budgets under strain from inflation, the result is inevitable—what we call “over-programming” where, in the absence of effective prioritisation, too many projects are chasing a finite amount of funding. Inadvertently, that drives competition between the three single services, each vying to get their programme on contract, knowing that funding is oversubscribed. Such over-programming can only be dealt with in one way: delay, shifting programmes to the right to make the books balance.

None of those problems compares with the most compelling reason for reform. In a world where our adversaries are threatening to out-compete us in capability terms, we have no choice but to reform acquisition, or we will see our military competitiveness diminished. Ukraine has shown that today's battlespace is highly contested, and integrated operations are essential. In 2021 we announced the integrated operating concept, recognising the military need for an integrated concept of operations but maintaining a delegated procurement system. Today, I announce our new integrated procurement model, in a world where multi-domain communications are critical and data integration is paramount. At the same time, our kit must be secure, with key elements made in the UK, and we must prioritise procuring enablers alongside the shiny new platform that cannot work without them.

What does that mean in practice? There will be five key features of our new approach. First, it will be joined up, with procurement anchored in pan-defence affordability rather than ad hoc silos that are vulnerable to over-programming. A key example will be our pending munitions

[James Cartledge]

strategy—a top priority given our need to replenish weapons stocks to war fighting levels. Pan-defence prioritisation of munitions procurement will be driven not only by the hard reality of the greatest threats we face, but by the scale of demand signal required for always-on production—the optimal outcome for both military and industry.

Secondly, we will have new checks and balances to challenge assumptions at the outset of programmes. Specifically, our new integration design authority, based within strategic command, will be empowered to ensure that our new approach is adopted in practice. If requirements lack a plan for data integration or accompanying enablers, the proposal will be sent back. The authority will also be able to monitor programmes where opportunities may arise, such as to better harness AI or novel technologies.

Meanwhile, in the MOD's largely civilian sphere, a defence-wide portfolio approach will bring together all the expertise at our disposal to enable properly informed choices and decisions on priorities. The aim will be to provide a credible second opinion for Ministers to weigh alongside the military's proposed requirements. In particular, there will be a far stronger role for our brilliant scientists at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory to focus on technological viability. Experts will be tasked with market analysis and prioritising advice on industrial options, ensuring that we make the best informed decision on whether to go for off the shelf, sovereign manufacture or somewhere in between. To avoid new oversight leading simply to more red tape, the reform takes place hand in hand with defence design, aimed at streamlining our internal processes.

The third key feature is prioritising exportability, which will now be considered in-depth from the very outset of programmes, to maximise the potential market for a given capability and, therefore, drive British industrial resilience. That is why one of the key expert voices will be our export specialists. At the moment, their primary focus is on export campaigns, largely for mature products. However, I want that expertise to be embedded within the MOD's acquisition process from the beginning, giving us robust data to quantify the risk that bespoke requirements might create a delta between our needs and international demand. Above all, that means that our international export campaigns can commence at a far earlier point in the product life cycle.

The fourth feature of our new approach is to empower industrial innovation. We have already started our radical new venture of engaging industry at secret, to give the strongest possible understanding of our future requirements. My aim is to embed this approach throughout procurement, driving the deepest possible relationship with industry, to enable entrepreneurial innovation to flourish and our supply chains to become more resilient. A more holistic supplier management approach will complement that by enabling the Department to speak with a clearer voice regarding priorities once on contract.

Fifthly, we will pursue spiral development by default—seeking 60% to 80% of the possible, rather than striving for perfection. For such spiral programmes we will abolish initial operating capability and full operating capability. Instead of IOC or FOC, there will be MDC—the minimum deployable capability. There will have to be

exceptions, but we have set new default time targets for programmes: three years for digital and five for platforms. This is all about pace, but to achieve pace we need the right people: capable senior responsible owners, operating in an environment of psychological safety. As such, and given the emphasis on our people and psychological safety, I am pleased to report that we believe we have now implemented all 24 recommendations of the Sheldon review.

Finally, how will this systematic change be implemented? I said to the Defence Committee that our plan was to launch our new model in the next financial year. From the second week of April, the integration design authority will formally deliver its new oversight function in support of the integrated procurement model. For major new programmes starting after that date, newly formed expert advice will be made available to Ministers, ensuring that we thrash out all the hard issues at the beginning of a major procurement, locking down the key policy decisions so that our SROs and commercial functions can deliver at pace from then. For contractual reasons, existing programmes will continue under their current procurement mode, but on 8 April we will publish our new spiral development playbook so that existing programmes that can adopt spiral features will be empowered to do so.

On exportability, yesterday I published the next stage of our new medium helicopter competition, which includes a strong weighting for exports to ensure that the high-quality rotary work that it will support in the UK is sustainable in the long term. Such an approach to weighting exportability, where appropriate, will become the default from 8 April. From that date, our three and five-year targets will apply to new programmes, including top priority pending procurements, such as the mobile fires platform. Ukraine has shown how close combat artillery remains critical to warfighting. We will now accelerate that crucial acquisition, exemplifying our new approach whereby we will order critical enablers in parallel to the platform itself, particularly ammunition. Ukraine has also shown the importance of drones. Uncrewed systems will form the first overall category of pipe cleaner for the integrated procurement model from end to end. Alongside this statement,

I am today publishing a short guidance note explaining the nuts and bolts of our new acquisition approach. Copies will be placed in the Library, and will be available in the Vote Office after I have sat down. The current environment in which we find ourselves—war in Europe—has made it impossible to ignore the urgent need for change. I commend this statement to the House.

2.17 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking the Minister for his statement and for early sight of it.

Defence procurement matters. It provides the vital kit that our forces need to fight, as well as supporting hundreds of thousands of UK jobs. We need to get this right as a nation, both for our national security and for economic growth. However, defence procurement is a mess. It needs deep and major reform. The Public Accounts Committee describes it as

“broken and repeatedly wasting taxpayers' money.”

It has been a mess for the last 14 years. Since 2010, the Conservatives have wasted £15 billion of taxpayers' money through mismanagement of defence procurement programmes; £5 billion has been wasted in this Parliament alone. With 46 of 52 major projects not on time or on budget, this Government are failing British forces and British taxpayers.

Time and again, this Government have been criticised for poor performance on defence procurement. There have been 17 National Audit Office reports on procurement in the MOD since 2019, four reports by the Defence Committee and eight reports by the Public Accounts Committee. They have all been critical—some highly critical—of this Government. It is right that the Minister proposes some changes—we welcome that. He mentioned Ajax; can he explain how his proposals would have stopped the disasters of the Ajax procurement? That was supposed to see vehicles in service in 2017, but now they will not be on operational deployment until 2026. More than £4 billion has been spent, but just 44 vehicles have been delivered to date. That is 70% of the budget spent for 7% of the vehicles ordered. That cannot be described as good value for money.

The MOD's Command Paper refresh, which sets out the policy for acquisition reform, does not even tackling waste or value for money, so how would the Minister's proposed changes stop what happened to the E-7 Wedgetail procurement? That programme, vital to enabling the UK to meet our NATO commitments, was cut from five planes to three by a ministerial decision to save money, but the changes mean that the RAF gets only 60% of the capability it wants while paying 90% of the original price. The Minister mentioned Morpheus. How would his proposals stop cost overruns, such as those that occurred in the Morpheus communication system procurement? That £395 million contract, awarded in 2017, was cancelled just before Christmas having delivered nothing at a cost of £690 million. It leaves our forces in the field having to use the ageing Bowman system for another decade.

As the Minister said in his statement, he has just announced the invitation to negotiate on the new medium helicopter. It has taken him since September 2022, when that announcement was first expected, and three subsequent delays to get the announcement finally made. Why has it taken so long and how will his integrated procurement model prevent delay after delay to expected invitations to negotiate? He expects the contract to be signed in 2025. Does it really take three years to invite negotiations and write contract specifications? Will his new integrated procurement model speed that up, or will it slow things down at the front end?

How does the Minister's announcement today tackle the waste, poor value for money and delays that appear endemic in the current MOD procurement system? He says the new integrated procurement model will be implemented this year in respect of new procurements, but when does he actually expect to see better value and faster, less wasteful procurements? He talks about procurement anchored in pan-defence affordability, but his 10-year equipment plan is already £17 billion over budget. What adjustments will be made on that?

The long-standing failures on procurement in the MOD matter in an increasingly dangerous world. They send a message, just as over the past 14 years the Government's hollowing out of our armed forces, creating

a recruitment crisis and shrinking the Army to its smallest size since the Napoleonic era, send signals to our adversaries. Labour believes that defence procurement can strengthen UK sovereignty, security and economic growth. Defence procurement reform will be a top priority for a Labour Government to ensure that our troops have the kit they need to fight and to fulfil our NATO obligations.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her comments. Some issues are above party politics and playing politics, especially when we look at the threat we face and our need for more competitive military procurement, but she is aware, for all she said, that we have seen a one-year reduction in procurement time from December 2020 to December 2022. There have been extraordinary efforts in DE&S in particular to get equipment into Ukraine. We should never understate the way we have gifted our own stocks and scoured the world to find an enormous amount of munitions, not least 300,000 artillery shells. That is very positive procurement and in the hour of need as far as Ukraine is concerned.

The right hon. Lady asked a perfectly fair question. Obviously, we cannot say how any of the measures would have worked in the past, but let me take one of her hypothetical questions: how would Ajax—the key example, given the Sheldon report—have been helped? I can only speculate, but the emphasis on exportability, for example, will be robust and from the start of programmes. That applies more pressure where requirements are overly exquisite, because it will be balanced out by international demand. The reason we want to promote exportability is ultimately to strengthen the resilience of our industrial base. Our market is not big enough. If we have that check in place, it will reduce the tendency towards the exquisite.

Secondly, we will have a new set-up in terms of the expert advice we receive at the beginning—the second opinion, as I call it—in particular from scientists at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, export experts at the Department for Business and Trade, and our own civil servants on finance and so on. We will have very clear advice, which will look at the technical issues around potential platforms. At the moment, to be frank—I appreciate this is only possible to say from internal knowledge—we do not get that level of balance and challenge against the primary requirement coming forward from the frontline command.

The right hon. Lady asked how the new model would apply to the new medium helicopter and whether it would add time at the beginning. I cannot comment on the specifics of NMH, because it is commercially sensitive, but talking in generality, I would trade more time at the beginning, thrashing out the big issues, working out and locking down the policy on, for example, industrial production, so that those issues do not find themselves being reopened later. Of course, I am talking generically and not about specific programmes, but if such things are not locked down, there is a real habit of them coming back later and creating the biggest delay, putting the programme in question. So, that is crucial.

Finally, the right hon. Lady asks about the affordability issue in the equipment plan, which I think is the most important part. I spoke about the munitions strategy. We could simply ask the single services to come forward

[James Cartlidge]

with their priorities for new munitions, but the best way is to look robustly at the threat we face. That is the most important issue: to work back from that and prioritise at a pan-defence level the most urgent requirements for new munitions. I think many people would think that that is common sense, but it has not necessarily been how the system has worked.

Let me finish by saying that perhaps the most positive experience I have had as the Minister for Defence Procurement was visiting one of our small and medium-sized enterprises, which was bringing forward a drone we were using in Ukraine. It was receiving data from the frontline and, based on that data, spirally developing the platform within days to go back into service so it was competitive against the threat it was facing. I want to create a constant loop between industry and the MOD, where we are sharing data and frontline knowledge, so that we have a far more rapid period of technological innovation. The equipment plan, which was very static over 10 years, will look like an old fashioned way of doing things. The priority is to get technology into the hands of the military. That will increasingly be on the software basis and that is how we strengthen our armed forces overall.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the statement, which looks to the future. There is a lot in it to commend. In particular, it is absolutely right to focus on data collection and making certain we are AI-ready. I am delighted about DSTL's enhanced role, which was one of the learnings from Ajax, and I am pleased that all the recommendations of the Sheldon report are being taken forward.

On closer industrial working at secret and exportability, that is entirely consistent with the defence security industrial strategy. That is absolutely welcome and a very positive sign. Above all, I am delighted with the emphasis on spiral development and the new concept of the MDC. We all know the benefits of that: getting something that is right and appropriate on to the frontline where it can be spirally developed is good for industry—it sees the drumbeat of orders—and good for the services, which do not need to think they are going to get everything in one bite. It is all positive.

The only thing I would ask is that we should not forget the basics. The Minister referred to this in his statement, but SROs who have enough bandwidth, support, and time and length on a project are absolutely critical, as is a culture in which they can experiment, and if something ain't working, they should be able to pull stumps. That should not be a source of shame, but an inevitable consequence of being forward-leaning, modern and experimental. They should say, "This isn't working; reinvest the cash elsewhere." That should be commended when SROs come to the Minister with that kind of circumstance.

James Cartlidge: I am very grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee; he is absolutely right. Let me take those two points. On the importance of SROs, the biggest issue we face, ironically, for all the talk about technology, is people—that is across the economy in

many ways and across the public sector. Yes, we want to empower SROs. There are some brilliant SROs in the Department and it has been a pleasure to work with them. I stress that I think we are now at the point where 90% of SROs spend at least 50% of their time solely on one project. That is very positive.

On my right hon. Friend's point about cultural change, let me be frank. We can publish all the strategies we want, but if they are not delivered and do not change the culture, they will not have the effect on output that we want.

Let me return to my drone example. My right hon. Friend spoke about the need to learn from failure, which is how many of the greatest entrepreneurs in the world have succeeded. On the day of my visit to the SME that was developing a highly effective drone to be used on the frontline, the people there had received bad news, but crucially, they took that bad news, they spiralled the platform, they learnt from it, and they made sure that when it went out again it was competitive. That is the key to the system.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and for his honesty in detailing the complexity and difficulties involved in defence procurement. I wish him every success with the proposals that he has outlined.

Back in December, a National Audit Office report stated that the MOD faced a £16.9 billion black hole in equipment funding. I did not hear any mention in the statement of how that would be addressed, and I fear that it may not be covered in the Budget, so perhaps the Minister could enlighten me. Will he also tell me whether he can guarantee that we will be able to meet the requirement for essential contributions to both NATO and Ukraine during this time of conflict?

Also missing from the statement were any details of the post-Brexit defence sector labour shortages—how do the Government plan to address those shortages in order to support the sector?—and any reference to parliamentary scrutiny, especially with regard to the nuclear programme. What assurances can the Minister give that the programme will be scrutinised by the Defence Committee and by Parliament? Also, given that we are working with allies to support Ukraine, which I welcome, do we not now need a mechanism such as a comprehensive defence security treaty with the European Union to further that?

There is a considerable emphasis on prioritising exportability. Do the Government acknowledge that arms exports and procurement programmes with the state of Israel could make us complicit in war crimes? That is a concern for many members of the public, and I would be grateful for the Minister's comments on it.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the broad thrust of his comments. Let me deal with them in reverse order, beginning with his point about arms exports. As he knows, we have strong and robust rules, and we do of course follow them. We keep all our existing export rules and priorities under review. He mentioned nuclear parliamentary scrutiny. I responded to two successive Adjournment debates on nuclear matters that had been initiated by Scottish colleagues. I also appeared before the Defence Committee recently, when

I spoke as openly as I could about the highly sensitive issue of the recent certification of our nuclear submarine, HMS Vanguard.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the lack of a labour supply from the EU. Let me gently say to him that when I speak to defence companies, I see a real willingness to invest in apprenticeships so that we can grow our own UK workforce, and I think that that is what we all want to see. On the equipment plan, the hon. Gentleman made the same point as the right hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). The equipment plan is a moment in time. It is a huge programme over 10 years, and only a minority of it—perhaps 25% or 30%—is actually on contract. What that is showing is, effectively, the aspiration for programmes in the future. There will be other programmes, not on contract, that we will not pull out of and that we will be expected to be part of, but there is room for flexibility.

For me, the purpose of this acquisition reform is to inform that process on the basis of what matters most of all: data from the frontline and war gaming data—on what is happening in Ukraine and on our own war gaming—informing spiral and technological development. That is the way forward, and I think it will be a far more flexible process than taking very rigid views.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I commend my hon. Friend for the remarkable pace at which he has got to grips with the challenges of acquisition in defence. He has not been in post for very long, but he has brought intellectual rigour to those challenges, which some of us have been trying to do for a while. I also endorse everything that was said by the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin), who is an expert on these issues. I am particularly pleased that he has sought to bring the learning from the current conflict in Ukraine back into our own system here in the UK. Other countries are learning how to adapt their acquisition systems rapidly, and we need to do the same.

I completely endorse the integrated procurement model. Its precursors were in the complex weapons programme, which has been running for more than 10 years. I think the fact that my hon. Friend has referred to it in the current contract that he announced yesterday for the next stage of the competition for the medium helicopter lift is a good example of that. He spoke about introducing agility, about exportability and about innovation. Many of us have been pushing the MOD to proceed with all those developments. The spiral development and, in particular, the move from an initial and a final operator capability to a minimum deployable should have a huge impact on the acceleration of processes.

SROs have been referred to. If my hon. Friend can consider extending terms—double or triple terms—for service personnel and key civil servants in that role, he will assist enormously in retaining knowledge within the system.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. May I remind Members to focus on the question to which they want the Minister to respond?

James Cartlidge: It is a privilege to take a question like that from the former Minister for Defence Procurement, who followed another former Minister for Defence Procurement—the Chairman of the Select Committee. I hope that my right hon. Friend does not mind my repeating what he said to me privately when I got the job. At that time, he made the same point about the importance of SROs' spending as long as possible in their roles, which was also in the Sheldon report. Obviously there is an employment law issue—in the sense that we cannot insist on that—but I have referred to statistics which show that we are investing more in SROs, in the Army in particular.

My right hon. Friend spoke of learning lessons from Ukraine—he is absolutely right. One lesson that I have been struck by is the importance of understanding electronic warfare, jamming and interference, and the way in which the battle space has changed. That is why I keep emphasising the importance in our system of securing data from the front and from war gaming to inform procurement.

My right hon. Friend made an important point about the complex weapons programme. This involves a portfolio approach that should lead to more agile commercial relationships, enabling a better demand signal to industry, which drives its investment, but also allows us to take a nimbler approach when dealing with industry.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Is it right for the Minister to seek to reform a defence procurement system that the Public Accounts Committee has described as “broken”? The shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), has just delivered a speech to Policy Exchange, in which he set out that a future Labour Government will create a national armaments director to co-ordinate and oversee defence procurement. Why have this Government not done that in the last 14 years?

James Cartlidge: It is interesting to hear what the hon. Gentleman has just been WhatsApped by the Labour Whips Office, but I am happy to share what is happening in the real world if he wants to hear it. Andy Start, who runs Defence Equipment and Support, is an excellent national armaments director. He has been out leading trade fairs in Ukraine, he has led reform in DE&S, and above all, at a time of war in Europe, he has overseen DE&S, particularly in Abbey Wood, getting equipment out to Ukraine and helping to keep it in the fight.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Forgive me, Sir, but—Yes! [*Laughter.*] I have waited for years to hear an MOD Minister issue this statement, and this very good Minister has done just that. It is true that the Public Accounts Committee said that the procurement system was broken, and last summer the Defence Committee endorsed that in a report, produced by a Sub-Committee that I chaired, entitled “It is broke—and it's time to fix it”. Well, I take this to be the “fix it” or “put right” plan. I welcome it, and in particular the sense of urgency that goes with it. Given that the Defence Secretary has told us that we now live in a pre-war rather than a post-war world, we must do this sooner and, crucially, faster. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, but can the Minister assure me and

[Mr Mark Francois]

the whole House that the sense of urgency that I mentioned will be at the centre of this, and that he and Andy Start will now get on with it?

James Cartlidge: I am honoured by my right hon. Friend. We enjoy our robust exchanges, but that was an example that I shall particularly remember.

The phrase “a sense of urgency” is, I think, what the public want to hear. Important as today’s exchanges are, this is really serious; it is above politics. This is about the fact that our adversaries are ramping up their procurement and their technology—frankly, in some instances, at a frightening pace. That is why embracing the deep relationship with industry, the constant feedback loop on data from the frontline and from war gaming, is so crucial. I think the Committee has an important role in this regard. I set out our intention in my statement, but for it to be embedded we will have a key set of milestones that will enable us, if we work together, to show that it is being implemented; if we can do that together, we can put the pressure on to ensure that it becomes manifest.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I would like to pick up on the point about urgency. We have seen what the UK is capable of in defence acquisition from urgent capability requirements or, previously, urgent operational requirements. These harness the ingenuity of British industry and combine it with the professionalism of the British armed forces personnel. They remove bureaucracy, focus on the capability rather than detailed specifications, and deliver amazing equipment in very short timescales. A great example is the Jackal, the all-terrain mobility platform that was developed at Dunkeswell in my Honiton constituency. How much is the new integrated procurement model informed by the UCR process?

James Cartlidge: On matters of defence procurement, it always strikes me how many former service personnel will raise the issue of urgent operational requirements or whatever else we call them, whatever variation of the acronym. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to stress their importance. They are not something that can be used at scale for the whole procurement system, but in specific, urgent areas they are critical, and we will continue to use them. I am considering them in a couple of sensitive areas, which obviously I cannot talk about further, but he makes an excellent point. By the way, the Jackal is an excellent platform. My first trade mission on exports was to the Czech Republic, and the Jackal was there. I was proud to receive glowing reviews about it from the defence select committee there.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I, too, welcome today’s statement and the bold strategy, so I thank the Minister. We had a conversation yesterday in which I suggested that we needed an arbiter of good taste within strat comms. I am delighted to see the IDA now being formed, which should allow for a bit of rigour, with tri-service interest. May I make a point about how we can further reform acquisition? To my mind, if we are serious about not writing cheques that we cannot cash, and about financial rigour, discipline and planning, we need to be making procurement teams responsible

for the entire capability throughout lifecycle. May I please leave that with the Minister? I am being mischievous, but it is a seed I want to sow.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend has also served and has great expertise in logistics and these matters. In many ways, that is the portfolio approach: having teams within MOD who are focused on a particular capability, potentially cutting across the frontline commands and the stovepipe approach. It has been particularly useful for complex weapons. In effect, as I have said, we will be using that with drones and uncrewed systems, but I am happy to look into it further.

I am also glad that my hon. Friend stresses the importance of the IDA in strat comms. Just to be clear, this is about having a way of calling out issues that I suspect and hope are not commonplace, but having that presence there will hopefully lead to cultural change, which is the key thing we want to see, so that we get into the habit whereby when we procure, we are looking at not just the platform but whether it has the key enablers. If we get the basics right, we will set programmes up for success.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s statement. He outlined several changes, and I am sure that his emphasis on people is absolutely correct. Procurement is not just a matter of systems, but about how they are implemented and who implements them, and the culture within teams is important too. Specification changes drive complexity, cost and delay. Does my hon. Friend agree that removing delay from the programmes is critical because, if for no other reason, the international security situation demands it?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend, who speaks with great expertise from significant ministerial experience, makes an excellent point. I agree with him wholeheartedly. There has been some debate about the issue of to what extent we can lock requirements so that they do not get changed, because it is a frustration. My sense, which I tried to share earlier, is that what we need to lock at the beginning are the top-level political decisions—for example, around the type of manufacture, be it sovereign, off the shelf or some combination thereof, which I think one could argue is the case for the New Medium Helicopter. If we do that, our SROs, officials and commercial teams will feel empowered, so that they can get on and rush to the finish line.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent statement. What training and professional development will be put in place to underpin the new policy? What he is describing is a wholesale transformation of culture, attitude and behaviour that is required in the Ministry of Defence, particularly around the pace, the people and the leadership of teams. This will not be achieved unless there is a concerted effort to change the culture and to implement a change programme in MOD and the armed forces that will underpin what he is seeking to achieve.

James Cartlidge: I am very grateful to my constituency neighbour—another Essex MP with a great passion for defence procurement reform. We have discussed it at length. He is absolutely right to emphasise the importance of training. A lot of this is already starting to happen

and come to fruition, and I can give him an example. I referred to a meeting with industry at “Secret”. I attended one such meeting in Main Building, where Mil Cap, who is in charge of military capability in MOD, and I sat with a wide number of defence industry representatives and spoke to them. The thing that enthused them was that, because we were at “Secret”, we were able to share as sensitively as possible our future plans. A lot of what I am saying is about building on work that is ongoing, particularly at DNS, for example. But my hon. Friend is right: if we want to make this work, we have to have the people and they have to have the training.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend will know full well that I am a huge advocate of Leonardo Helicopters in the neighbouring Yeovil constituency, which is the home of British helicopters as the only end-to-end helicopter supply chain manufacturer in the United Kingdom. I welcome today’s statement, and I very much welcome his statement earlier in the week about the New Medium Helicopter procurement, but could he briefly outline how organisations such as Leonardo Helicopters, which employs thousands of people in south Somerset and West Dorset, might benefit from his statement today?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is a champion of the rotary industry, which supports so many jobs in his constituency. It is thanks to the championing of that interest by him and other colleagues who have constituency interests in the procurement that it is moving forward as it is. Obviously it is a competition, so we have to be even-handed and recognise that all three companies have their strengths, but I would emphasise two points about that procurement. First, there is a strong emphasis on UK industrial contribution, particularly in design work. That is the most important work, and it is what we want to see in the UK.

Secondly, there is the huge weighting for exportability. As far as I am aware, Type 31 is the only other such procurement where we have had a weighting for exportability. I want that to be the default so that my hon. Friend can say to his constituents that, because of his campaigning, this procurement will give a strong weighting to UK jobs and prosperity.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Defence procurement has been a work in progress since Samuel Pepys, and I welcome the latest reforms. One issue when

I was in the Ministry of Defence and then on the Public Accounts Committee was that SROs are in place for a fraction of the contract life cycle. Will the Minister ensure that longer terms apply across all programmes, not just those in the Army? How will the much-needed reforms help get better value for money, particularly for contracts that are awarded without competition?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an important point about Samuel Pepys. My diplomatic answer would be that defence procurement has perhaps been subject to spiral development for longer than we think. My hon. Friend makes an important point about value for money, particularly for single source. I stress that the changes will come into force at the same time as we are also reforming single source regulations. I will soon have the great pleasure of bringing forward a statutory instrument, which will make a number of changes to single source regulations to ensure that they are optimised. They are a good way of ensuring that the inevitable single source procurement that we will always have in defence, not least in highly sensitive areas or where there is one specialist supplier, is as effective as possible. He makes a very good point.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the statement, particularly the new thinking around factoring exports for the future into defence acquisition and procurement. I thank the Minister for his recent visit to Shropshire. Would he like to put on the record his thanks to all the fantastic defence engineers—men, women and apprentices—who work at Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land and the defence support group Babcock, which are delivering for defence and keeping us safe at home and abroad? Would he perhaps like to hint at new jobs and new contracts in Shropshire up to 2030?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is an absolute champion of defence jobs in his constituency in Shropshire. I was delighted to visit RBSL in Telford, which is making not only Boxer but Challenger 3, two of the three key components of our future armoured combat battlegroups. It was a pleasure to meet the apprentices and other workers, and to see the reality behind those jobs that we often talk of as statistics. Babcock is also an important employer in his constituency. I will say to him that the opportunity will be there not only through our own procurement but through putting exportability at the heart of procurement, to ensure that we sustain our industrial base for as long as possible by giving it the widest possible market.

Points of Order

2.50 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have informed the relevant Member of my raising this point of order. On 10 January, the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Steve Tuckwell) asked the Prime Minister an oral question about Hillingdon Hospital in his constituency. He said that

“the new Hillingdon hospital has full planning permission and full funding and enabling works are well under way.”—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 295.]

However, a freedom of information request has revealed that

“the total funding for the redevelopment of Hillingdon Hospital is to be confirmed”.

I further understand that the start date for the procurement of a contractor and for the construction of the hospital is yet to be confirmed. Given that the hon. Gentleman may have unintentionally misled the House on a matter of great concern to his constituents, I seek your assistance, Mr Deputy Speaker, in asking him to set the record straight on this matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me forward notice of it. She has clearly made public her views on this matter. While I am not responsible for the content of Members’ questions, I draw the matter to the attention of those on the Treasury Bench so that if a Member has unintentionally misled the House, they can be advised to correct the record as soon as possible.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to clarify the record because something I said in the House yesterday was not, it turns out, on further investigation, entirely accurate. I have been campaigning for some time on supermarket chains’ charging motorists in Chesterfield several pence more than they were being charged a few miles up the road. Yesterday I took the opportunity again to bring that to the attention of the House during Department for Energy Security and Net Zero questions. Since then my office has discovered that prices in Chesterfield are now the same as they are in Sheffield, or very slightly less, so I want to give credit to the supermarkets, who appear to have put in place the changes that were needed. I said that Chesterfield motorists were being overcharged, but they no longer are, which is a very happy thing, so I take this opportunity to correct the record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I can see motorists speeding towards—well, perhaps not speeding but heading towards the hon. Member’s constituency to fill up. When someone

unintentionally misleads the House, that is how to correct the record with speed. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Today, reports that Thames Water has been lobbying the Government and Ofwat to let it increase bills and face lower fines come as the company seeks to avoid a potential £18 billion bail-out from the taxpayer. It seems clear that the UK’s largest water company is teetering on the brink of collapse. My constituents and all the 16 million people who depend on Thames Water across London, the Thames valley, Surrey and elsewhere will be deeply concerned about what a collapse of Thames Water could mean for them. We know that the Government have prepared a contingency plan for that event. That was confirmed to me in response to a written question that I tabled this month. However, in the same response the Government refused to make that plan public. The prospect of a multibillion-pound bail-out means that this has ceased to be a purely commercial matter, and there is now a significant public interest in the publication of the plans. May I please ask your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, on how I might compel the Government to come to the House to provide reassurance to my constituents as soon as possible, and on what measures the House can take to ensure that the Government publish their contingency plans for the event of Thames Water’s collapse?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me forward notice of it. She has already done a lot of work on this, so she knows the avenues to go through, but she can always seek guidance from the Table Office on how to pursue the matter further. While it is not in the power of the Chair to compel Ministers to come here, they will have heard the point of order through those on the Treasury Bench, so I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making it.

BILL PRESENTED

HIGH INCOME CHILD BENEFIT CHARGE (REVIEW AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wendy Chamberlain presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to undertake and publish a review of the merits of raising the income threshold for the High Income Child Benefit Charge and of reforming the process for declaring income above that threshold; to require the Secretary of State to publish an assessment of the impact of the High Income Child Benefit Charge on single parents and on full-time caregivers for children; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 170).

Brain Tumours

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23) 2.55 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to set a target for the number of glioblastoma patients who take part in clinical trials each year; to require training for medical oncologists to include training relating to brain cancers; to provide that any drug that has been licensed for use on tumours must be trialled on people with brain tumours; to make provision in relation to neuro-oncology multidisciplinary teams in the NHS, including a requirement that each such team must include a medical oncologist; to require manufacturers of drugs licensed to treat tumours to make those drugs available in specified circumstances for clinical trials relating to brain tumours; to make provision about the application of funding caps on funding for multi-drug treatments for glioblastoma brain tumours; to make provision about the processes for funding of drugs intended for the treatment of glioblastoma; to make provision about the management of drug trial data, for the purpose of increasing the quality of data relating to glioblastoma patients; to make provision about reviewing the allocation of existing funding for brain tumour research by the National Institute for Health and Care Research; to make provision about the direct referral of patients by optometrists to accident and emergency departments for the purpose of diagnosing brain tumours; and for connected purposes.

The reason I am speaking again about this terrible disease is a personal one. It is why this campaign will always feel different from the other campaigns I take on. On 24 June 2023, I lost my wonderful sister Margaret to a glioblastoma brain tumour. As soon as Margaret received her diagnosis, we found out just how bad the treatment was, how the life expectancy was nine months and how there had not been a new treatment on the NHS for 30 years. We found out that families in the UK were left to crowdfund and sell their houses to fund private treatment, and that they would have to take their very sick family member on to a plane and fly thousands of miles to access healthcare in Germany or the United States. That is why Margaret started her final campaign: to find a cure for glioblastoma brain tumours. When Margaret passed away on 24 June, it was left to me to take on that battle. Her mission is now my mission. The Government have left the disease in the “too difficult” pile for too long, and I am here to put finding a cure back on the Government’s agenda.

The second reason I am making this speech is above us in the viewing Gallery: I am incredibly grateful that a number of patients’ families have come to the House to hear the speech, and their support is a reminder that 3,200 people are diagnosed with a glioblastoma brain tumour every year. It is not just Margaret who was forced to fly thousands of miles to access the treatment that should have been provided on the NHS, but families up and down the country who are being failed and who deserve better. Having cared for someone with a brain tumour, I know how bad things are, and I know that if we try something different, we can give people diagnosed with this deadly disease some hope. This is my something different.

No. 1 is the pharmaceutical industry. Dr Paul Mulholland is Europe’s leading medical oncologist in glioblastoma. He believes that we are on the cusp of a cure and he would like to run clinical trials so that he can turn that belief into a reality, but the pharmaceutical industry has refused to donate the drugs he needs for those trials

to take place. That is because glioblastoma is a very small market for those companies. With only 3,200 people diagnosed each year, the investment is just not profitable—there is not much money in it, and the companies are not interested. That is why, as policymakers, it is our job either to encourage or to force the pharmaceutical companies to provide the drugs for these trials.

I will give just one example. In October, I met Moderna to ask if it could donate medicines for a clinical trial of 10 patients. I had hoped that it would give clinical access to its mRNA pipeline to help find a cure, but it refused. This company with annual sales of \$4 billion refused to donate drugs for 10 people at a maximum cost of half a million pounds. These drugs could save thousands of lives each year, so Moderna’s refusal is shameful.

The House will be interested to hear that Moderna has published an environmental, social and governance statement on its website that says it has

“a responsibility to the multitude of patients our technology could help, regardless of whether they have a disease shared by millions, or one that is unique to them alone.”

The statement says that Moderna

“understand what our stakeholders expect from us as a sustainable responsible business and leader in mRNA medicines.”

Those words are clearly meaningless.

I do not mean to sound pessimistic, because some companies have been very supportive—I have had wonderful conversations with Roche—but where companies such as Moderna have the funds and the medicines but lack the will to find a cure for brain tumours, I think it is the Government’s duty to step in and legislate to ensure that they do.

The second difference is about regulation. We need to ensure that our regulators incentivise the pharmaceutical industry and clinicians to do as many clinical trials as possible. Right now, the pharmaceutical industry sees the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence as a barrier, as a reason not to do clinical trials in the UK. That needs to change. For starters, when a pharmaceutical company is trialling a drug for glioblastoma and another disease such as melanoma, the MHRA should allow it to submit its data separately, so that glioblastoma patients’ results do not adversely affect the application.

Funding treatments as a package has been a major impediment to the industry. We can solve this issue if NICE funds each drug used in the treatment of glioblastoma separately. We will make progress if we make those changes, but we should not stop there. We need a whole host of policy changes if we want to make a change. If we carry on with the same old processes, we will get the same old results, which in the case of brain tumour research is failure. We also need a target of getting 200 glioblastoma patients each year into clinical trials on drugs that have the potential to change the course of the disease.

We need the NHS to ensure that every neuro-oncology multidisciplinary team has a medical oncologist as a core member, so that brain tumour patients are not left in a corner of the ward because there is nobody to fight for them. The NHS should make it easier for optometrists to directly refer patients straight to A&E for a scan without going through their GP.

On Monday I met the Anticancer Fund, which is based in Brussels, and I think I have discovered the one

[*Dame Siobhain McDonagh*]

benefit of Brexit. Brexit means that the NHS medicines repurposing programme has been able to identify drugs that were initially purposed to cure another cancer, and that is exactly what we need to tackle brain tumours.

The NHS should require that every doctor training to be a medical oncologist goes through a mandatory course on brain tumours, which takes me to my final recommendation. In 2018, after Tessa Jowell sadly passed away from glioblastoma, £40 million of Government funding was promised to fund research into brain tumours. As of January 2024, just £15 million of that £40 million had been awarded. That is a real failure of government. The MHRA should be shouting loud and proud about how much money is available for investment in brain tumour treatments, but it does not and I cannot understand why.

For as long as there is no progress and I am a Member, I will come back to the House at every opportunity. I came into politics to fight for people who are not heard, and there are few people heard less than those who suffer from glioblastoma.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dame Siobhain McDonagh, Will Quince, George Freeman, Tracey Crouch, Steve Brine, Helen Hayes, Paul Blomfield, Sarah Owen, Dame Meg Hillier, Daisy Cooper and Wes Streeting present the Bill.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 April, and to be printed (Bill 169).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Your campaign is one of Margaret's legacies. Thank you, Siobhain.

Pedicabs (London) Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading

3.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to move the motion on Second Reading for this Bill, which tackles an issue that has plagued London's roads for far too long. Without a shadow of a doubt, the Bill has a long and chequered history in getting to this stage, and legislators have been calling for legislation on the issue for over 20 years. It is unquestionably the case that in 2011 the Law Commission commenced its 11th programme of law reform, which included a review of the legal framework relating to this space. That was published on 23 May 2014, and it recommended bringing pedicabs within the scope of taxi and private hire regulation.

Successive Mayors, including the present Mayor, have supported regulation in this space. The previous Mayor of London, Mr Boris Johnson, called in 2012 for Transport for London to have the power to remove pedicabs that do not meet rigorous safety and licensing standards. An independent task and finish group on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing was subsequently commissioned by the Government in September 2017.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The Minister is making a very good point about the cross-party support from both a Labour Mayor and a Conservative Mayor. Does he agree that it is important to recognise that the pedicab industry has also called for proper regulation? The London Pedicab Operators Association wrote to me to say that it is

"in accord with the universal view that pedicabs must be fairly and appropriately regulated fast."

Does the Minister agree that it is important to do it now?

Guy Opperman: Anyone who has seen this particular problem on the streets of London will accept that there is clear public demand for pedicabs and that there are organisations that want to have regulated, safe pedicabs on the streets of London. My hon. Friend is right to say that the industry wishes to be regulated so that the good actors can be supported, so that people can have trust in this industry, although it is small, and so that the rogue actors—I will come on to them in a bit more detail—are not only discouraged but prevented from operating in this way.

We have to be blunt about some of the particular examples, and this has a significant and real impact on the tourist industry in this country, on women's health in particular—but also that of general members of the public—and on the potential commission of crime. Some of the worst examples include a tourist charged more than £450 for a seven-minute, 1.3 mile journey with their two children, another charged £500 for a 10-minute journey between Mayfair and Soho, and one hit with a £180 bill for a three-minute journey—fortunately on that occasion the driver was ordered to return the money by local police and Westminster City Council.

The truth is that the task and finish group has been seeking a space for a safe and responsible pedicab trade. The quote that is set out in the House of Commons guidance says that

“there has been much justified criticism in recent years of rogue pedicab operators taking advantage of tourists with excessive charges and absence of safety checks”,

and it goes on:

“It is not acceptable that Transport for London is unable to regulate pedicabs to ensure a safe service; the Government announced in 2016 that it would rectify this, and the legislation should be brought forward as soon as possible.”

That was said in 2018. Subsequently, in 2019, the Government made it crystal clear that they supported the Bill.

There have been various attempts to bring this matter forward and—let us be blunt—this is a thin Bill dealing with a niche issue, but it is something that genuinely does matter. Such issues are traditionally often handled by way of a private Member’s Bill, and various colleagues have tried to bring this matter forward by way of a private Member’s Bill, starting with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Guy Opperman: As I have just named my hon. Friend, I will be delighted to give way.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and he is, as ever, making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the Mayor, the councils, residents, businesses, Parliament—largely—and the pedicab industry itself agree with simply changing a 19th-century legislative anomaly in order for the only form of public transport in London that is not regulated to come under that banner? Does he agree that this could and should have been done years ago, and that it should be done easily now?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend will know that pedicabs are effectively stage carriages under the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869—with which we are all deeply familiar, I am quite sure. That means they are the only unregulated form of public transport operating on London’s roads. He is right to highlight that this has cross-party support across London, as well as support from a variety of Mayors and local authorities. It has the support of the business industry and those who want to be part of a regulated pedicab industry. Tourists visiting London who step into a pedicab should not, I believe, face the risk of an inappropriate fare, an unlicensed driver who has had no background checks, and a vehicle with potentially no safety standards—sadly, that is fairly regularly the case.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Would we not have had a regulatory regime had the Licensed Taxi Drivers’ Association not been campaigning openly and publicly for banning pedicabs altogether, rather than regulating them?

Guy Opperman: I say with real, genuine respect for my hon. Friend—I was his Whip for a while—who clearly has strong views on these matters, that although the London taxi drivers may have a view, having unregulated providers on the streets of London who are clearly, in

some sad cases, abusing tourists and having a very bad reputation—ripping people off to the tune of £500 for a couple of minutes’ journey—does not give a good image of London. There have been attempts under successive Governments to tackle this issue by way of private Members’ Bills, which is often how small legislation is often dealt with in this place. The taxi drivers do not have anything fundamentally to fear from a regulated pedicab industry, because regulated pedicabs exist in other cities, and it is not the case that anybody is trying to take away unfair competition. The taxi drivers have been regulated in a perfectly appropriate way by successive Governments on a cross-party basis, and we want them to thrive and exist and provide the services they do to Londoners and tourists alike.

Sir Christopher Chope: Is the Minister aware that at a meeting with licensed taxi drivers at City Hall on 17 January 2004 Bob Oddy referred to a video produced by the LTDA, “Ban Don’t License”, and the LTDA was campaigning not for registration of pedicabs but for a complete ban? Will the Government commit to ensuring pedicabs are not regulated out of existence?

Guy Opperman: There is quite a lot to unpick from that question on events of 20 years ago, but I will do my best.

First, the Government do not want to regulate any particular part of the sector out of existence, and, in fact, pedicabs exist elsewhere. Secondly, I am absolutely confident that we can have a situation in which people are charged an appropriate fee for what is a physical activity—charging for cycling someone around the flattish streets of London is fairly simple stuff—and pedicab operators get a proper return for their endeavours while making sure the cost is not £500 for five minutes. It is perfectly possible for us to create a proper market where there are safety checks in the usual way without pedicabs no longer being in existence.

The point is answered by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken): as she rightly points out, a number of pedicab operators want to get rid of the bad actors so they can thrive. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with that—there really is not. There is space in the great city of London for the black cab industry, the private motor vehicle industry in the form of private hire, and pedicabs; all three can and should co-exist, along with all the buses, the tube and the like.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the Minister about the mixture of transport modes we enjoy in London—and people should also be able to enjoy that across the rest of the nation. Bringing us forward to the last few years as opposed to 2004, when I chaired a transport committee on the London Assembly in 2017 we looked at accessibility and ensuring access to different transport modes in the capital. Does the Minister agree that by bringing forward this legislation and helping Transport for London to set the regulation, we will have licensed pedicabs with clear operators, allowing for a licence duration, fees, suspension and clear charging, which will help pedicabs add to the mix of transport modes in London?

Guy Opperman: It is hard to disagree with those points, but I accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has concerns

[*Guy Opperman*]

and I want to try to try to address some of his points. This is not something that just one side of the House is seeking; all parts of the House are seeking it, as have successive Mayors, including Mr Boris Johnson, late of this parish, who enthusiastically supported it.

I accept entirely that some may have concerns about Transport for London not being part of the Government as such, but successive Mayors of different political persuasions have been happy for TfL to run this appropriate regulation. The hon. Lady touches on a variety of points, but clearly there are other issues, such as noise, the persistent and ongoing blocking of footpaths—which unquestionably has significant issues for accessibility—and the general causing of nuisance. Without a shadow of a doubt, there are plentiful examples to show why this measure has been called for on a repeat basis and why the Government should act in this space.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am not against this Bill, but I would like some general reassurance from the Minister. I am not the sort of Conservative who believes in more regulation, particularly when it comes to young entrepreneurs providing a fairly simple service for tourists. Can he assure me that, when this regulation comes into force, it will be light touch and not onerous, so that we do not kill this young and perfectly acceptable industry? I am perfectly happy to be reassured; I just want the Minister to do that for me.

Guy Opperman: The answer is yes and yes. The key point is that, as this is a totally unregulated market, it is hard to be precise as to how many people are providing this service on a daily or weekly basis. In London, it is in the several hundreds, rather than the thousands. Those who wish to take this industry seriously and do things properly unquestionably feel that they can run a young entrepreneurial business with a proper reputation and the right amount of enthusiasm and aspiration in a truly Conservative way, and also provide a safe service in which tourists can have confidence. I genuinely believe that that is the case. If it matters that there is a strong recommendation that the measures will be appropriate, but light touch, I am happy to provide that from this Dispatch Box.

I have gone on for longer than I intended, but I genuinely believe that the Bill will ensure that the pedicab industry is respectable, safe and regulated in an appropriate fashion, and that it brings the same accountability to this industry that we rightly expect in a great capital city that is, rightly, a tourist hotspot, and we wish to continue to support that. The Bill is supported by Londoners, councillors and Members of Parliament, and there is no question but that I am happy to commend it to the House.

3.22 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition on Second Reading this afternoon. As my colleagues in the other place have set out, Labour welcomes this short yet vital Bill and will support its progress, but it is long overdue. After years of asking for these powers from the Government, the Bill will finally give Transport for London the power to tackle the blight of unregulated pedicabs in London—largely in the city's west end.

As colleagues will know all too well, pedicabs have been able to operate without regulation for decades due to a legal loophole in London. They are not considered taxis under the current law and are instead defined as “stage carriages” under section 4 of the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869.

However, with section 4 no longer in force, a completely unregulated pedicab industry has emerged in London. Indeed, as the Minister inferred, it is the only form of unregulated public transport in the capital. Between 2018 and 2023, 24 pedicab operator incidents were reported in London, including six sexual offences and 13 injury-causing collisions. Pedicabs have also been notorious for egregious overcharging of tourists, as of course they are currently entirely free to determine their own fares, sometimes seemingly at random. As the Minister referenced, a tourist with two young children was charged more than £450 for a seven-minute journey in a pedicab. The driver intimidated the tourist into immediate payment and then disappeared—presumably to avoid being reported. This is just one of many concerning reports of unacceptable behaviour from unlicensed operators.

It is clear that TfL urgently needs the powers necessary to regulate, and I am pleased that the Bill will go a long way in making pedicabs safer for passengers, because it is this emphasis on safety that is so vital. I know that the Minister and I agree that we do not want pedicabs banned from London streets; we just want them to be as well-regulated on safety as any other mode of public transport.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is speaking very eloquently. I also welcomed the words from the Minister this afternoon. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a very similar situation with other new forms of transport, such as e-scooters and e-motorbikes? Hopefully, there can be a similar discussion about the safety issues and about balancing the need for new forms of transport against the safety of pedestrians. Perhaps he can say a few words about the need for the Government to look at that issue as their next objective in this area of transport policy.

Simon Lightwood: I agree with my hon. Friend. I would have liked to have seen the Government hold to their promise of delivering a comprehensive transport Bill. Things such as e-scooters need a decision one way or the other; we cannot extend the trials indefinitely.

A regulated pedicab sector can bring enormous benefits to London, as a unique zero-carbon way to travel in an equally unique, thriving part of London with a bustling night-time economy. Indeed, a sustainable pedicab industry can be in keeping with the treasured, colourful, unique character of the west end, while also ensuring that regulations are in place to keep passengers safe.

I am pleased that the Bill has reached this Chamber in a much improved state, thanks to the hard work of colleagues in the other place, notably Labour lords. In particular, we welcome that the Government have conceded on ensuring that the power to regulate is entirely devolved to Transport for London, rather than the time-consuming and unnecessary step of requiring parliamentary approval. Such a requirement would have been anomalous compared with TfL's wider powers on

private hire regulations, or indeed with other combined authority's regulatory powers. For that reason, we welcome the Government's removal of subsection (2) of clause 6 and the insertion of clause 7 on guidance from the Secretary of State instead.

Additionally, we warmly welcome the Government's decision to amend clause 2, to make provision for regulation on noise nuisance, which is a key concern that stakeholders have been raising for years. That being said, as positive as the Bill is, the Government have taken far too long to get to this point. Transport for London, Westminster City Council, the Local Government Association and various night-time economy trade associations have been calling for action on pedicabs for years. And for years, the Government repeatedly promised action, with private Members' Bills even being proposed on the same topic by Government MPs. The reality is that this legislation is desperately overdue and should have been part of a much more comprehensive transport Bill. Local councils, industry bodies and manufacturers alike are crying out for clarity from the Government on e-scooter and e-bike regulations, for instance, but the Government seem to refuse to take this opportunity to make progress in this area.

None the less, the Bill is important in its own terms, and I am pleased that TfL's power to regulate on this issue will be on the statute books in due course. A key issue that many stakeholders, including the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association and Transport for London, have raised is making pedicab operators eligible for enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks in line with taxi and private hire drivers. I know that that was raised by several colleagues in the other place, where the Minister said that the Government are looking into it. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update and say whether we can explore that in Committee, because this is an opportunity to ensure that passenger safety is as robust as possible.

Overall, this is a much-needed but desperately overdue Bill. I look forward to working with the Minister and other colleagues as the Bill progresses.

3.28 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I, perhaps more than most here today, welcome the Second Reading of the Pedicabs (London) Bill. It does seem to be groundhog day for me, as this will be the third time since entering Parliament in 2019 that I have stood in this Chamber and spoken on Second Reading to highlight the need for a licensing scheme for pedicabs in London.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you and others in and outside Parliament could be forgiven for wondering why on earth the Government have given time for this small Bill. One would expect that it should become law via a private Member's Bill, as the Minister mentioned. It should have done, as four attempts have been made via private Members' Bills to introduce a pedicabs licensing scheme in London. One was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully); a second by my predecessor, Mark Field; and since entering Parliament I have twice promoted a private Member's Bill on pedicab licensing, but because of the way such Bills fall due to a single objection, mine have failed.

Therefore, I am truly grateful for what the Government have done, first under the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who was 100% behind the wish to secure pedicab legislation. He agreed with the then Transport Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), to put a clause in the planned transport Bill, which fell when Mr Johnson resigned. I then started my lobbying from scratch and met No. 10 officials from the current Administration to make the case for pedicab legislation to be given Government time.

I would like to put on record my thanks to people from across Parliament who have provided help, particularly Baroness Stowell of Beeston, who supported my campaign to lobby Ministers and their special advisers. I would also like to put on record my thanks and admiration for the two special advisers, James Nation and Will Tanner, who accepted that we needed to introduce pedicab regulation. Without them, we would not be here today and I thank them, the Minister and the Transport Secretary for understanding the reasons why we need this legislation. I did not know for certain whether we would get Government time for this legislation, so when I stood in the other place and heard His Majesty announce

"A Bill will be introduced to deal with the scourge of unlicensed pedicabs in London",

you could have knocked me over with a feather.

It is fair to ask why we need this legislation at all. First, I wish to point out that this Bill does not and will not propose to ban pedicabs from the streets of London; it is about improving the conditions for drivers and passengers. I firmly believe that if we could have properly regulated pedicabs, they could offer a very positive and special visitor experience. I understand that pedicab regulation already exists in this country and where it does, in places such as Oxford, York and Salisbury, we still see pedicabs, but they provide a much better offer. It is clear that the regulation of pedicabs does not mean their eradication.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend will have seen, as I have, the briefing from Cycling UK. Does she recall that it says:

"Even where local authorities have been keen to support local would-be pedicab operators (as has happened in Oxford, Salisbury and York), they have been unable to operate on a ply-for-hire basis, because the local taxi operators (who view them as competition) start asking questions about whether the pedicabs and their operators have the same insurance etc"?

Pedicabs have not been able to operate in those areas outside London because of the opposition from the licensed taxi drivers.

Nickie Aiken: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. As far as I am concerned, Cycling UK has supported this Bill—I have had several meetings with Cycling UK and I believe my hon. Friend may have been involved in some of those meetings previously. It has always understood why I want to bring in this Bill. It is important to make the point that the drivers and vehicles must be safe. There have been too many instances where police operations and operations in conjunction with Westminster City Council have found drivers who are unfit to be taking passengers, including those who are wanted for serious crimes, such as sexual violence crimes. I believe that one person was even found to be wanted for murder—

Florence Eshalomi: Does the hon. Lady agree that this regulation is not just about ensuring a fair and transparent fare model, because TfL will have the option to ensure that those drivers undergo criminal checks and that they have the right to work in the UK?

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, as it comes to the crux of why I wanted to introduce this legislation: I want to make these vehicles safe, not only through ensuring that they are passing MOTs and are fit to be on the street, but by ensuring that the drivers are safe. Again, as a result of the operations that the police and Westminster City Council have undertaken over the years, we have found asylum seekers who have not got the right to work driving these pedicabs, and we have found illegal immigrants who have not got the right to work here. Let us not forget that those people are also being exploited. One reason it is important to have regulated pedicabs is that it will ensure that drivers have rights.

We also have to ensure that we have a regulated, fair system in place. Operators must adhere to the highway code and not play blaring music at all hours of the day and night. It is time that pedicabs in London were regulated, as black cabs, Ubers and private hire vehicles are. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) says about what the Licensed Taxi Drivers' Association said 20 years ago. In my own meetings in the last couple of years, taxi drivers have been very clear that they want a level playing field. They do not expect pedicabs to be banned; they just want them to be as safe as black cabs. Why should a black cab driver have to jump through so many hoops to get on the road, when a pedicab driver can literally get on a pedicab, go on to the streets of Westminster and ply for trade? It cannot be right, and we have to ensure that the whole system is fair, just and legal.

Parts of my constituency, including Soho, Covent Garden, Marylebone and Fitzrovia, can become like the wild west. It becomes the wild west end at times because of the sheer number of pedicabs on the streets. Too many play extraordinarily loud music, often block roads and pavements, disrupt residents and businesses, and have a poor track record of exploiting London's tourists.

I am extremely grateful for the wide range of support that I have had for securing pedicab regulation from local people across the two cities, from residents associations such as the Soho Society, the Marylebone Association, and the Covent Garden Community Association, and from businesses including the Hippodrome, Heart of London Business Alliance and the New West End Company. I also thank Roger Geffen from Cycling UK, Chris Dixon from Pedal Me, and Friedel Schroder from the London Pedicabs Operators Association, who have been on this journey with me and always provided me with the information and support for what I intended to do.

The reason pedicabs are not regulated in London, as we have heard, can be traced back to the fact that, under the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869, pedicabs in Greater London are defined as a stage carriage. Modern legislation has not corrected the issue, and thus pedicabs do not fall under Transport for London's licensing powers. As a result, pedicabs are currently the only form of public transport that is not regulated in

London. The Bill corrects that, clearly outlining that, to attain a licence to operate a pedicab, operators must adhere to several requirements pertaining to their pedicabs. The requirements relate to the road-worthiness and cleanliness of pedicabs, safety and insurance, the type of equipment that must be carried onboard, the appearance and marking of pedicabs, and the conduct of pedicab operators.

I must thank the noble Members of the other place, where the Bill began its parliamentary journey, who have improved the Bill and ensured that it is as watertight as possible. I put on record my gratitude to the transport Minister Lord Davies of Gower for his excellent stewardship of the Bill through the other place, and for joining me and today's Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), on a visit to Leicester Square on a Sunday evening to see the situation for himself. I am sure that it was enjoyable, and a different ministerial visit than they are both used to. In that time, we saw four pedicabs blocking a pavement, which would have prevented an emergency vehicle, be it an ambulance, fire engine or police vehicle, from entering Leicester Square had there been an incident. Pedicabs have to be properly regulated to ensure that the public are safe.

The other place has tightened up the definition of a pedicab to prevent any adjustments from being made to a pedicab to get around the licensing requirements. Not only will the Bill ensure that the conduct of operating a pedicab is regulated, but it will provide Transport for London, which will operate the licensing scheme, with the powers to implement a proper, fair system like the ones for black cabs and Ubers. Rip-off fares from pedicabs are a constant theme in my inbox, and in media coverage.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the hon. Lady for making such a powerful speech on why we need regulation. Is she aware of the BBC Democracy report on its undercover work looking at the fee charges? One pedicab charged a flat fee of £5 per minute and another reportedly close to £500 for a 10-minute ride. Does she not think that that is an extortionate rip-off?

Nickie Aiken: I absolutely agree and thank the hon. Lady for her points. The BBC Democracy report was fascinating about some pedicab drivers, although I must make the very important point that not all pedicab drivers are rogues. There are brilliant organisations and companies such as Pedal Me—I have worked with Chris Dixon, the founder—which is an outstanding pedicab company that looks after its drivers properly, and its vehicles. I want all pedicabs to be like that. The BBC Democracy report, however, showed that some pedicabs drivers are being used for drug dealing and taking people to brothels, where they deserve what happens if they go to some very dodgy club. That is why we have to regulate and ensure that drivers are fit to carry passengers and that they are legally able to work in this country, more than anything.

Such pedicab fares are in the media constantly, especially when pedicab operators take advantage of vulnerable tourists enjoying the incredible cultural offer of the west end. A constituent who came across one such tourist incident wrote to me:

"The Pedicab operators got very aggressive when the Americans refused to pay £300 for a journey from Trafalgar Square to Great Smith Street",

which is a journey of 0.8 miles. I welcome the Bill's providing Transport for London with powers to set what fares can be charged, when and how passengers must be made aware of the fares, and what methods of payment are acceptable.

Perhaps the most popular part of the Bill for my constituents is the provisions on riders' conduct, which thanks to the other place have been strengthened to include noise limits. The frustration local people often face due to the loudspeakers many pedicabs carry was best summed up by a constituent who told me:

"I have no choice but to listen to music hour after hour, day after day, and often until the early hours of the morning. They are left in situ, able to do it, as they all know the council and the police have no powers to stop them".

I was therefore pleased to see the other place strengthen the Bill's ability to tackle unreasonable noise levels by adding noise restrictions to the conduct requirements that operators must meet in order to keep their licences.

Florence Eshalomi: The hon. Lady may know that a number of pedicabs congregate outside St Thomas's Hospital in my constituency, where patients are recovering from lifesaving treatment. Does she agree that having that noise blaring out in the early hours of the morning is totally unreasonable?

Nickie Aiken: It is completely unreasonable; the hon. Lady makes a good point. Not only hospitals are affected; hotels are losing business. If a pedicab is outside a hotel in the west end at 2 in the morning and does not move for hours, patrons rightly complain and ask for their money back. This is not just about residents and hospital patients, but about businesses losing money.

I am pleased about the noise levels being added to the restrictions. As my constituent rightly pointed out, pedicabs can get away with acting like that, because there are no powers to contain them. The Pedicabs (London) Bill will bring that to an end, I hope. Those operators who do not adhere to their new licence terms can be given a fixed penalty notice. If the conduct of operators does not improve after that, Transport for London reserve the right to demobilise, seize and dispose of pedicabs that contravene the regulations. That will make a huge difference.

Finally, I will touch on the role of Transport for London. I put on the record my sincere thanks to Will Norman, the Mayor of London's walking and cycling commissioner. He has worked closely with me on my private Member's Bills and has been a huge advocate for pedicab regulation.

I note that in the other place an amendment was tabled to allow the Department for Transport to provide Transport for London with statutory guidance on pedicab regulation. I agree with that and welcome the fact that the Government have accepted that amendment. TfL is the correct body to oversee regulation, as it currently regulates licensing for all other taxi and private hires.

It may have taken four private Members' Bills, an abandoned transport Bill and years of lobbying and campaigning by politicians from across the political divide, but I am confident that the Pedicabs (London) Bill will finally become law, the streets of London will be safer, and we will have a safe and thriving pedicabs industry.

3.45 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I thank her for her work in bringing the Bill to this stage, and pay tribute to Members for the cross-party support that it has received. The Bill is supported by the Mayor of London, by my borough council—Lambeth Council—by Westminster City Council, by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and by hon. Members from across the political divide.

I share Westminster bridge with the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster: half the bridge is in Vauxhall; the other half is in the City of Westminster. I regularly cross the bridge on my way to work. I need not tell any Member that that bridge can be busy; you literally have to fight to get across it—in some cases, for your life. I want the bridge to be busy, because that means that tourists are coming to London, our night-time economy is thriving, my constituency on the south bank is seeing those visitors coming and spending, and people are supporting our local businesses. It means that people are able to thrive—and that is what we want. It is what makes London unique, so it is important that we celebrate the fact that more and more people are coming to Westminster bridge and parts of central London. However, we also want people to have a good experience.

Sir Christopher Chope: In that case, why is there still a proliferation of unlicensed market stalls selling hot dogs and blocking the pavement with impunity on the Lambeth side of Westminster bridge?

Florence Eshalomi: I continually raise that issue with the Lambeth North safer neighbourhood policing team, with Lambeth Council and, rightly, with the Met Police Commissioner. I have said to the commissioner on a number of occasions that, yes, there are many major policing challenges in London, but that activity is a blight on a key part of London that receives so many tourists. There is also the crime element of those things. Through work with the safer neighbourhood team led by Sergeant Watson, we have seen a number of prosecutions in recent months, and I hope that with more support and funding for our police officers, we can eradicate that activity for good.

Pedicabs are part of the experience for many visitors to London. The Bill's main purpose is not to ban them outright, but we cannot deny that, with their current unregulated status, they are creating serious risk and problems for tourists, residents, the road network, and, as the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster highlighted, for the drivers themselves. Currently, someone getting into a pedicab has no clear idea of what they are getting into: they do not know how safe the driver is, how roadworthy the pedicab is, or how often it has been cleaned. Not only is that dangerous for everyone on board; it also disadvantages those who spend money maintaining their pedicab only to see their hard work, trust and investment damaged by those who continue to take risks. It is right that clause 2(6)(a), (b) and (c) give Transport for London the power to create a clear safety and cleanliness standard so that people can trust that the pedicab they are using is not dangerous.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

I also welcome the amendment to clause 2(6)(i) made in the other place. I confess that when I am driving, sometimes I like listening to music. I will not tell you my choice of music, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it ranges from Beyoncé and the Spice Girls to Taylor Swift and Usher Raymond. We know that when it comes to pedicabs, music can also be part of the experience; it goes a long way, but I have had constituents complain about the loud music from pedicabs and the noise nuisance that they create in residential areas, as the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster also outlined. It is right that we give TfL the power to act on that.

While a lot of our focus may be on the problems customers face in pedicabs, it is also right that we look at the working conditions of their drivers. Many drivers find themselves being exploited; they work long hours and tiring shifts in close proximity to extremely loud music, and—let's be honest—some face abuse from customers, with very little protection. It is therefore right that clause 2(6)(h) allows provisions to be made relating to the working conditions of drivers. I hope that is not forgotten when TfL drafts the regulations.

Like many people, I also welcome clause 2(5), which relates to how fares are advertised, charged and paid for; we have heard many stories and anecdotes of how those fares are not fair. I do not think any of us expects that pedicabs will, or should, become a cost-effective way of travelling around our capital, and it is clear that many people getting into pedicabs do so because of the wild and wacky experience they offer—those lights can sometimes be quite attractive, especially when the pedicab has pink fluffy feathers as well—but there is a big difference between paying a premium for an experience and, frankly, being exploited. As the Minister touched on, the BBC reported in July on a Belgian tourist who was charged £464 for a mile-long ride. When she complained, the driver demanded immediate payment, making her feel really threatened. Do we think any tourist who has had that experience will want to come back? Do we think they are going to tell their friends and family, “Come to London”, when this is what can happen?

This is not about just one egregious case; as we have heard, there are many other cases of such exploitation. Many tourists have been advertised trips between the likes of Westminster bridge, just outside this place, and Trafalgar Square without knowing how close they are, and rightly feel cheated when they are charged £50 for a 10-minute journey. I know that London is expensive, but come on—that is just a rip-off. It is right that we recognise that pedicabs may charge that little bit extra for those pink flashing lights and the music, but we must strike the right balance between a premium and being ripped off.

London should be one of the best cities in the world to be a tourist, but our current lax regulation around pedicabs destroys not only their image, but that of our rightfully robust standards in other sectors and the experience of the UK as a whole. At present, TfL is unable to act to help ensure pedicabs' safety, including for passengers, and their fair and transparent operation. In a city of almost 8 million people, pedicabs are the only form of unregulated public transport in the capital. This Bill will allow TfL to set standards for operators

and ensure that drivers undergo robust criminal checks. As the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster has highlighted, it is long overdue, and it is necessary to allow pedicabs to be a positive part of the London transport network.

3.53 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate. I am grateful to the Minister for having indicated in his remarks that he is open to discussion and persuasion on what I hope will be some useful amendments that can be tabled to improve the Bill when it reaches its Committee and Report stages. I see that it will be referred to a Committee of the whole House, rather than a Public Bill Committee; that is just as well, because if it were going to be dealt with in a Committee upstairs, I am sure that I would never be selected by the Committee of Selection—which is controlled by the Government—to participate in it.

This Bill is really an allegory for this Parliament. We have thousands of illegal immigrants on our streets who have jumped bail or got rid of their tags; rogue parking operators who the Government have been trying to deal with for years and years; e-bikes running amok and causing mammoth problems for pedestrians in London; and all sorts of other obstructions of the highway by protesters, making it very difficult for people visiting London—particularly at the weekend—to go about their lawful business. It is an allegory for this Parliament that it has chosen prime time on a Wednesday to discuss the burning issue of pedicabs. [*Interruption.*] I cannot hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) said from a sedentary position.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is making an interesting speech, but would he agree that we could and should have done this back in 2018, when my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) was the leader of Westminster Council and I introduced my private Member's Bill? We could have got it done on a Friday afternoon.

Sir Christopher Chope: We could have got this done much sooner than that. We could have got it done in about 2005-06, when Transport for London brought forward a private Bill, including a provision to deal with this matter. However, in that Bill and in subsequent Bills, we have always encountered the difficulty that Transport for London has been unwilling—I do not think it was unable, but it was unwilling—to produce any draft regulations, so we were being asked to approve potential legislation that was blind as to what would be contained in it.

It is interesting, is it not, that all these years have gone by, and one might have expected by now that Transport for London would have a document with detailed draft regulations for pedicabs but it has not got anywhere near that? Indeed, when I was privileged to be invited to a meeting that my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster organised, it was clear at the meeting that Transport for London was unable to produce any draft and was unable to say how long it would be before it would produce one. It was unwilling to produce a draft to inform debate on the private Member's Bill that my hon. Friend was promoting.

So is it surprising that there is a lot of suspicion around this issue? People think that the ulterior motive of Transport for London is to regulate pedicabs out of existence. Obviously, we can say that that is not the intention, and all the rest of it, but if the consequence of this legislation is that pedicabs will be extinct in a few years' time, we as legislators should be asking whether we really want that situation to arise. I certainly do not want that situation to arise, and I am concerned that there has been a lot of misrepresentation about the extent of the support for the Bill. In principle, there is support for the Bill, because all the regular pedicab operators would love to have a light regulatory regime to get rid of the rogues on the streets.

Florence Eshalomi: Let us go back to the history of the Bill, and the proposals from many different politicians from across parties, organisations and business improvement districts right across London, and the councils in the 32 boroughs of London. Does the hon. Member believe that they, as representatives of London, speaking for their residents and businesses, would see why we need this Bill?

Sir Christopher Chope: I see that, absolutely. I have already referred to that London Assembly Transport Committee's scrutiny report on the future of London's pedicabs, which was published in February 2005. In that report, that committee makes it quite clear that it is in favour of very light regulation of pedicabs, not the heavy-handed regulation that seems to be envisaged at the moment and that is certainly feared by organisations such as Cycling UK.

Florence Eshalomi: The hon. Member keeps citing the 2005 report. Does he appreciate that, 20 years on, the transport system in London has moved on, is more diverse and is more accessible? Does he agree that regulating these pedicabs will help improve the transport network for residents, businesses and tourists coming to London alike?

Sir Christopher Chope: I think the jury is out. I say that because Transport for London has discretion to decide, for example, whether to introduce 20 mph zones. We know that it also has discretion over whether to outlaw vehicles of a particular type, such as diesel vehicles, or to introduce ultra low emission zones. It has that discretion, but many people living in London—particularly outer London, where they are dependent on their cars or vans for going about their normal business—think that Transport for London has abused its powers. Indeed, they have asked the Government to intervene, and that is the message that came out of the Uxbridge and South Ruislip by-election, which the hon. Lady may remember. Is Transport for London to be trusted? The short answer is that it has not behaved responsibly on the extension of the ULEZ charges across the whole conurbation. How do we know it is to be trusted on this if we give it a blank cheque on which to write?

Florence Eshalomi: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, a lifelong Londoner, that some of the measures he has outlined, such as 20 mph limits, ULEZ and the congestion charge, are all benefits to help improve transport in London and air quality? We have a major

issue with air quality. When we step out from this building on to Westminster bridge in my constituency, the air quality is quite bad. We have a major issue. We are trying to get more people to be active and to use public transport, but that will only happen if measures, such as the ones he has outlined, are introduced with the support of Londoners, the councils and residents in London. Does he agree?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am afraid I do not agree with everything that the hon. Lady is saying, but I agree about the desirability of having emissions-free forms of transport in London, and one such emissions-free form of transport is the pedicab. I do not understand why the hon. Lady seems to be relying on Transport for London legislating with a heavy hand to exclude that sort of activity.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I hope the House will forgive me for having to leave the Chamber for a few minutes. Does he agree that what this law is trying to do is ensure not only that pedicabs become regulated, like every other form of public transport, but that they are treated in London as they are in every other part of the country? They are stage carriages in London, but everywhere else they are hansom cabs, which means they can be regulated everywhere apart from London. The Regulated Pedicabs Coalition brings together the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association, which he mentioned earlier in an intervention, as well as casinos, hospitality businesses and residents groups in Westminster that want this Bill to happen so that we have pedicabs on the street, but regulated ones.

Sir Christopher Chope: I hope that my hon. Friend will make his own speech in due course, because I know he believes passionately about this issue. May I just refer him and other Members to the briefing from Cycling UK? My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster referred in her opening remarks to Roger Geffen, the policy director for Cycling UK. The briefing he has produced has a section entitled "Beyond the Bill: the need for a 'national' regulatory framework for pedicabs". It states:

"As things currently stand, pedicabs can operate in London under legislation dating from 1869, which permits the operation of Stage Carriages... Conversely, in the rest of Great Britain (i.e. outside London), pedicabs have to operate under the same legal framework as taxis. This makes it almost impossible in practice for pedicabs to operate on a ply-for-hire basis outside London, because the insurance and other requirements for taxis are so onerous, and are entirely disproportionate for addressing the potential risks. Even where local authorities have been keen to support local would-be pedicab operators",

those pedicab operators have not been able to start up, because of the weight of regulation. I made that point in an intervention on the Minister.

Roger Geffen then states that it is "potentially valuable" that the Secretary of State will now be able to issue guidance to TfL, but that it would be great if that guidance

"could in future be extended to other non-London licensing authorities, at such time as a new regulatory framework is put in place for licensing taxis and minicabs."

He, as a cyclist, is concerned that this great method of transport—a pedal-driven rickshaw—is not being used outside London for the purpose of enabling people to apply for hire and travel from one place to another.

[Sir Christopher Chope]

That is why I think the assertion that the Bill aims not to regulate pedicabs out of existence but merely to bring in a regulatory regime that outlaws the most extreme examples of bad behaviour is naive.

It is incumbent on Transport for London to produce a draft regulation. As we have heard, it has been at this for 20-plus years, and even as we speak it cannot produce drafts of the regulations it has in mind to introduce. I put out this challenge to Transport for London, which I hope will be carried to it by my hon. Friend the Minister. I do not know when the business managers will decide we will have the Bill's Committee and Report stages, but before we get to Committee it should bring forward a draft of the regulations that it has in mind. If it does that, we will be able to see whether our fears and suspicions, which are shared by Cycling UK, are well founded or wide of the mark. That is a perfectly reasonable way to proceed.

It is commonplace in the House to see draft regulations before we finalise legislation, but there does not seem to be any appetite for that on the part of Transport for London. We have not even had an indication of the timescale in which Transport for London wishes to introduce the regulations. How much longer will the good pedicab operators of London have to wait before the lightweight regulation, for which they have been campaigning for so many years, is introduced?

One of my suggestions is therefore that the Government should recognise that, in the rest of the country, where a different regulatory regime relates to pedicabs, they do not exist because they are regulated out of existence. If the Government wish to promote emission-free forms of transport such as pedicabs, why do they not get on and introduce a guidance system for transport authorities and local authorities outside the London area so that they can take the burden of regulation off potential entrepreneurs who wish to be able to provide pedicab services in cities such as Oxford, Salisbury and York, as we have heard? If such a commitment from the Government were to come out of the Bill, it would be a really worthwhile exercise.

I do not think that the Government are right to be sitting on the fence in relation to e-bikes and e-scooters. Why are we concentrating on the small number of pedicabs rather than the very much larger number of e-bikes and e-scooters, which are causing mayhem for many residents living in London, not to mention elsewhere in the country?

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, the use of e-scooters on the highway—other than in certain pilot sites—is illegal. Therefore, it is not really a matter of regulation; rather, it is a matter of enforcement. Many of us would love to see much more enforcement. Similarly, on e-bikes, of which I used to be a regular user and owner, my hon. Friend will know that there are significant regulations, not least that they are speed-limited to 15 mph. However, many manufacturers have hidden in their bikes somewhere the ability to override that speed limiter. Similarly, that is a subject for enforcement rather than for regulation. Therefore, although I appreciate his point and agree with him, I do not think it is a matter for legislation; frankly, in London and elsewhere, it is more a matter for the police.

Sir Christopher Chope: My right hon. Friend is right. So often in this place we find ourselves introducing new legislation because the legislation in place is not being enforced. My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster did not mention this, but is it not extraordinary that it took the City of Westminster so long to start using powers that it already has to control “pedicab chaos” as it put it, to start prosecuting rogue pedicab operators. The City of Westminster issued a press release on 20 December priding itself on successfully prosecuting six pedicab operators in Westminster magistrates court, which resulted in fines nearing £3,000. That shows that laws are already in place but they are not being adequately enforced, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said.

Florence Eshalomi: I agree on the safety of e-bikes. Tragically, a three-year-old was hit by an e-scooter on 19 July 2021 in Myatt's Field park in my constituency. Thankfully, she did not die, but she was left with life-changing injuries. There is a real issue about the safety of e-bikes. Does the hon. Member agree that many pedicabs obstruct cycle lanes and cause danger, and that is why we need clear regulation to ensure that they follow the highway code and the code of practice?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am very much in favour of regulation where it is necessary. To take the hon. Lady's own council, Lambeth, I recall reading in a national newspaper in the past few days that because it has not complied with regulations on street signs to prohibit entry into low-traffic neighbourhoods, it has been able to fleece the motoring public of many millions of pounds. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady is laughing, but it is not funny to the motorists who have suffered and paid those high penalties. It is not as though the money that Lambeth has recovered through those foul means has been reinvested into improving the road network. As someone who has the privilege—if I can call it that—of living in Lambeth, I can see with my own eyes the poor state of the pavements and highways there.

Florence Eshalomi: What the hon. Gentleman is referring to, as the Minister knows, is the trial of a low-traffic neighbourhood in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), off Streatham High Road. That is still in its trial period and the council is consulting on it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that my local authority is having to scale back on the things that it wants to do because of the cuts it has faced over the past 14 years? It would be helpful if we lobbied the Chancellor on a cross-party basis to fund local government adequately.

Sir Christopher Chope: I will not be drawn into the Lambeth-Wandsworth comparison. When I was the leader of Wandsworth council, we helped secure the lowest council taxes in London, while Lambeth had among the highest. The hon. Lady would be well advised to keep away from the efficiency or otherwise of Lambeth Council.

Let me revert to the subject matter this afternoon. Roger Geffen's briefing has drawn attention to the definition of pedicab in clause 1(2), which is:

““pedicab” means a pedal cycle, or a pedal cycle in combination with a trailer, that is constructed or adapted for carrying one or more passengers and is made available with a driver for hire or reward”.

The point made by Cycling UK is that a pedal cycle may be used for the delivery of goods, so why should it be controlled under the provisions in the Bill? It may be used by somebody not plying for hire, but taking a passenger in a pedicab as a result of a hire agreement entered into not from a public highway but as a private agreement. For example, hotels and hospitality centres in London may wish to use the services of pedicabs as a privilege for their customers, so they can visit the west end and not have to struggle on public transport, while, at the same time, enjoying the fun of travelling by pedicab. Why should pedicabs in that situation be outlawed under the definition in the Bill? That is a concern. Coupled with that is the concern expressed that the plying for hire of pedicabs is too broadly drafted, because it excludes private hire but would not exclude private hire, on a definition in the Bill, relating to pedicabs exclusively. That is the detail relating to clause 5.

I hope my hon. Friend the Minister has looked at the briefing from Cycling UK, because it is very balanced and well argued. It reinforces the point made at the beginning of the debate:

“Cycling UK and the London Pedicab Operators’ Association (LPOA) has been calling for such a framework for over 20 years. Had it been put in place, the ‘wild west’ situation which now exists in London could have been averted. However, it needs to be clear that the regulatory framework’s objectives are to support a safe and responsible pedicab sector, and not potentially to kill it off... The Bill as drafted contains no safeguards to assure us on this point.”

If my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster can provide the safeguards that will be contained in the Bill but are not in it at the moment, I am happy to give way. *[Interruption.]* I thought she wanted to intervene, but obviously she does not want to draw attention to the safeguards that Cycling UK, which she prayed in aid as a supporter earlier on, says are missing from the Bill. My hon. Friend seems to be asserting that they are in the current Bill. If that is the situation, I would like to see where they are. I would not have thought that that was an unreasonable request.

Guy Opperman: I hesitate to intervene, but the position that used to exist was that the Government were going to do the secondary regulation. It was decided in the other place that it would be quicker and better to do it through Transport for London. To criticise TfL, when this was produced only in the last few weeks in the other place, is a little harsh given that that was not intended when the Bill was originally published. It is clearly the case, though, that we continue to support the industry. We can argue the toss on the briefing my hon. Friend refers to, but I can assure him that it is not our intention to, as he put it, regulate this particular industry out of existence.

Sir Christopher Chope: I accept what my hon. Friend says, but if that is not the intention but it happens in practice that it is regulated out of existence, what will the Government do about it? Perhaps he will intervene and answer that question. At the moment, there is nothing in the Bill to enable the situation to be rectified. If TfL behaves in the irresponsible way it has in relation to the ultra low emission zone, and appeases the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association and effectively outlaws pedicabs in London, what is going to be done about it? I hear no response, but that is why proper safeguards must be

written into the Bill. As for the Minister’s point that Transport for London has only just found out about its responsibilities, TfL proposed its own legislation in 2005, and I imagine that it had in mind exactly what it wanted to do.

When my hon. Friends the Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and for Cities of London and Westminster produced their private Members’ Bills on this subject, it was already clear that the regulations would be introduced by TfL. When we asked TfL what would be in them, we were told, “We have not the time or the inclination to start drafting the regulations now.” Even as we speak, we do not know what the timescale is for the production of the regulations and the introduction of this regime.

I am not sure whether the Minister said that he had read Roger Geffen’s four-page briefing, but if he has not, I will happily share it with him after the debate. In the briefing, concern is expressed—and I certainly share that concern—about the Bill’s requirement for TfL to consult “whoever it considers appropriate”. What is the point of that? Why not say something specific, such as “Transport for London must consult organisations representing pedicab operators, cyclists and pedestrians—and others, but including those”? At present, the Bill places no obligation on TfL to consult pedicab operators, cyclists, people involved in the hospitality industries, and so on.

Nickie Aiken: My understanding—although the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) may be able to correct me, having carried out the role of transport committee chair at City Hall—is that TfL must undertake a statutory consultation with all the relevant parties, including businesses and residents, on any regulation that may be introduced if the Bill is passed before this can become a proper licensing regime.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because in that case I am sure she will support an amendment, or perhaps draft it herself, to place on the face of the Bill exactly what she has said. At the moment, the discretion as to who should be consulted rests solely with TfL, which I think is ridiculous.

Let me expand a little on the point I was making about clause 5 and the need for clarification of what is meant by “a power-assisted pedicab”. Cycling UK believes that the potential pitfalls could be avoided through reference to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles Regulations 1983 to define the vehicles that will be exempt from the legislative requirements for private hire vehicles. I hope that the Minister will take that point on board.

Cycling UK has made a number of other suggestions. It asks, for instance, what will happen about pedicab stands:

“Subclause 2(7) of the Bill currently provides for TfL to make regulations to limit the places, times and/or circumstances in which pedicabs may ply for hire or operate”—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that speeches on Second Reading should not go into huge detail about the various clauses, because that is obviously for Committee. I am sure that he will return to the wider issues.

Sir Christopher Chope: Madam Deputy Speaker, I take your point completely, but this is not a situation where the Bill will go into Committee upstairs, the Committee will start with a couple of evidence sessions with people who are interested in the Bill, and members of the Committee will look at it. This is a situation where the Government have on the Order Paper a motion that all the remaining stages should be dealt with in three hours. There is no indication as to how much time there will be between now and the time that those stages are timetabled for this House. Therefore, I thought it would be helpful if I flagged up in advance some of my concerns about this Bill, to which I am referring in this Second Reading speech. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, a Second Reading speech can extend to things that are not included in the Bill, which is why I am referring to things that could be included in the Bill but which are not currently included—that is my intent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is extremely helpful. The hon. Gentleman is very experienced and is on the Panel of Chairs, and he understands a lot about procedure. Although he is flagging up issues, too much detail about the clauses would be inappropriate, but I am sure he is coming back to his main points. I just remind him that I have two other speakers to get in.

Sir Christopher Chope: Fortunately, because there has not been much Government business today, we have a reasonable period of time for discussing the Bill.

To summarise the point I was seeking to make, Cycling UK says that the Bill grants powers for TfL to make regulations to limit this, that and the other, but there is no power to require TfL to provide places where pedicabs can have stands. Again, that seems to be rather asymmetrical or illiberal.

My final point is about the concern that Cycling UK expresses about the need for consistency between civil offences relating to the use of pedicabs and motor vehicles. Cycling UK refers specifically to clause 3(5)(a). I will not refer to that in detail, taking your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I think there is sufficient meat in this Bill for us to have a very lively discussion in Committee and on Report. However, I hope that in advance of that, we will get a clearer view from the Government, and particularly from the Minister, about whether it is essentially their intent to stand by idly while giving powers to Transport for London, which does not exactly have a good record on all this, to exercise what the Government hope will be its good intent to facilitate a high-quality pedicab regime in London. We know jolly well that quite a lot of the people who are concerned about pedicabs in the city stop short of actually banning them altogether or introducing regulation that would have exactly the same effect.

4.28 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I wholeheartedly welcome this legislation and the steps taken by the Government to introduce a licensing regime for the only form of transport in London that is still unregulated. I hope to see the development of the pedicabs industry across London, providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities as well as a safe, affordable and carbon-free form of transport, especially for those who are unable to utilise other forms of active travel.

In order to ensure that regulation can promote the use of pedicabs, rather than merely suppress the negative aspects of the unregulated trade, it is important to ensure that sufficient care and attention is paid to how such a trade might operate. The Liberal Democrats urge the Government and TfL to ensure that the relevant councils and user groups, such as the ones in my constituency of Richmond Park, are adequately consulted to ensure that the new regime is effective and that regulation is implemented as smoothly as possible.

My particular interest in pedicabs arises from their use as a means of transport in parts of the capital that are currently closed to motor traffic. I refer of course to Hammersmith bridge in my constituency in particular. We are shortly to mark the fifth anniversary of its closure to motor traffic, although I can assure the Minister that this milestone will not be celebrated with any particular joy among the communities of Barnes, East Sheen or Mortlake, or indeed wider afield, who have suffered ever since from the consequences of appalling traffic congestion.

There has yet to be a complete analysis of the full economic consequences to the capital of the continued closure of the bridge, but even if there were one, it could not encompass all the missed opportunities that my constituents have suffered: the passing trade missed by small businesses in Barnes; the employment opportunities that could not be taken up; and the educational, social and cultural events that had to be missed because people were unable to cross the river. During the 2019 election campaign, various Conservative politicians filmed themselves at the bridge, promising to get it fixed, yet here we are, staring down the barrel of another general election and no progress has been made. The Government have remained shamefully silent on their plans to fix the bridge, despite having been in possession of a business case from Hammersmith and Fulham Council for the past year.

However, adversity breeds innovation, and my enterprising constituents in Barnes have not sat by passively while being let down by the Government. In 2021 a temporary pedicab service was put in place across Hammersmith bridge by the Barnes Community Association. In the six months that it was operational, the scheme carried more than 9,000 people over the Thames and was a lifeline for those members of my constituency who cannot access the shops, hospitals and other services in Hammersmith while the bridge is closed. This temporary scheme demonstrated that there is demand for transport across Hammersmith bridge beyond cycling and walking, especially among older people and those with limited mobility. The ability to cross the bridge connects people with the economic and social opportunities denied to them by reliance on a lengthy and increasingly unreliable bus route.

Should this legislation pass, I urge Ministers to work with TfL to create a new pedicab service across the bridge that could serve as a model for other schemes in London. I have met Transport Ministers, officials from the Mayor's office and local councillors, all of whom expressed support for the idea, and I hope the Minister will now publicly commit to working with TfL to renew efforts to get a pedicab service up and running across Hammersmith bridge, should this legislation be enacted. I believe that if a pedicab service could be put in place initially to serve those who wished to cross Hammersmith

bridge, it could work as a proof of concept to enable the service to be extended to other parts of London where the promotion of active travel has been hindered by the need to cater for those with reduced mobility.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Liberal Democrat colleagues in the other place, where this legislation originated. I particularly welcome the fact that this Bill will provide the framework to address not only the noise pollution often caused by pedicabs in London but the safety issues for both passengers and pedestrians that are often linked to the driving of these vehicles. Further, I am pleased that we will be able to crack down on the extortionate fares often charged by pedicabs. There have been reports of some journeys of only 10 minutes resulting in fares of hundreds of pounds for the passenger. This legislation will therefore be useful not just in enabling the setting up of new pedicab schemes but in regulating those already in existence.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the outstanding work of Liberal Democrat London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, who has campaigned for years on the issue of pedicabs in our capital as well as being an effective voice for Londoners on so many issues relating to crime and transport. She has given great service to the people of London in her 16 years as an Assembly Member and she will be much missed when she stands down in May.

This legislation is a welcome step towards setting up a framework to regulate pedicab usage in London, and the Liberal Democrats will be supporting the Bill today. My constituents in Richmond Park will particularly welcome the opportunity to make use of a clean, safe, good-value transport option to access the north side of the Thames, and I hope that the Government will continue to approach this legislation in an enabling, rather than suppressing, spirit. My constituents are still demanding answers on the long-term future of the bridge, and I will continue to press for them, but a short-term solution to the problem of access will none the less be welcome.

4.34 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Some years ago, as I emerged from one of the watering holes in Soho that I used to frequent before the children came along, I happened upon a scene where an inebriated individual was standing in front of a pedicab, swaying backwards and forwards. As I passed, I heard him say to the pedicab driver, “How much to Guildford, mate?”, at which point there was an exchange that I did not overhear. The man got into the pedicab, and off it went. I have no idea what happened to that poor chap or whether he made it to Guildford in the pedicab from the fringes of Leicester Square, but I doubt it.

It occurred to me after the event that what probably happened, as we have heard from other Members, was effectively a sort of mugging. This chap, in his relaxed state, was likely to have been relieved of quite a lot of money for a service that he had stumbled into in his confusion, probably with a sense of good humour, adventure or desperation to get home. It struck me that we really needed to do something about the pedicab system in central London.

I do not want to detain the House too long. I feel like an SNP Member commenting on legislation that affects only England in that, like my hon. Friend the Member

for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), there are no pedicabs in my constituency, although I look forward to his amendment on Report that would allow the relaxation of licensing so that pedicabs can emerge in Bournemouth and Christchurch. I am sure that campaign will feature on his election leaflets come the big day later this year.

Notwithstanding my imposing on the debate, I have antecedence in London as a Westminster councillor and a deputy Mayor for eight years. I support this Bill for four reasons. First, I regard myself as an economic liberal. I think we should avoid as much regulation as possible to allow the private sector to flourish and, frankly, to allow grown adults to freely enter into contracts between themselves. However, more important to me is that, in any industry or economic area, there should be a level playing field. We have to accept that these vehicles operate in London by dint of a strange loophole in rather ancient legislation.

When Airbnb arrived in London in a big way, all the hotels, which were very heavily regulated and had significant insurance and maintenance costs, were right to complain that an unregulated competitor was entering the market and that the Government had to take a decision. “Either you regulate Airbnb the same as us or you regulate none of us and allow us all to compete fairly.” That notion of a level playing field is key.

When I was at City Hall, I supported the arrival in London of Uber and other related taxi services on the basis that there should be a level playing field with the black cab service. I felt that if there were not a level playing field, black cabs should have some privileges that Uber and others did not have. The job of the Government or the regulatory authority is to balance those rights, privileges and regulations to make sure that all competition is fair. At the moment, as a number of Members have said, it is not fair that pedicabs are not regulated in the same way as other cabs.

Secondly, although many of us love and cherish the slight chaos of the centre of our capital city, it requires order from time to time. In particular, it requires order on the streets. Anyone who drives in London on a regular basis will know that it is hazardous at the best of times, not least because the growth in cycling and the fact we now have to drive at 20 mph mean there is a lot of overtaking and chaotic behaviour. Motorists have to keep their eyes peeled at all times for people suddenly swerving across the road, very often taking their life in their hands.

We need a sense of order, particularly in the densely built centre of town, and it strikes me that these pedicabs do not contribute to a sense of order. Having had close shaves with a couple of pedicabs over the years, I can say that they are often dangerously driven and badly parked. They block the roads and pavements, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) said, causes problems for emergency vehicles that need access to pedestrianised areas. We need a sense of order, and this Bill will achieve that.

Thirdly, successful city centres—and London is a particularly successful city centre—do not happen by accident. They happen because they are curated. When I was a Westminster councillor at City Hall, we were very careful to preserve the ability of residents to live in central London and to ensure that the west end in particular should be a mixed residential and commercial

[Kit Malthouse]

area. That was key to its success, and if there is a sense of nuisance, which many pedicabs are—will have heard about the music and the lights and all the rest of it—that will be just another straw breaking the camel's back to drive the residents out of central London. If we want the west end to stay vibrant and successful—the powerhouse, frankly, of the economy that it is—we cannot allow it to turn into the City, where there are no residents and it is dead after 9 o'clock and there is no one there at the weekends. That is just not the way to curate a city centre.

Curating a city centre is an art as much as a science, and the municipal authorities have an obligation to allow a certain amount of chaos and scruff. I have lamented the municipal Domestos, for example, that has been poured over Spitalfields by the City Corporation. It has destroyed that asset for the City and it is now just another dull shopping centre filled with chains. I look to companies such as Soho Estates, which is a great custodian of the area around Soho Square; it carefully curates who occupies its properties in order to maintain both the reputation and the character of Soho as a slightly louche, shall we say, part of the capital, which all of us have enjoyed from time to time, mostly in our youth. That curation requires tools with which we can control some activities, and that includes pedicabs.

The fourth reason I support the legislation is the issue of crime. There is, unfortunately, a litany of stories of crimes being committed by people operating these cabs, whether ripping off tourists, putting passengers in danger or using their pedicabs to run drugs. They are not unrelated to the criminal fraternity and we need to be able to root out those people and have the control to remove them, because in the end this is all about making money, and if we remove them and leave space for the reputable operators, we will have a much better sense of safety for the public in central London.

I acknowledge the hesitancy of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch about regulation, and in normal circumstances would share it, but we must bear in mind the notion of a level playing field and of a service that operates within the capital that is reputable around the world and does not feature on social media for tourists in other countries as one of the rip-offs they must avoid—a bit like how so many Italian cities are now advertised on social media as infested with pickpockets. We have to think about the reputation of our city internationally and indeed its impact nationally. That is why I am very keen to support this legislation and have been a long-standing supporter of this step since my time at City Hall.

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

4.42 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This has been an interesting debate—some contributions have been interesting in a good way, some perhaps less so—and there has been broad agreement, with one exception, that this Bill is a thoroughly good thing. I am pleased to see powers finally being granted to Transport for London to tackle the challenges and difficulties of unregulated pedicabs, which we have heard described by a number of Members, from across London in particular.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for her work on this issue over many years and I am grateful to her for quoting the views of the London Pedicab Operators Association and its call for regulation, showing that the industry itself is keen to see action on behalf of operators who want to do the right thing. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on finally getting his dearest wish granted and seeing this regulation come to fruition. Perhaps I am overstating that, but he has played a part, including through promoting a private Member's Bill.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) was extolling the virtues of Westminster bridge, I did wonder whether she was going to start quoting William Wordsworth:

“Earth has not anything to show more fair”.

That is, of course, a line that everybody is aware of, but perhaps pedicabs spoil the view very slightly. She made good points about the threats to tourists and the importance of safety for passengers and, indeed, for drivers, which is included in the legislation. She, along with a number of other Members, mentioned the noise nuisance as well.

My parliamentary twin, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—he and I share the same date of birth—finished the debate with what I would loosely describe as an occasional dose of over-disclosure about his own past, but he made a very good case for the legislation as well. We had some disagreement from the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who seemed to think that this was a sitting Friday and that he should take his characteristic approach of talking out a private Member's Bill, which is why, as the Minister pointed out, we are here and the Government have had to finally bring the Bill forward.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is being a little unfair to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who made a good point about our trying to understand where this legislation could go. As I understand it, TfL published a framework for licensing pedicabs back in 2022. It might be helpful if the Minister were to circulate that framework to Members when we get to Committee.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his intervention. The wider point is that the hon. Member for Christchurch was raising things that really belong in Committee, but he will have his chance to raise the matter that the right hon. Member mentioned, as it will be a Committee of the whole House. It is good news that we will close the legal loophole that exempts pedicabs from being defined as taxis under current law, leaving pedicabs as the only form of unregulated public transport in London.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) set out why Labour views the Bill as so important. He addressed the cases of overcharging. We have had TfL's own evidence of collisions that involve pedicabs resulting in personal injury. There were 24 driver incidents between 2018 and the end of August 2023, including road obstruction, driver conduct, and six sexual offences. Those cases, alongside the overcharging and the noise nuisance, demonstrate why it is so important that action is taken to regulate pedicabs.

We have an important opportunity here to improve the safety of passengers, and of all road users in central London, and to help the tourist economy. The Bill strikes the right balance between the enjoyment that pedicabs can offer and the protection of the public. Today's debate prompts the question of when the Government plan to bring forward their long-promised transport Bill, which needs to be wide-reaching and to extend beyond London, and include regulations on other neglected issues such as e-scooters and e-bikes. For today, though, this legislation on pedicabs is long overdue and I look forward to it progressing through the House.

4.48 pm

Guy Opperman: With the leave of the House, having opened this debate, I shall now bring it to a close. We have had a short, occasionally feisty, and certainly interesting journey down memory lane. I would like to mention all those colleagues who have endeavoured to bring this legislation before this House and to pass it on previous occasions. I congratulate all colleagues who have attempted to bring in this legislation through private Members' Bills.

Clearly, we have learned an awful lot about certain individual Members. I enjoyed hearing from the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) who probably has a T-shirt—obviously created in Soho—that says, “I was louche in my youth”. The long and the short of it is that he makes good and fair points. I genuinely believe that, even though we are all economically liberal and want to see a thriving, bustling, entrepreneurial London, there has to be some degree of order and a fair playing field across all forms of transport. There is a legitimate issue to address in terms of crime and the way in which this city is perceived if we do not take action. It is right that, on a cross-party basis, we are taking action.

I thank all colleagues for their contributions, although I will not go through them in detail. A fair point was made about noise. I say that having spent the best part of a month of my life in St Thomas' Hospital, where I experienced the impact of the noise outside, and having met many representatives of hotels, businesses, restaurants and theatres, who are genuinely concerned at the unregulated noise being provided by some of these operators. The fair point was also made that people need a living, breathing residential city of London and that that is simply not possible if we have unregulated noise. People are literally moving out because of this problem and that is not acceptable. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) rightly made legitimate and genuine points, starting with the fundamental principle of asking, “What is the end objective here?” That is a totally legitimate thing to do and we should not in any way decry his robust attempt to get to the heart and soul of these points—I welcome his doing so. I very much take on board the efforts he wishes me to make to allay his concerns prior to Committee stage.

I wish to put a couple of other points on the record. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire made clear in his brief remarks, TfL produced an outline, in January 2022, of a potential licensing framework, which is in excess of 10 pages. Clearly, it would have to be refreshed, because this legislation is coming forward and, for example, noise regulations

were added in the other place barely weeks ago. We must also take into account that clause 7 sets out the requirement for guidance, which is a matter for the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State gave updated best practice guidance for licensing authorities outside London in November last year. It specifically states that where there is a “local interest” in providing pedicab services, licensing authorities should make “adjustments” to licensing requirements to “accommodate” such services. The whole point and purpose of that is to make it easier to bring those things in. Clearly, clause 7 provides a capability for the Secretary of State to bring in such guidance. I endorse the point that has been made about e-bikes and e-scooters: enforcement is the key issue on an ongoing basis.

I make the final point that we will debate the Bill in Committee, and I propose to write to all Members who have contributed today to set out some of those points in a bit more detail. I genuinely commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Pedicabs (London) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Pedicabs (London) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

**PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL [LORDS]
(WAYS AND MEANS)**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Pedicabs (London) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees under the Act.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

**Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
and International Committee of the
Red Cross (Status) Bill (Money)**

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made and Question proposed,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any amount refunded in respect of any tax or duty in accordance with arrangements made under the Act.—(*Nigel Huddleston.*)

4.54 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to make a few brief comments about this money resolution. Let me begin by thanking all those who work with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I know that I am not the only Member who has benefited from its expertise, experience, networks, contacts and global stature, which are recognised and valued both here in the UK and across the Commonwealth. I have relied on its support on many occasions. I have recently visited Ghana and Canada with the CPA, and I have worked closely with our overseas territories, Crown dependencies and other members of the Commonwealth family. It is crucial that we build those links and strengthen them. At a time of deep global uncertainty, our relationships through the Commonwealth, and indeed inter-parliamentary relationships, are crucial.

When it comes to both CPA UK and, as this money resolution applies to, the CPA as a whole, the secretariat, which is hosted here, plays a critical role; and I pay tribute to the former Member of this House, our friend Stephen Twigg, who is the Secretary-General. I also commend the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which obviously plays a critical role globally, working tirelessly and meticulously to support civilians working in conflict and war zones around the world, and to uphold key responsibilities in relation to the laws of war and humanitarian law. As we know, the ICRC has played a critical role for many decades.

On the substance of today's money resolution, the Opposition fully support these moves. As I understand it—perhaps the Minister will correct me—the money resolution does not lead to any substantial expenditure. On the privileges and immunities that will be granted by the Bill, any expenditure will be covered in relation to the work that already goes on around similar international organisations. It is worth referencing that the CPA has experienced significant issues, with concerns being raised about whether it will receive these important privileges and immunities. Questions have been raised, including at recent meetings of the CPA, so it is important that we get on with this as soon as possible, and give it the support it needs in terms of a change of status. Otherwise, there could be a risk, for example, of the CPA secretariat being moved outside the UK, which would be a huge retrograde step.

It is critical that we give the ICRC the specific privileges and immunities that other states grant, so that its confidential and neutral, important work can be carried out. I have heard from both the CPA and the ICRC about these matters, and how important this small but significant change in legislation is to them. Indeed, I have visited the ICRC headquarters in Geneva and

listened to important developments about its work in critical zones around the world. As I said, the Opposition fully support these moves. The money resolution is an important next step. We need these changes to the status and operations of these organisations, bringing us in line with other countries and allowing the organisations to do their work. Time is of the essence, so I hope that the Government can move swiftly.

4.57 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): The motion is about sending taxpayers' money to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which I fully endorse, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. I will spend a minute or two talking about the ICRC, because all British taxpayers are contributing. The ICRC plays a noble and important role in conflicts around the world. That is indisputable. It would, however, be remiss of me not to reflect on the strong criticism that it has faced in recent months for its abject failure to access the hostages—then, more than 200—who have been cruelly held by Hamas in unimaginable conditions. We should not forget that in 1939 the president of the ICRC approached the German Red Cross to arrange for visitation with Jews deported to Poland, and he was met with a refusal by the Nazi German authorities. From then on in world war two, the ICRC opted for a strategy of no longer addressing the question of Jews directly.

We all know the tragic consequences of that decision, for which the ICRC has—or had—retrospectively apologised, and rightly so. Following that apology, His Majesty's Government, and other Governments around the world, have supported the International Committee of the Red Cross with British taxpayers' money, and have done so for years, but today families in the United Kingdom—and there are families in the United Kingdom whose relatives are being held hostage—as well as families from Israel and around the world whose loved ones have been missing now for almost five months, understand the history of the Red Cross as it relates to the Nazis in world war two, for obvious reasons, and it is painful. As a consequence, this most recent failure by the ICRC will never be understood and is likely, I am sorry to say, never to be forgiven.

When questioned about that by the Prime Minister of Israel, the ICRC president, Spoljaric Egger, said that applying pressure to Hamas

“is not going to work”.

As can be imagined, that is inconceivably frustrating for Israel's leadership and for Jewish people around the world, particularly in this country. Israel's Foreign Minister at the time, Eli Cohen, said that the Red Cross had no right to exist if it could not reach the hostages, determine their condition and provide them with medical treatment and medications. He added:

“Every day that passes is another failure for the Red Cross.”

Even more shocking was a meeting with hostage families. Someone from the ICRC went to meet hostage families, and the Red Cross responded to pleas to deliver medication to the hostages with reprimands of the hostage families, telling them to think about the Palestinians. Imagine saying to a recent rape victim, “Can you think about others?”

In the circumstances, perhaps it is not surprising that a reported mathematical breakdown of the ICRC's statements on social media showed that 77% of them

solely condemn Israel, while only 7% solely condemn Hamas—an 11 times difference, which surely points to a worrying trend towards political bias in the ICRC. Bearing in mind its second world war history, that is deeply shaming. Criticism of the organisation is mounting across the world, as well as in Israel. Near-weekly rallies have taken place outside the ICRC offices in the United States since 7 October to demand that the Red Cross meets individuals in the Gaza strip.

We are asking His Majesty's Government for taxpayers' money to go to the ICRC. We should take the demands about the hostages held by Hamas seriously and urgently, because it is the ICRC's distinguished reputation that I am talking about now. I applaud its good work in so many regions around the world; I just want it to do good work for Jewish people as well as for people around the world. There are too many examples of international organisations and institutions, and national ones, that do excellent work everywhere else except where Jews are concerned. It is for the ICRC's reputation that I speak now. Where it does such excellent work internationally in other cases, I want it to do excellent work for Jewish people, who are being tortured, with children being kept hostage.

This issue has led to deep-seated feelings of frustration and disappointment. I will conclude by saying that I am sure that His Majesty's Treasury and His Majesty's Ministers in the Treasury will think carefully, as they always do—I know that they will—about spending taxpayers' money.

5.3 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Sir Michael Ellis) for their contributions. I have heard my right hon. and learned Friend, as I am sure has the ICRC.

The purpose of the Bill is to enable the Government to treat the CPA and the ICRC in a manner comparable to that of an international organisation. My right hon. and learned Friend made some broader comments and, as I say, the Government have heard them and I am sure that the ICRC has heard them.

I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for his comments, particularly the way in which he, too, recognised and applauded the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Its purpose and role are recognised across the House and around the world. There will be further debate on the Bill in Committee, so I will end my comments there.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

That the draft Paternity Leave (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 10 January, be approved.—*(Joy Morrissey.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PENSIONS

That the draft Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 14 December 2023, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Southall Crown Post Office

5.4 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I rise to present a petition for Southall Crown post office on behalf of the residents of Ealing, Southall. Southall Crown post office is being closed against the will of local residents. This afternoon, along with my constituents, I delivered the Communication Workers Union and Ealing Labour petition to Post Office Ltd's chief executive officer, Nick Read. He refused to meet us. As they provide a vital public service, we urge the House of Commons to protect this and other offices of the Crown post office network, especially in the light of the maladministration of the Post Office exposed by the Horizon scandal.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with Post Office Limited and Nick Read CEO to ensure that Southall Crown Post Office is not closed.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Ealing Southall in the county of Middlesex,

Declares that Southall Crown Post Office should not be closed by Post Office Limited.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with Post Office Limited and Nick Read CEO to ensure that Southall Crown Post Office is not closed.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002918]

British Justice System and International Corruption Cases

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

5.6 pm

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): This is the third debate on oligarchs and lawfare that I have led in the past two years. It is unfortunate that it is necessary to return once again to this matter, but it is just as crucial as ever.

In the last three decades, London has been swamped by a tidal wave of money that has poured in from Russia, other ex-Soviet states, China, and other corrupt regimes around the world. Cash-hungry charities, universities and political parties have gladly accepted that money, and have looked at those deep-pocketed oligarchs with green-eyed gullibility. All have shown an excessive willingness to overlook the misbehaviour of the people supplying the money.

My previous debate on this subject was in response to the bullying of a former Member of this place, Charlotte Leslie, by someone who has sought to take advantage of this cash-for-access attitude: Mohamed Amersi. Over the past decade, Amersi has set out to purchase a reputation in the British establishment, seeking to be known as an upright citizen and philanthropist. He even has a name for it: "access capitalism." However, his fame has turned to notoriety, as more and more worrying information has come to light about his past. He trained his sights on Ms Leslie because of her proper exercise of due diligence in regard to him. That came after he attempted to take control of the Conservative Middle East Council, which Ms Leslie runs, and then in turn sought to set up his own rival organisation.

Amersi accused Ms Leslie of libel for what she had said about him, in an excessively long, drawn-out and expensive legal case that also encompassed a wrongful claim of a breach of data protection rules. But his campaign against her went far beyond the case itself; he set out to destroy her reputation. There were lies that she sexually blackmailed men; the collection of intimate details about her family; physical intimidation; threatening letters sent by notorious legal firm Carter-Ruck to journalists and MPs, including myself, claiming that Ms Leslie consorted with sanctioned individuals; and an obsessive, misogynistic and ultimately defamatory hate campaign conducted on social media by Amersi himself.

Ms Leslie has at last been vindicated in court, with Mr Justice Nicklin noting Amersi's

"exorbitant approach to the litigation",

and the fact that

"Subjecting a person to successive civil claims can be a hallmark of abusive conduct".

Amersi clearly hoped that he could break Ms Leslie's resolve and force her to concede through bullying, intimidation and the threat of financial ruin. He failed. He also sought to intimidate a current Member of this place, the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who had likewise tried to shed light on his dealings.

Thanks to those two people and the relentless work of journalists such as Tom Burgis, upon whose new book "Cuckooland" I will draw today, we know that Amersi is deeply immersed in a twilight world of backroom bribes,

creative accountancy, and a whole lot of smoke and mirrors. That is why he was so desperate to suppress Ms Leslie's claims: he did not want to be exposed and have his carefully crafted public image—that of a savvy entrepreneur and generous philanthropist—shredded. With that in mind, a closer look at his past is warranted.

The names of the regimes that Amersi has aided, abetted and enriched make for a shopping list of dictatorships and autocracies. First, let us look at Russia—as with so many tales of corruption and kleptocracy, the story starts in Russia. In 2005, Amersi was an adviser in a deal with the Danish lawyer and businessman Jeffrey Galmond. Galmond claimed to own a large swathe of the Russian telecoms market. In reality, though, he was said to be a frontman for the Russian telecoms Minister and Putin ally Leonid Reiman, who used Galmond to exercise his control over the sector. That was confirmed by a Swiss arbitration tribunal in 2006, which noted that Reiman arranged deals to “misappropriate” Russian state assets “for his personal enrichment”. It seems likely that Amersi's payment for the deal—\$4 million—came from the proceeds of crime against the Russian people, funnelled via Galmond.

In an affidavit issued by Galmond the year before the deal Amersi advised on, Galmond acknowledged the existence of allegations about his relationship with Reiman. We know that Amersi would have had a copy of that affidavit, which surely should have raised some questions in his mind, yet the deal went ahead and Amersi got his \$4 million. It was a straightforward case of a fixer being rewarded for facilitating a deal. Of course, Amersi denies knowing the truth about Galmond, but we have to ask ourselves how ignorant someone working on such deals could really have been. It had been clear for years that the post-Soviet regime in Russia was a kleptocracy. Indeed, Alexander Litvinenko was murdered in 2006 because he had been investigating post-Soviet corruption.

However, Russia is not the only place of interest. I also want to focus on a few places where Amersi has been active: Uzbekistan, Nepal and Kazakhstan. In those places, Amersi worked as a representative of TeliaSonera, a large Swedish telecoms firm. His pay was an astonishing £19,000 a day. That gives us an idea of what TeliaSonera thought he brought to the company, but the question has to be asked: what on earth could Amersi possibly bring to the table to justify a salary of nearly £7 million a year?

In Uzbekistan, the deal Amersi was involved in led to a finding of criminal activity. In essence, TeliaSonera—the company Amersi worked for—agreed to buy a company controlled by the President of Uzbekistan's daughter for a hugely inflated price in order to gain access to the Uzbek market. That company and its Uzbek subsidiary later admitted that it had paid

“more than \$331 million in bribes to an Uzbek official”.

That is corruption 101: paying a bribe by vastly overpaying in a business deal that ultimately profits members of a corrupt regime. The American Department of Justice confirmed that TeliaSonera

“corruptly built a lucrative telecommunications business in Uzbekistan, using bribe payments wired around the world through accounts here in New York City.”

As a result of all this, various judicial authorities ended up imposing fines of nearly \$1 billion on TeliaSonera in 2017. Amersi pleads ignorance—if we believe his version

of events, he had no idea that TeliaSonera was crafting a massive bung for a corrupt post-Soviet regime. However, Amersi knew that the Uzbek businessman with whom TeliaSonera was dealing ran a telecoms company that, according to a memo that Amersi had seen, was controlled by affiliates of the Uzbek President's daughter. That will be something of a theme in these cases: Amersi saying that he could not possibly have known, but then being exposed by the documentary evidence. The pattern is that of a specialist in shady dealing, and it was for that specialism that TeliaSonera was paying him nearly £7 million a year.

Amersi's work for TeliaSonera extended to Nepal, where he helped that company gain access to the telecoms market. At the time, Nepal was controlled by a corrupt Maoist regime. In this sphere, Amersi facilitated a deal with Nepalese business tycoon Ajeya Raj Sumargi, which involved many millions of dollars finding its way to Sumargi. However, it was not really Sumargi whose friendship TeliaSonera sought; it was that of the corrupt Maoist Government. That much is clear from a 2013 report commissioned by TeliaSonera and carried out by private intelligence specialists Control Risks, which notes that its sources believed Sumargi

“handles and invests unaccounted money for various Maoist leaders.”

Control Risks further reported that Sumargi's relationship with leading Nepalese politician, and now Prime Minister, Prachanda

“extends beyond the realms of business”.

It appears Sumargi even bought Prachanda a house in his sister-in-law's name. The report also noted existing allegations of bribery and corruption against Sumargi, and claims of

“unethical or illegal business practices”.

Even after this report, Amersi urged TeliaSonera to maintain its relationship with Sumargi, which it did to the tune of millions of dollars.

Yet another example of this pattern is found in Kazakhstan, where Amersi facilitated a large questionable business deal to the benefit of a banker accused of being a front for the corrupt Kazakh regime. Both TeliaSonera and Amersi were handsomely rewarded for this. Once again, Amersi will claim he could not possibly have known of this corruption, but this is a clear pattern of behaviour. This is a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

As I have said, in all these cases Amersi maintains his innocence. In fact, he told Mr Burgis that he would only deem a potential business partner to be corrupt if there was 100% proof—a higher bar, of course, than that of a criminal court, and a bar rarely reached, but never reached if you always look the other way.

A report by the highly respected legal firm Norton Rose Fulbright, commissioned by TeliaSonera in the wake of its corruption scandal, noted that the

“nature of the services and the relationships provided”

by Amersi were

“not transparent, it appears often deliberately so.”

It stated that, in his dealings with TeliaSonera, Amersi

“was taking no obvious risk”,

and did not have the kind of overheads associated with an investment bank, yet was being paid like one. Throughout the report, Amersi was referred to as Mr “XY”,

if Members care to read it. The report noted that in some cases he was apparently paid twice for providing the same service, at one point receiving a fee of \$30 million. It also highlighted back-to-back payment arrangements—a classic laundering exercise—whereby TeliaSonera would pay his company, and his company would then pay the third party in question the same amount.

I would like to turn to Amersi's relationship with the British legal system, which is the core of this. Much has been said about this in the past, and I do not want to repeat what I and others have said in this House, but there is one aspect we must focus on, and it relates to Amersi's legal case against Charlotte Leslie. That was one of the key strategic lawsuits against public participation that we talked about when we raised the SLAPPs campaign back in January 2022.

In a hearing in this case in June last year, the presiding judge, Mr Justice Nicklin, asked both sides to state what costs they had incurred in fighting the case to that point. Ms Leslie's team provided the information, but Mr Amersi's lawyers failed or refused to do so. This was rather odd: as Justice Nicklin pointed out, Amersi's lawyers were declining to provide information that was already in the public domain. As he put it:

“Would you help me with how you can maintain a claim of confidentiality when you have given an interview to a newspaper in which you have told the newspaper how much your costs are?”

That interview from June 2021 was with Tom Burgis and published in the *Financial Times*.

The lawyers' response in court was to say that Burgis's reporting was inaccurate and misrepresented the truth: the figure quoted by Burgis—£300,000—was wrong, and Amersi had never said it. In fact, however, the transcript of the interview shows exactly what he said:

“£260,000 worth of costs, right? Nearly £300,000 now, after the DPA”—

Data Protection Act—

“filings’ against Ms Leslie.”

Amersi went on to confirm the £300,000 figure in an email to the *Private Eye* journalist Richard Brooks in 2021, and his lawyers—from the notorious firm Carter-Ruck—did the same in a threatening letter they sent to the *Financial Times* in 2022. Yet in court, Amersi's lawyers told Mr Justice Nicklin that the costs had

“not been revealed to Mr Burgis”,

which is a lie. Amersi claimed in a sworn witness statement that he

“did not say that my legal costs were approaching £300,000”,

which is also a lie. In short, Burgis's reporting was correct, and Amersi and his lawyers knew that when they told the court it was not. I am not a lawyer, but that would appear to me to be perjury.

A picture emerges of an attempt to avoid justice by obscuring the truth. Indeed, it is not only the court system that Mr Amersi has sought to bend his will; he has attempted to buy his way into the British establishment and, worryingly, he has had some success. Amersi has managed to recast himself as a philanthropist and a benefactor, rather than the shady political fixer for corrupt politicians that he really is. He has donated to charities, academic institutions and the Conservative party, and apparently he now intends to donate to Labour. Clearly, he will do whatever he can to get influence.

The British establishment is clearly vulnerable. There is a green-eyed gullibility at the top of our society, with institutions happy to Hoover up cash without asking questions. I am afraid that the origin of that vulnerability dates back to the Blair years, when a tendency to overlook inconvenient truths about wealthy donors became embedded, but it has to be said that it did not improve with subsequent Governments either. Indeed, the sad truth is that Amersi is just one of many people who take advantage of our freedoms to enrich themselves and to dodge accountability.

I welcome that the action the Government have taken to make it harder for oligarchs and their enablers to bend our justice system to their will, but there is much more work to be done to ensure that British justice is the enemy of these corrupt individuals, and not a tool for achieving their wicked ends. The Government are properly starting to change the law on SLAPPs, but to deal with current misbehaviour, we need to enforce the laws that already exist to protect ordinary British citizens. There must also be more scrutiny of such people's attempts to buy their way to a good reputation.

Although I have set out to detail an accurate account of Amersi's behaviour based on extensive documentation, it is for the appropriate legal bodies to come to a decision on his innocence or guilt. However, we know that Amersi facilitated corrupt deals. The repeat nature of the murky practices involved is striking, and he put Charlotte Leslie through years of persecution and torture for her due diligence, in what may have amounted—in my view, it did—to criminal harassment.

The Bribery Act 2010 is clear that it is an offence for a British citizen to bribe a foreign public official, no matter where in the world that action takes place. Mr Amersi is a British citizen, and he must obey British law. His dealings in the former Soviet Union and Nepal are therefore surely a matter for the National Crime Agency to consider. Furthermore, the Metropolitan police must now consider whether the actions against Charlotte Leslie constitute criminal harassment, and the judiciary should consider the question of perjury that I outlined a moment or two ago. I will send copies of the *Hansard* for today's debate to all those agencies. I know that the Solicitors Regulation Authority is already reviewing a complaint about the conduct of Carter-Ruck in these matters.

The very due diligence that Ms Leslie has been attacked for is exactly what we need when it comes to people like Amersi. We must ensure that it happens, and that it is not prevented by the kind of bullying deployed by Mr Amersi. All this is a test case for how we handle corruption and cronyism in our country. It is imperative we meet that test if London is not to become a global capital for sleaze.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) for having secured it. He has been an exemplary advocate on the challenges that corruption poses to the rule of law and freedom of speech.

My right hon. Friend has raised some serious issues. As he will know, investigations are conducted independently of His Majesty's Government, and we are unable to

speculate or comment specifically on any individual allegations. This debate engages issues of fundamental importance to our democracy and values. We must confront the reality that, while our justice system stands as a beacon of fairness and equality for many, the corrosive effects of corruption can undermine justice here and around the world. In acknowledging that challenge, we affirm our commitment to uphold the principles of justice and to ensure that the rule of law remains steadfast. Corruption can threaten our national security and prosperity through a slow erosion of trust in institutions at home and overseas. Development is slowed when poorer nations have their resources drained away, which hampers their ability to mobilise revenue and facilitate growth and investment while undermining wider efforts to reduce poverty.

At its most extreme, corruption can fuel state capture, where private interests trump the public interest as corrupt actors take over the state institutions and decision-making processes to serve their own agendas. While instances of corruption may be isolated, their impact reverberates far beyond the confines of individual cases, undermining public trust and confidence in the legal system as a whole.

The British justice system has in recent years seen the rise of strategic litigation against public participation, which has a chilling effect on freedom of expression and civic engagement, deterring individuals and organisations from exercising their right to free speech for fear of legal reprisal. We know that free speech is critical in the fight against corruption, for it enables truth telling where corrupt actors rely on precisely the opposite. The climate of fear and self-censorship that SLAPPs create leads to stifled public debate, undermining the robust exchange that we hold as essential.

Fortunately, we can point to progress in countering SLAPPs in this jurisdiction. We were the first jurisdiction to legislate at the national level to combat SLAPPs relating to economic crime in last year's Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act. Work is also under way to ensure that new procedural rules are designed to give the legislation effect, such that SLAPPs defendants have a fair fight when confronted with abusive threats or proceedings.

Just last week, the Government were proud to announce their support for a private Member's Bill on SLAPPs introduced by the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), whom I congratulate on his commitment to challenging abusive litigation that undermines British justice. The Bill follows the approach set out in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act, which as hon. Members know, introduces new defining characteristics in statute to empower judges tasked with identifying these cases, an early dismissal mechanism that cuts short cases with improper purposes at their heart, and a costs protection regime that will provide defendants with clarity around the costs risk they are exposed to when responding to SLAPP threats. The Bill passed its Second Reading, which is an essential step in legislating comprehensively against SLAPPs, no matter their subject matter or the cause of action in question.

I am pleased to note the support that we have received from stakeholders across media, law, civil society and both Houses of Parliament. It is a credit to our country that so many are prepared to come together to tackle this issue across the political spectrum. However, combating corruption and preserving access to justice requires more than just legislative solutions. It demands a cultural shift that places ethics and integrity at the forefront of our justice system.

We are fortunate in this country to have independent regulators that uphold the highest professional standards. The Solicitors Regulation Authority took swift action by launching a thematic review of SLAPP activity and published a warning notice early on when the issue came to light. That encouraged renewed engagement, with guidance on aggressive correspondence and the notorious letters often issued at the start of SLAPP claims: those marked "confidential" or "without prejudice". Such labels are designed to intimidate people who may not have immediate access to legal advice, such that they withdraw from intended publications.

We are working together across Government to champion a co-ordinated approach to SLAPPs. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport leads the SLAPPs taskforce, which brings together actors in the media freedom space to propose non-legislative measures to stamp out SLAPPs. The taskforce is making progress across workstreams that seek to raise awareness and develop regulatory responses on the issue, benefiting from the depth of expertise among the media and law professionals taking part.

Aside from abusive lawsuits, let me address the Government efforts to combat corruption in the broadest sense. It is an undoubted benefit that the UK is an open economy with one of the world's major financial centres in the City of London. That means that we need strong defences to prevent bribery and corruption here and abroad. The Government took decisive action on bribery by modernising UK criminal law through the Bribery Act reforms in 2010. That legislation set the international gold standard for anti-bribery and corruption laws, and was found to be an "exemplary piece of legislation" by the other place following post-legislative scrutiny.

In the past fortnight, the Serious Fraud Office has brought charges against two individuals for alleged bribery in the oil and gas sector in the middle east. The charges build on a number of critical enforcement milestones that have been met in recent years, including our largest ever financial penalties for bribery following the conviction of Glencore, which was ordered to pay £280 million in 2022.

I am proud of all that is being done to keep corruption at bay. Whether through action against illicit finance or legislation that protects public participation in the public interest, we must continue this work together to ensure that corruption finds no home in our jurisdiction.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 28 February 2024

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

Funding for Youth Services

9.30 am

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered trends in funding levels for youth services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. The significance of good youth services for our young people's development cannot be overstated. They provide essential building blocks for a full and rewarding life, a safe place, acceptance, guidance, friendship, physical and mental health support, academic support and employment skills. Youth services set young people up for a healthy, happy and confident life as part of communities across Britain, acting as an indispensable component of our national infrastructure. I have seen that at first hand in my constituency of Luton South. I want to say a huge thank you to everyone in Luton supporting our young people. They are a credit to our town and play such an important part in giving the best start in life to our young people.

Luton Council does an excellent job working with our voluntary and community sector to ensure that all young people enjoy their lives and reach their full potential. Whether it is the Scouts, the Guides, Tokko youth centre, the Centre for Youth and Community Development, Next Generation Youth Theatre, Youthscape, various cadets or sports clubs and our excellent music service, our young people have a variety of activities that they can get involved in.

That support and meaningful activities for young people have arguably never been needed more, with challenges such as loneliness and societal pressures stemming from the global health pandemic and the cost of living crisis making it harder for our young people to get on. In some cases, youth services are about ensuring that a young person is guided away from being drawn into gangs or other negative activities. However, more often than not, they are about nurturing the confidence, resilience and skills of our young people.

The benefits of well-resourced youth services are obvious for all to see, but rather than just reel off stats and facts, I want to use this opportunity to amplify our young people's voices. Here are some testimonies of young people, as given to the YMCA, about the importance of youth services. Sam, 16, said:

"I wasn't keen on the idea of attending a youth club at first, it was quite out of my comfort zone but since I started attending, I have grown in confidence and have begun speaking to people more often...Attending YMCA has made a real difference to my life."

Rachel, 16, told YMCA:

"It was around a year ago that I started to struggle with anxiety and depression and at first, I did nothing. My older sister was already attending the youth club at YMCA and invited me along. I love it here. I feel very safe and supported in the company of the youth workers—they are very caring and always sit and talk with me when I feel upset or need to cry. Without YMCA, my mental health would be way worse as I would have no one to talk to and nothing to do."

Idris, also 16, said:

"I suffer from anxiety and anger issues. I tried to battle it alone, but it didn't work. A friend suggested I come to YMCA. I always have fun when I attend YMCA and it makes me feel really happy. It has helped me as I can take positive memories away from my time here and when I am feeling low, I can remember that I have Monday's youth club to look forward to."

There is no better testimony than from those who actually use the services and are reaping the benefit.

Unfortunately, today's debate is an opportunity not just to sing the praises of our wonderful youth services, but to recognise the reality of a severely underfunded, under-supported sector that has been deprioritised by the Conservatives.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend has given fantastic examples of the importance of youth services and the work of the YMCA. Does she agree that one problem in society at the moment is that children in the more deprived communities are even less likely to be able to access the services that they need for the sort of support that she has described for her constituents?

Rachel Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I wanted to have this debate so that we could press that point, particularly for constituencies similar to mine of Luton South.

After 14 years of the Conservatives cutting funding, local authorities are struggling under the substantial weight of funding pressures. Youth services are often one of the first services to be cut. Councils and councillors want to deliver high-quality youth services for young people, but the Conservatives have given them no choice. My local council, Luton, is a case in point: it has had £170 million cut from its budget since 2010.

The Local Government Association has stated that councils in England face a funding gap of £4 billion over the next two years just to keep services standing still. Significant budget pressures mean that there are few options available to maintain high-quality youth services. Children's social care puts significant pressure on local authority finances, so general, more universal services for young people are compromised as the limited resources are targeted at ensuring that the young people most in need are kept safe and supported. It is a difficult decision that councillors of all party colours must make, but the Government are ultimately responsible, due to their swingeing cuts to local government finances.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. My experience as a serving Somerset councillor is that investing in youth services is often seen as a preventive measure to address future social and economic issues. Somerset has seen an 80% reduction in real-terms spending on youth services over the past 12 years. Does the hon. Lady agree that cutting such services leads to higher costs associated with problems that could have been mitigated through early intervention and support for young people, and that local government needs to be adequately funded?

Rachel Hopkins: I thank the hon. Lady for making an excellent point. I absolutely agree, and I will address that later in my speech.

[Rachel Hopkins]

During the Conservatives' time in office, youth organisations have fought to keep delivering great youth work, amid a £1.1 billion real-terms cut to local authority spending on youth services. I thank the YMCA and the National Youth Agency for their support in preparation for this debate. The YMCA's "On the ropes" report found that drastic underfunding means that spending per head on youth services in England has suffered a real-terms cut of 75% since 2010-11, which means that it sits at £48 per five to 17-year-old. Although cuts have been significant across the board, there are clear regional funding inequalities. In 2022-23, the lowest spend per young person was in the west midlands, at £24, followed by the east of England and the south-east, at £38. In contrast, in London it is £69 and in Yorkshire and the Humber it is £71.

I am also concerned about the funding cuts to my constituency of Luton South since the Conservatives took power. The YMCA found that real-terms spending on youth services in Luton has been cut by 73%, with spend per young person sitting at £34.60. In the central Bedfordshire part of my constituency, spending per head for young people is £25.17—a 53% cut. Although passionate youth workers continue to battle to deliver high-quality support, many have had to leave the profession: there has been a 35% reduction in full-time equivalent youth workers employed by local authorities in England over the same period.

This should not have to be said, but all children, irrespective of background or geography, deserve high-quality youth services to support their development. After 14 years of the Conservatives, youth services are at breaking point, and too many young people have no access to youth services at all. Our voluntary and community sector has brilliantly stepped up to fill the gap left by the Conservative Government cuts, but that is not a long-term solution.

The physical and mental health support previously offered by youth services has been shifted on to schools and overworked, under-resourced teachers. Schools have their own pressures. According to National Education Union research, in Luton South per-pupil funding has been cut by £751 since the Conservatives took power—that is more than £14 million stripped from our school system. The case for greater resources for youth services is compelling. Youth work has proven, positive impacts on improving young people's mental health and wellbeing, behaviour, engagement with education and attainment. Youth workers achieve life-changing outcomes for young people through intervention and prevention, building voluntary, trusted and educative relationships with the young people they support.

If the Minister needs to hear an economic case for youth services, for every pound the Government invest in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40. Youth work saves £500 million annually by preventing incidents of antisocial behaviour, knife crime and other associated criminal justice costs, according to UK Youth and Frontier Economics. To pre-empt what the Minister might say in response about Government funding directed at specific youth club buildings: as welcome as any capital funding is, there is a pressing need for additional support for training and sustaining well-qualified youth workers. There is an absence of a

co-ordinated strategy across Government Departments, leading to fragmented and insufficient funding for targeted youth services.

The YMCA has set out the following recommendations to support youth services. It mentions:

"sustained and long-term revenue funding to bolster universal and open-access youth services, catering to all young people throughout the year",

a cross-departmental strategy for youth services,

"fostering a long-term vision for nationwide provision",

and enforcing

"a duty on local authorities to ensure that all young people can access youth services in their respective areas, with necessary government support and resourcing."

Will the Minister respond to each of those recommendations in his closing remarks?

I want the impact of this debate to be that the Minister, his officials and other Government Departments reflect on the true value of our youth services. I do not doubt that the Government recognise the good those services do in our community, but I ask that additional actions be taken to ensure that they receive the support they desperately need. Will the Minister outline what recent discussions he has had with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Education and the Home Department about long-term resources for youth services? Will he also outline what steps the Government are taking to increase the number of full-time equivalent youth workers across the UK to ensure that all young people receive the support they deserve?

Labour recognises the need for a long-term, co-ordinated approach to revitalise the delivery of youth services. At our last party conference, we announced a 10-year programme to bring together services and communities to support young people, providing new youth mentors and mental health hubs in every community, and youth workers and pupil referral units in A&E, along with a programme of public sector reform to help to deliver that. Communities will come together to transform the lives of children, giving them the best possible start in life. Will the Minister explain why the Government have not implemented such a scheme during their 14-year tenure?

I look forward to hearing the contributions of Members from across the House. Together, we must continue to call for Government action to ensure that young people in our constituencies get the best possible start in life. That means supporting our local youth services and youth workers.

9.42 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, I believe for the first time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on securing this important debate. It is a fact that, as a direct result of cuts, more young people are being enticed into crime, and we have seen a rise in antisocial behaviour across our communities. We have heard about the new YMCA report, which highlights the striking challenges in funding youth services. I have no doubt about the importance of those services for building young people's confidence, resilience and skills.

Based in Darlington, Tees Valley YMCA plays a vital role in providing affordable housing and engaging youth programmes, and promoting overall community resilience. I pay tribute to it, and to other charities, churches and community groups that work with young people. Just as well that they do, because publicly funded services have been decimated by 14 years of Tory rule. Perhaps the fact that there are no Conservative Members here sitting behind the Minister to contribute to this debate illustrates where the Government and the Conservative party are when it comes to youth services.

The YMCA report shows that councils' funding for youth services has been slashed by a real-terms average of 73% across England over the last 12 years, with an average of just £47.79 now being spent per child. The north-east has one of the lowest overall averages, at just £44. I am pleased to say that in Stockton-on-Tees the figure sits at £101.79 per child, but that is half what it was in 2012. In Redcar and Cleveland, it decreased by 79%, in Hartlepool by 84%, in Darlington by 89% and in Middlesbrough by 94%. Meanwhile, in the City of London, average spending per young person is £493.67. Young people are our future, but the Government are not investing in them, particularly not in the north-east of England. Our young people are robbed of opportunities to learn, grow and, perhaps more importantly, play.

Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the number of council youth centres in England fell by 53%, from 917 to 427. The number of council youth workers is down by 25%. Funding of youth services is not mandatory, and the localised nature of provision has meant a wide variation in spending on youth services across the country; I have already illustrated that. As reported in the Department for Education's local authority and school expenditure for the 2022-23 financial year, local authorities increased expenditure on youth services by 3% in 2021-22, but that was easily swallowed up by inflation. Examining 2022-23 spending levels, the figures still represent a £1.1 billion real-terms reduction in local authority expenditure since 2010-11. In the north-east and the west midlands, for example, real-terms cuts over that time have exceeded 80%, while in Yorkshire and the Humber, the east midlands and the east of England, there have been cuts of more than two thirds, with a reduction of 68%.

In 2019, there was a debate on the Floor of the House on youth services. The Minister of the day, recognising similar concerns, spoke of what was being done to improve the situation for youth workers. She said:

"On training for youth workers, we will renew the youth work curriculum and national occupational standards. We will also renew the entry level qualifications into youth work, and I am pleased to announce today that we will establish a new level 3 youth work apprenticeship. We know that these are particularly valuable to frontline youth workers—paid workers and, importantly, volunteers—and we are doing this because we know the power of a trusted relationship between a young person and an appropriately trained adult. This can absolutely transform a young person's life."—[*Official Report*, 24 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 1370.]

I ask the Minister of this day: how has all that gone? Have those things happened? Are the Government's measures having the predicted impact? Sadly, I fear that there are no real positive answers to the questions I have posed this morning.

Youth services also play a vital role in tackling youth violence. In Home Office questions earlier this week, I told the House that

"Children as young as 12 are being"

paid "pocket money" by dealers in Stockton to

"deliver class A and class B drugs"—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2024; Vol. 746, c. 8.]

No one else is offering them anything, and they are in thrall to these criminals, who act with impunity. Less wealthy communities see more crime and are more likely to be victims, creating a disparity and inequality. With an average of 3,000 incidents of antisocial behaviour recorded every day, communities feel abandoned by authorities and increasingly unsafe.

The Youth Endowment Fund's November 2023 report says:

"Many teenage children are changing their behaviour due to feeling unsafe, with 1 in 5 saying they'd skipped school, and most that commit violence are not getting the support they need."

Another key finding was:

"Children whose parents made some of the most difficult changes in response to cost of living pressures had higher rates of victimisation. Victimisation rates were 31% among those now using foodbanks, 29% for those whose parents asked them to wear old clothes, 25% for those not allowed to go on school trips and 23% in households where parents skipped meals or reduced portion sizes."

The report also says that

"48% of perpetrators of violence were also victims. This increases to 64% for children receiving free school meals, 81% for children in gangs and 87% for those who had contact with the police about a suspected offence."

Importantly, the report also says:

"Only 16% of children who perpetrated violence were offered support or training to control their behaviour, meaning that 84% received no support"

whatsoever, and that

"more vulnerable children...were even less likely to receive support (12%)".

I know that there is cross-party support for improving youth services in recognition of their impact, but after 14 years of the Conservatives the country needs change. They have failed on the economy, failed on public services, failed on living standards and failed our young people.

A report from the Select Committee on Levelling Up, Housing and Communities entitled "Financial distress in local authorities" has stressed that a fundamental review of local authority funding must take place following the next UK general election. Our young people cannot wait, though. They are being exploited now. They are being criminalised now; they are being bored into antisocial behaviour. The Government have failed them. We need that election now. We really need action for our young people.

9.50 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on introducing this absolutely fantastic and timely debate. I endorse her comments and those that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) just made, including the figures and statistics that he provided about the challenges that we have with our youth services and with what is

[Yasmin Qureshi]

happening to young people, especially from working-class and poorer communities. He described a picture very similar to what is happening in my constituency of Bolton South East, which, in the indices of social deprivation, is 38th in the country, so I genuinely thank him for the facts and figures that he highlighted. I will not repeat them, but I agree with everything that my two colleagues said.

Many other Members will touch on this later. We know that youth centres and places like them provide support to young people as safe places to socialise, develop and learn new skills and gain new experiences. In Bolton, we are blessed with many fantastic youth services that do amazing work, but they are all voluntary. I have seen at first hand how these groups allow children in Bolton to go on trips that they might not normally go on, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North said, or to gain access to sports facilities, music and art equipment—an experience that they would not otherwise get.

We have national groups such as the YMCA and the Scouts, which are doing fantastic work in Bolton. The YMCA has just invested £6.1 million in its new Y-Pad building, which is providing community space and housing for young people leaving foster care. They are another group of young people whom we ignore massively; we do not have full and proper provision for them when they leave foster care. Those groups are filling gaps left by the cuts to local authority and Government budgets. We have also seen brilliant local services such as the Bolton Lads & Girls Club, Be The Change, in Farnworth, and Zac's Youth Bar, in Kearsley. These services are driven by local need and run by dedicated volunteers.

These organisations and their volunteers help in combating antisocial behaviour and improving young people's mental and physical health. Why, then, have we seen a stark reduction in their funding? The benefits of youth services are very clear. It is also clear that they are undervalued and have not been funded properly since 2010. In addition, as a result of covid, the levels of stress and mental health problems for young people have increased massively. Along with the elderly, they were one of the groups that in some respects suffered the most.

We need a sea change in the Government's approach to youth services. Young people are a very easy target. We often hear that they are lazy, are glued to their Xbox, are social media addicts and other expressions of that nature, when we know that that is not correct. We need there to be safe outdoor and indoor spaces to enable young people to play sports, socialise and engage with the real world.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Member for allowing my intervention. Volunteer-led Somerton library has recently been highlighted as excellent in a review of public libraries. It plays, as the hon. Member was suggesting, a crucial role in engaging young people. However, the national crisis in local authorities' finances will threaten the future provision of libraries in places around the country, such as Somerton. Does she agree that this is a vital service, and that we need to ensure that our local authorities are adequately funded to provide those crucial services for young people and wider communities?

Yasmin Qureshi: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. We need properly funded youth services because they are the key to unlock the potential of many young people, especially in communities like mine. The young are our future. Most of us here are heading towards retirement—well, some are. We need young people to be the workers providing for us in 10, 15, and 20 years' time. We need to invest in them because they are our future. If we do not want to do it for a moral reason, let us do it because of straightforward economic reality. We need good young people who have been trained properly and educated, and are able to look after themselves and contribute to our society.

I will end on one particular aspect of youth services. Throughout my life as a barrister practising in criminal law, I dealt with many young people coming through the criminal justice system. A lot of them had problems within their families, or were subject to violence or abuse, and had an addiction problem. Over the past 10 years or so, we have seen a massive reduction in provision for rehabilitation centres for drug and alcohol intoxication. At the moment, trying to get a place in drug or alcohol rehab can take months and months. I ask the Government to look at this, because when some young people unfortunately end up in the criminal justice system, it is often because of an addiction to alcohol and drugs. There are not facilities at the other end to help wean them off this drug and alcohol addiction. I hope the Minister is listening to us, and I hope that we get some real commitment to providing funding to youth services and to tackling the issues of drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres.

9.57 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on securing this debate. I do not think there is enough chance to talk about youth services in our parliamentary debates, so I am really glad to have this opportunity. Youth work is so important, and I am surprised not to see more Members here—there are no Members here from the Conservative party except for the Minister. It is an issue for all our constituents throughout the country.

I would like to pay tribute to some of the youth work that goes on in my constituency: Regenerate; Group 64 at the Putney Arts Theatre; Free2B for LGBTQ+ young people; the many church youth workers we have; the Ahmadiyya youth movement; the Girl Guides, Brownies, and Scouts; sea cadets; sports clubs; SW15 Music, which provides affordable music lessons; and Love to Learn, where I used to work, which provides youth work for children from an asylum-seeking refugee background. I also pay tribute to Wandsworth Council and all the youth workers, especially in Roehampton Base, for all the amazing work they do with our young people in increasingly difficult circumstances. I will focus on those difficult circumstances today.

In the 1990s, I was a youth worker. I worked for the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs, working with young people across the country. I have been a passionate advocate for youth services since then, because I saw the essential work that youth workers do to enable access to skills, mental health support, and support for families and good relationships. It can be a safe space to boost

self-esteem, have fun, try out challenges and skills, and potentially help young people see a different future from the one they have around them, because they are meeting up with other young people and having a range of experiences.

Regenerate is a fantastic youth work centre in my constituency, and it describes a stool with three legs—families, school and informal youth work. We need all three of those legs, but I feel that currently one of those legs has been cut off. We have been hearing the statistics from other Members. According to reports by the National Youth Agency and the YMCA, youth services have been cut by an astonishing 73% since 2010. Annual spending has dropped by £1 billion and 4,500 qualified youth workers have been lost from the frontline. In London, over £240 million was cut from youth services budgets between 2011 and 2021, and those cuts continue. Half of young people across the country do not have access to a youth service and do not know what is available in their area. Where voluntary and community groups have sought to fill that void, there is a crisis in volunteer recruitment, which was made worse by the pandemic, with a shortfall of at least 40,000 adult volunteers.

That amounts to 14 long years of our young people being let down. There is no more damning indictment of 14 years of Conservative cuts than the closed and decaying Alton and Roehampton youth club buildings in the middle of one of the most deprived estates in Wandsworth and in London. Every day, we walk past a building where there used to be a youth club, but it is sitting there completely closed. Youth workers I have spoken to said they had built up great relationships and trust with local families that cannot be rebuilt quickly, if at all. It is going to take a long time to rebuild our youth services.

The Government cannot talk about social mobility and levelling up without also talking about supporting youth services. Not only have they failed to invest in youth services and community spaces dedicated to them, but their approach is fragmented and unco-ordinated. The Home Office funds some youth services aimed at reducing violent crime. The Department for Work and Pensions commissions some employment-focused youth programmes. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport funded some of the building of new youth centres.

There does not seem to be a streamlined strategy to look at this in the round. Add in all the cuts to local government, and there is a perfect storm of failure of our young people. There should be a streamlined strategy to ensure a base level of universal open-access youth services. Young people must be a priority; it is imperative that the Government act to prevent missed opportunities for young people to get the support they need, from which we all benefit as a society.

The real-world impact of the cuts and patchwork approach to provision of youth services is damning. Some 24% of young respondents to a recent survey by the youth charity OnSide reported that they do not have a safe space to go where they feel they belong. With nowhere else to turn, and without the guidance, encouragement and mentoring that young people crave and youth workers are excellent at providing, they are abandoned to those who do not have their best interests

at heart, and often make bad decisions, lacking the support they need to stop crime and antisocial behaviour in our communities.

As the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime made it clear in a report, each reduction in the number of youth centres corresponds to an increase in knife crime. Research by the University of Warwick bears that out. It found that crime participation among 10 to 15-year-olds increased by 10% in those London boroughs most affected by youth centre closures between 2010 and 2019. Those cuts have mental health and skills costs, because they have gone hand in hand with cuts to careers advisers in schools, and they have a social cost. They have a deep economic cost, too, because youth work saves £500 million of public spending through crime reduction alone.

Instead of letting down yet another generation of young people, Labour has a plan. Young Futures will be a new cross-Government national programme aimed at giving Britain's young people the best start in life. Each community will be offered a Young Futures hub, which I cannot wait to see opened in my constituency. They will bring together mental health specialists, youth workers and neighbourhood police officers to finally give young people the start in life they deserve but have been missing for far too long.

There is a serious crisis in youth work, caused by years of cuts and of not valuing youth work, youth workers and young people. That has stopped young people achieving their potential. Youth work reduces crime and enables access to skills, engagement in education, good relationships and whole-family support. It improves mental health, physical health and, yes, happiness. Action must be taken to value and invest in youth services.

At the end of my speeches in this Chamber, I normally say to the Minister, "Please can we hear your plan?" However, I do not believe that he will have a good plan, so I can only hope for a Labour Government to start changing our youth service investment as soon as possible.

10.5 am

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I place it on the record that my husband is the chair of YMCA Liverpool, which is a non-paid role. I pay tribute to all the organisations and volunteers who provide youth services in my constituency of Liverpool, Wavertree and the city of Liverpool, in particular Harthill Youth Centre, which does incredibly innovative work in my constituency.

I also pay tribute to my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), who spoke eloquently about the desperate need to reinvest in youth services. I agree with her that we must nurture the confidence, skills and resilience of our young people and ensure that they get the best start in life.

Austerity has been a political con, and we live with its consequences today. We see them everywhere in our communities and in our public sector's depleted resilience. Our children and young adults have borne the brunt more than most. The economic decisions taken post 2010, particularly between 2010 and 2015, have gutted the ability of the state to help people to help themselves. Local authorities have become beleaguered vessels of the British state: owning nothing, running nothing and

[Paula Barker]

commissioning everything—and very little at that. In the bonfire of austerity, young people and the services they relied on were always the most expendable for the coalition Government.

The record of the last Labour Government on children and young adults is a proud one. The likes of Sure Start and the Connexions service were truly radical ideas, which showed the value of a social democratic Government that prioritised the needs of future generations.

In the late 2000s and in government, the Conservative party droned on and on about dependency and waste in the public sector. That was rather insulting for those, like me, who worked in local government at the time. The rhetoric never matched the reality of the well-funded services that my colleagues and I worked hard to deliver. Youth services were about career advice, housing support, assistance for those with learning disabilities and so much more besides. They were about social inclusion, removing barriers, and helping young adults to get into education or training in a post-industrial society in which a job in the local factory was no longer guaranteed.

The economic vandalism of austerity was most pronounced in our cities. I suppose it was those pesky Labour funding formulas that, according to the Prime Minister, used to stuff all the money into deprived areas rather than into the likes of Royal Tunbridge Wells. According to the YMCA, the cuts have meant that Liverpool City Council has lost 86% of its youth service provision since 2010. That has brought its spending to just under £40 for each young person. In comparison, the Prime Minister's North Yorkshire constituency can spend over double that: £89 per young person. This is not about playing one area off against another, but those numbers betray the fact that this Government have no regard for and no interest in equality of opportunity, despite all their claims to the contrary. Young people in Liverpool, and across all our cities and towns, deserve better.

Behind those numbers is an entire generation of young people who are blissfully unaware of what they have lost and what their predecessors were afforded. Whether they are gen Z or millennial—or, indeed, just under the age of 40—our people know that for 14 years they have been subject to a Government whose ability to cement intergenerational inequality has never been surpassed, with no youth clubs or youth services, violent crime up, social isolation, a lack of mental health provision, tuition fees trebled, no homes, a housing crisis, people unable to afford to buy or rent, minimum wage discrimination, no action on the gig economy, precarious work, underemployment, and a low-wage economy. The age-old offer that each generation will have it better than the last is in the dustbin, and now we have the grim spectacle of over 136,000 of our young people homeless, with nowhere else to go. There is no plan to tackle the scourge of youth homelessness that the likes of Centrepont and the New Horizon Youth Centre in north London are calling for.

The cuts to youth services and youth provision have been the tip of the iceberg for the prevailing attitude that many politicians do not care about young people. The young people of the noughties have gone on to become the 30 and 40-year-olds waiting so very keenly to vote in this year's election, and they, like the people in

my home city of Liverpool, have exceptionally long memories. The same will no doubt be true of gen Z, who will not have any reference point for the likes of Connexions or the importance of the youth club and youth workers in their local communities, but they are angry for other reasons. Quite frankly, they have every right to be.

10.10 am

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) for securing this important debate and highlighting this key issue, which all of our constituents are facing.

I would like to start by paying tribute to what the voluntary sector is doing in my area—but it is just not enough. I grew up in Birmingham, where youth services were a lifeline for many young people. Those services provided lifetime friendships. They were a place to keep warm, eat, do homework, play, listen to music or just talk; a place to help young people develop cooking skills; a place to think, read or just have time alone, if that was what you wanted to do. Those places do not exist today. Young people are locked in bedrooms on their computers through no fault of their own. It is undoubtedly one of the hardest times in history to be a young person. They have lived through the covid pandemic, they are struggling with the cost of living, and they are unable to afford to rent or buy. That is why it is vital that we invest in youth services and support.

Since the last Labour Government, real-terms spending on youth services has fallen by 73%, which equates to £1.1 billion lost. Since 2011, youth services operated by local authorities have reduced by 53%, and since 2012 there has been a 35% reduction in full-time equivalent youth workers employed by local authorities in England. At the same time, and under the same Tory Government, child poverty has soared. It is shameful that 4.2 million children are now growing up in poverty in the UK. That is nine children in a classroom of 30 who are growing up without consistent access to warm homes, a warm dinner or a warm coat.

Like many colleagues here, I have been contacted by numerous constituents about how their children are facing the cost of living crisis. One contacted me as her disability means that she cannot walk her children to school, and the school is not able to assist with pick-ups. As a single parent, all her income goes on paying for a house that leaks, rising gas and energy bills, and a high premium on her car insurance. She is constantly cut off by the gas supplier, which takes days to switch the gas back on after she has spent ages on the phone to it. She uses her local food bank, as she spends all she has trying to keep her home warm. It is a sad fact that that case is not unique to Erdington, let alone the rest of the UK. Each of those circumstances is a reason why constituents like mine need access to better funded child services to give them the support they so desperately need.

In 2021–22—I know more recent figures were highlighted earlier—the west midlands was the region where the least was spent on young people's services. In that region an average of £33 was spent on every young person aged 11 to 19, compared with a figure of £77 in the east midlands. Eight councils since 2018 have issued a section 114 notice, signifying severe financial distress.

The Tories have wrecked our economy and plunged Britain into recession, and it is left to underfunded councils to pick up the pieces. It is therefore welcome that the Government's response to their youth review provided further details on plans to level up and expand access to youth provision through a youth guarantee. However, people in my community know those promises too well. It seems that everywhere the Government promise to level up gets left behind, including in communities such as Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale. Make no mistake: people in constituencies across the country will be holding the Government to their pledges—they are what children in our communities deserve.

Labour has a plan to break down the barriers to opportunity for young people, and child poverty reduction specialists are at the heart of our plans to support people from every background. There is absolutely no question of the value of youth services; they provide huge amounts of support and care for young people across the country. They need to be funded properly, sustained over the long term, and made accessible to everyone regardless of their background. Our young people deserve the best, which is what they will get under a Labour Government. I am confident of that.

10.17 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins); she made a really good speech, as did all her colleagues who followed, and she has secured a debate on this really important topic.

Funding for youth services has experienced a downward trend, and that has been the case for a couple of generations. That trend in funding is a representation of a trend in the priority and value that society gives youth services. They are Cinderella services—local authorities of all colours often think youth services are the part of the budget for young people that they can cut most easily. It is easier to cut funding for those services than, for example, cutting funding for school provision and other forms of formal education.

At central Government level, youth services are not seen as significant or important enough, but the importance of youth work cannot be overstated. They provide a vital third space between home and school where young people can feel safe and experience new things to expand their horizons. The trend in the reduction of the provision of youth services around the country matches trends of increasing criminality and mental health crises among young people. I am not saying there is an absolute direct correlation, but there are massive links between the two.

When we are looking at a mental health crisis—and I think that we are at the moment—investing in something that builds the resilience of young people so that they can deal with the stuff that life throws at us when we are young, and not so young, is of enormous value. I am sure somebody has tried, but it is hard to put a price on the financial savings for the criminal justice system when young people are led into areas that are profitable—away from a life of crime and into one where they make a useful contribution to their communities. Youth services also provide a place where people can develop role models that may not be available in the home. Over the last two generations, there has been a slow decline in

youth work, largely because its importance has been belittled, but when big financial shocks come, such as the 2008 financial crisis, it is the last thing to be saved. There is a reason why: too many people at the centre of Government and local government do not value it enough. Others have alluded to this.

I chaired and helped to run a youth club in my village just before I became an MP, when I was a local councillor in the village of Milnthorpe. One thing I picked up on was that the kids who do not come are the ones who actually need it. All the stats prove that people who come from relatively comfortable and well-to-do backgrounds have a much greater chance of attending some kind of youth organisation, whether to do sports or music club or whether that is one of the uniformed organisations. That is great; it is fantastic to have parents who have the time and the resource to encourage kids to do that and it is fantastic to be in social circles where that is the norm. The reality is that youth work fills the gap for so many people who do not have those opportunities. When youth work is in decline, those who miss out are the young people from the poorest backgrounds—always, always, always. The value that we can provide for younger people who come from more difficult backgrounds by providing decent youth work in those communities is absolutely enormous.

A couple of things occurred to me when we put together the Milnthorpe youth group 20-odd years ago. This was a setting where there was not a lot of public intervention; this was the early noughties, so there was probably more than there is now but certainly less than there had been previously. One of the issues we found was that we needed to be realistic in our ambition. To raise the money for a new youth centre, lots of kit and lots of staff would have held us up and taken us months, if not years, to achieve. We had low ambition and that allowed us to get good outcomes quite quickly.

We brought in a team of 20 volunteers and then tapped into organisations that already existed. Back then, the organisation we tapped into was Crusaders, now known as Urban Saints, which is the Church of England's youth wing. It was absolutely invaluable to us. That it is a reminder that, today, after a period of cutbacks over many years, so much provision comes through faith groups of different kinds around the country. That is partly out of necessity because of the way in which the state has withdrawn to a large degree from this area, and partly because those people are motivated to provide that provision because of their faith. I hope that one thing we have learned from how much we relied on faith provision during the pandemic, not just for youth work, is that local authorities, health commissioners and central Government should be less snuffy about youth provision and be celebrating those people who, because of what they believe, work so hard at providing for those in their communities, including young people.

There are people who have spoken in this debate who represent areas far more deprived than mine, but one of the challenges that we face in our communities is rurality and the dispersed nature of populations. It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. That is kind of difficult if the village has been hollowed out and is full of second homes, and there is not that much community left to support young people. There is then the issue of the distance people need to travel to get from where they live to where their nearest youth provision is.

[Tim Farron]

The lack of genuinely affordable housing and investment in social housing is a major problem in an area such as ours and around other parts of the country as well, as is public transport. I give absolute credit to the Government for the £2 bus fare—but a fat lot of good that is if there is no bus to spend it on. We need to make sure that we are investing in public transport and new routes in communities to connect young people to the provision nearest to them.

Housing and the cost of living is an extra burden for us in Westmorland, because trying to recruit youth workers to a place where the average house price is 11 or 12 times the average salary will not attract people. Westmorland and Furness Council does a brilliant job in offering fantastic free youth worker training, which helps to upskill people and bring them into the sector, but if people cannot afford to live in these communities they simply will not take up those jobs and provide the support that we desperately need.

What funding there is—this issue is mentioned by lots of youth providers around my constituency, both voluntary and full-time providers—is so often short-term. Youth providers can spend all their time applying for funds. For example, talk to the people who run Kirkby Stephen Youth Centre, which is absolutely amazing. So much of their time is spent chasing the next round of funding, the next short-term bid, rather than being able to rely on core funding that would enable them to serve the young people in their care. If every pot that people bid for is only for three years at most, there is a constant worry. Providers might build up relationships, as colleagues have already mentioned, and do wonderful work, but then it ends, just because that pot has dried up and funding has moved on to the next thing. And that is the situation at best.

I chair the steering group of the Kendal Youth Matters project, which came about because two or three years ago the police approached me as they were deeply concerned about young people in the town of Kendal, the largest town in our area, who were at risk of becoming involved with criminality and were not in training, education or work; indeed, some of them were too young to be in a position to make choices about those things. The police asked what could be done to reach out to those young people, on the understanding that very often the kids who do not go to youth provision are the ones who desperately need it the most.

I say a massive thank you to everybody who has been involved in the Kendal Youth Matters project, including different organisations, businesses, charities and youth workers, and in particular Brathay, which runs the outdoor education centre based near Ambleside. Its staff do a wonderful job in their day jobs, so to speak, by providing outdoor education provision for young people from the most difficult parts of the UK, giving them outstanding—indeed, life-changing—experiences in the heart of the Lake district. And their doing that work now for kids in Kendal has been an enormous blessing and an enormous advantage for us.

What we have been able to do through the Youth Matters project is to provide a regular base for young people in the centre of town, in order to bring forward existing and bespoke youth provision: ski club, climbing wall and uniformed groups. Some of these things already

existed; other things were specifically created. The funding has mostly gone on detached youth workers to get out there and proactively find the kids who would benefit the most. If we just open the doors, frankly, only the middle-class kids will turn up. We need to go out and look for the kids who would benefit the most. So I say an enormous thank you to Brathay and everybody involved with it.

There are so many other groups as well in Kendal: Kendal Youth Zone, Kendal Lads and Lasses Club and all the other outfits that offer wonderful provision in Kendal. I have mentioned the Kirkby Stephen Youth Centre and there are things going on in the Kent estuary as well. However, places such as Windermere, Appleby and Ambleside lack such provision. It is because we rely so much on the voluntary sector that we depend on having people in the right place.

There is undoubtedly a mental health crisis. During my time in Parliament, the thing that I have noticed the most is the spiralling numbers of young people suffering from tragic mental health crises. The impact on them and their families is literally heartbreaking. I want us to provide support through child and adolescent mental health services that we are not able to provide at the moment; the investment in CAMHS is woeful. Why are we not spending more money and focusing more on investing earlier, so that we build the resilience of young people in ways that mean when a crisis comes, they are much more able to sustain themselves? We put effort into stopping people smoking and getting people to do physical exercise, so that they remain physically well, so why are we not investing in the same way in the things that we know will keep people mentally well throughout their lives, which undoubtedly start with youth work?

Before I come to a conclusion—I promise—I will say another quick word. I take advantage of the fact that I am among colleagues from the Labour party and a Minister from the Conservative party by making a plea—both in this place and, using colleagues' contacts and colleagues, in the Senedd in Wales and in the Scottish Parliament. Sam Rowlands, a Member of the Welsh Senedd, and Liz Smith, a Member of the Scottish Parliament—they are both Conservatives as it happens, but please don't hold that against them—and I are all presenting private Members' Bills that seek to make outdoor education residential trips a guaranteed and funded opportunity for young people at primary and secondary schools. In that way, we could connect people with the outdoors, build their resilience and do those things for them that we know outdoor education does so well for everybody, and not just for those schools and kids who can afford it. I encourage Members here to encourage their comrades in both the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament to back those Bills, and I encourage the Minister to back my Bill in this place.

Finally, I have been involved in youth work in a voluntary capacity for a couple of decades or more now. I know that one of the dangers—probably second only to the lack of funding—is patronising people. We end up with people in their fifties designing youth programmes. It is so important that young people co-design new youth facilities. We should let them choose and let them come up with answers so that the provision meets their needs. A lot of what we are doing in the Youth Matters project is about connecting people to training and work so that there is real hope for the future.

Youth work is an investment. It is always seen, as I say, as the least important thing—the thing that gets cut first—yet the value to our society, the individuals, their families and our wider community is immense. Let us reprioritise youth work. It will pay us back in droves.

10.30 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this morning, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on securing the debate and on her excellent speech setting out the value of youth services and the devastating funding situation they face. I also thank all Members who have made the powerful case for youth services and paid tribute to those who provide them.

Over 85% of a young person's waking hours are spent outside of school and formal education. Young people tell us that they want somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to. The importance of youth services and the value that they bring to young people, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, is widely acknowledged. YMCA talks about youth services as

“a vital resource for building young people's confidence, resilience, and skills.”

The National Youth Agency says:

“Youth work has proven impacts on improving young people's mental health and wellbeing, behaviour, engagement with education and attainment.”

I know we have all visited local youth clubs and heard from young people themselves about how youth services and youth workers have changed their lives. Members have rightly highlighted the many community, voluntary and faith organisations in their constituencies that are working to support young people. Their work is invaluable in every part of the country.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport also recognises the importance of youth services. Its statutory guidance to local authorities, issued last September, states:

“Recreational and educational leisure-time activities can have a significant effect on young people's development and wellbeing....Those activities can...support them to build their skills...improve trust and tolerance...help them become active members of society...champion their voice.”

We do not believe that youth services matter just because people tell us they matter: there is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates their positive impact. A Dutch longitudinal study highlighted the positive impact of youth work on socially vulnerable young people. Those who were recipients of youth work support for more than six months had significantly more extensive support from their social network, participated more in society, such as by volunteering, developed better social skills and had higher self-esteem. “Better Together”, the National Youth Agency's 2023 independent review of youth work with schools, found that youth workers can support schools by:

“Engaging or re-engaging young people in learning and school, reducing exclusions and persistent absenteeism, and improving their wider wellbeing.”

It is well recognised that youth work can play an important role in preventing and reducing crime, including serious violence. A study by Carmen Villa-Llera at the University of Warwick's Economics Observatory project the found that the closure of youth centres in London

led to a 10% increase in crime among 10 to 15-year-olds and that young people in the affected areas were 12% more likely to be suspended from school. In 2020, the all-party parliamentary group on child criminal exploitation and knife crime found that a reduction in the number of youth centres corresponded to an increase in knife crime.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South highlighted, 2022 research by UK Youth and Frontier Economics found that for every £1 that the Government invest in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40, and that youth work saves £500 million annually by preventing incidents of knife crime and antisocial behaviour and other associated criminal justice costs. I think that is the number the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) hoped someone had calculated.

Again, as the Department's own statutory guidance states:

“Young people's involvement in such activities can also make an important contribution to other objectives, such as economic, social and environmental improvements, community cohesion, safer and stronger neighbourhoods, better health and increased educational attainment and employment.”

That is precisely why it is so important that youth services are properly resourced and that every young person has the opportunity to access them, and why this debate is so necessary and timely. As we have heard, since 2010 local councils' expenditure on youth services, whether delivered directly or in partnership with charities and voluntary organisations, has been cut to the bone. There has been a £1 billion real-terms cut in spending by local authorities in England, which the House of Commons Library briefing confirms

“have most of the responsibility for providing youth services, but are not obliged to fund them.”

It would be easy to say that youth services have been decimated, but that would be massively underplaying the scale of the reduction. As we have heard, funding has been cut not by a tenth but, as the National Youth Agency reports, by 73%, with more than 4,500 youth work jobs lost and hundreds of youth centres closed. As the financial crisis in local authorities intensifies, youth services face still deeper cuts. The National Youth Agency found that a third of local authorities reduced their youth provision spend between 2021-22 and 2022-23, with Worcestershire spending zero in that year. It is reported that Kent County Council is planning to cut its entire youth offer from April.

Youth work now faces historic national underinvestment. As the YMCA reports, half of young people do not have access to a youth service or do not know what is available in their area. The reduction in funding has very real consequences for young people and society more broadly, because it is entirely short-sighted and counter-productive. The small savings that may be made initially will always be outweighed by the loss of facilities, damage to young people's social development and far higher costs that result from an increased need for additional interventions. As the Department itself explicitly acknowledges:

“Not securing such leisure-time activities can mean young people miss out on opportunities to reach their full potential. Those activities can act as a supportive measure that can prevent costly interventions later on. This is true for all young people but is particularly important for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people who might need specific, additional, or early support.” It is not like the Government do not know exactly what is going on.

[Lilian Greenwood]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) noted, the savage cut to youth services has coincided with an unprecedented increase in the challenges faced by young people. There is a mental health emergency with, according to the NHS, as many as one in five children and young people in England having a probable mental health disorder; there is rising social isolation and loneliness; and there are serious problems with school attendance, with one in five pupils persistently absent, according to the Office for National Statistics.

There is a growing risk of online harms, particularly as the possibilities of artificial intelligence increase exponentially; a cost of living crisis and financial worries; and, as my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) spelled out, the risk of exploitation and crime, with too many young people carrying knives and county lines and gang conflicts affecting too many young people where they live. These challenges demand more, not less, investment in youth services, but it needs to be effective investment.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is promising to level up and expand access through its “youth guarantee”, but it is doubtful whether that can begin to fill the gap left by more than a decade of cuts. Where the Government have provided funding for youth services, it has been mostly in the form of funding for capital costs or short-term initiatives and pilot programmes. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale highlighted the extra drain on voluntary organisations, which have to constantly bid to secure new funding.

The lack of sustainable, long-term support for universal youth work services means that providers do not have enough funding for the staffing and other resources they need to deliver youth services. In my city of Nottingham, as in many others, we have youth centres lying empty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) said, the Government’s approach to youth services is fragmented and unco-ordinated, with the Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions, DCMS and DLUHC operating in silos.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) reminded us, it was not always this way and it does not have to be. Last October, Labour announced our plan for a national network of Young Futures hubs to bring local services together, deliver support for teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime or facing mental health challenges, and, where appropriate, provide universal, open-access youth services. It will be a major reform that focuses on prevention rather than sticking-plaster policies. It will bring together services and communities to support young people and ensure that they all have access to the opportunities they need to thrive and get ready for work and life.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) for securing this important debate, and all other Members for their extremely passionate contributions.

I recognise the importance of youth services. As the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, more than 85% of a young person’s waking hours are spent outside school, and it is during that time that thousands of youth workers and volunteers make a tremendous difference to young people’s lives. The unique nature of youth services—one that builds a long-term, voluntary relationship with a trusted adult—is incredibly important. Youth services have been proven to have positive impacts on young people’s wellbeing, confidence, social skills, political awareness and citizenship, and they can help with the development of specific skills.

I am glad that a number of Members mentioned our important work on loneliness. As the Minister responsible, I know how important it is that we look at loneliness, particularly for young people. In fact, this week—it may even be today—we are launching our latest campaign, which is targeted at helping young people who are particularly affected by loneliness. We are particularly looking at the issue of stigma; loneliness is part of life, and it is fine for somebody to admit that they are feeling lonely and seek help.

Last year, I had the privilege to visit the Lift youth centre in Islington, where I saw at first hand how transformational youth services can be. I spoke to youth workers who had previously attended the youth centre themselves and were so inspired by their own youth workers that they had entered the profession themselves. I also spoke to a number of young people, who definitely put me to the test when it came to table tennis. They told me that the youth centre gave them a safe space to meet friends, try new activities and speak to trusted adults. The impact of such activities, safe spaces and trusted relationships cannot be underestimated.

Ensuring that all young people have access to youth services is a top priority for me and the Secretary of State, but before I turn to the details of Government funding, it is important that I set out the wider context. A wide range of youth services operate in this country, funded from a wide variety of sources. UK Youth estimates that there are 8,500 organisations involved in delivering youth services, with a total expenditure of up to £2 billion. I thank them all for what they do. In addition, much of the funding delivered through our public bodies, such as Sport England, Arts Council England and the National Lottery Community Fund, benefits young people, although it is not formally counted as youth service spending.

Alex Cunningham: I am a big fan of what the lottery has achieved in so many parts of the country, and it supports many sports clubs in my constituency. Despite those clubs’ work and outreach, many of the most vulnerable children never get the opportunity to go to them, and nor can they afford the small subs. Does the Minister agree that we need greater outreach from clubs that are benefiting from the money that we all spend occasionally on a lottery ticket?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which I was going to come to later but will touch on now. One of the important things we are doing in the Department is our sports and physical activity strategy, which looks specifically at people who are not particularly active or engaging. We have established a taskforce that brings together the national governing bodies of various sports, which have a huge network that includes grassroots

sports organisations up and down the country. The taskforce will see what more we can do to reach those who are not participating for a variety of reasons, one of which may be the cost.

As colleagues have said, local authorities play a key part in delivering youth services. That is reflected in their statutory duty to provide sufficient leisure time activities and facilities in line with local needs. Some areas have faced challenges in meeting that duty. In recognition of the pressures, the local government settlement was increased to more than £64 billion this year, and an additional £500 million will be dedicated to ensuring the continued provision of crucial services and early intervention for communities, in particular for children and young people.

We are also committed to ensuring that disadvantaged young people have holidays that are full of experiences and opportunities. We are providing £200 million a year to local authorities and their local partners through the holiday activities and food programme. Through our reforms to social care and family help, the Government are investing in new approaches that will see spending rebalanced towards more preventive measures. I want youth services to contribute to and benefit from those reforms.

We are also taking further steps to support local authorities to uphold their duty. As was mentioned, we recently updated the statutory guidance that underpins the duty for local youth service provision so that we can support local authorities to better understand their duty and how to deliver it. We are also funding a peer review programme, which provides local authorities with the opportunity to learn from each other and share best practice. By working alongside organisations in the community and voluntary organisations, local authorities can secure high-quality youth provision that meets the needs of the young people in their areas. The programme is working especially well in areas that have developed local youth partnerships, which we are continuing to support.

I am keen to find solutions to some of the problems that have been highlighted today. That is why I recently met with the Young People's Foundation Trust, which brings all the local organisations together and does joint bids for grants. That eases the burdens mentioned by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I want to roll that work out, so that we have effective local provision.

Lilian Greenwood: I do not doubt the Minister's personal commitment to youth services, but I ask him gently what conversations he has had with his opposite number in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. It is not as if local authorities do not understand the value of youth work or do not want to provide youth services. It is that they simply cannot do so: so much of their funding is now directed to statutory services for social care, child protection and homelessness that they do not have the money to provide the services that we desperately need.

Stuart Andrew: I have regular conversations with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up. That is why I was mentioning the local youth partnership work. The response from local authorities up and down the country to the updated guidance we gave them was very

positive, and in some areas the sharing of best practice is going extremely well. I want the valuable work of bringing people together to share best practice to be rolled out across the country.

We also have an ambitious goal: our national youth guarantee that, by 2025, every young person will have access to regular out-of-school activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer. That came as a direct request from young people themselves; we contacted thousands of young people to ask them what their top priorities were, and those were the ones. That is why we are investing over £500 million in services to deliver that ambition, which builds on a £1 billion investment in England since 2015. Our funding is designed to complement the existing provision that local authorities and dedicated voluntary and community organisations are already providing.

We want to level up opportunities and ensure that every young person has somewhere to go, someone to talk to and something to do, as the hon. Member for Nottingham South said. We are creating and redeveloping up to 300 youth facilities through the youth investment fund. More than £250 million has already gone out of the door, supporting 226 organisations, to give thousands more young people access to opportunities in their community. We have also reformed the National Citizen Service programme into a year-round offer, with 120,000 young people taking part last year and thousands more already taking part this year.

We recognise the benefits of greater join-up between formal education and the youth sector. We are working with the Department for Education to expand access to the Duke of Edinburgh award in schools and communities across the country. More than 400 new organisations have already started delivering the programme, giving more than 30,000 young people the opportunity to challenge themselves, support their communities and learn new skills.

In addition, we are supporting uniformed youth organisations to recruit more volunteers, as has rightly been mentioned during the debate, to increase their capacity sustainably. More than 7,500 young people already have a new place in an existing group or one of the new 250 groups we have helped to establish. We are also supporting more than 10,000 young people to take part in outdoor learning that supports their personal development, through the adventures away from home fund.

Alex Cunningham: I suspect the Minister is coming towards the end of his speech. I am concerned that we have all on this side raised the link between youth services and crime, so will the Minister address that before he sits down?

Stuart Andrew: I will certainly come to that in a minute. It pre-empted the rest of my speech, but I am happy to take that intervention, as I have reached that point now. Many hon. Members have raised issues of antisocial behaviour and crime. There were interesting points about addiction services; I will raise that with colleagues in the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care.

In partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund, we are providing £22 million to youth organisations to deliver additional hours of support and positive activities for young people in areas where they may be at

[Stuart Andrew]

risk of antisocial behaviour. We have already invested £3.7 million of the million hours fund, supporting more than 400 youth organisations. We are also continuing to invest in the #iwill fund, to create around 60,000 opportunities for young people to make a difference in their communities through social action.

We recognise that some young people need additional support to reach their potential. That is why we are investing in dedicated programmes, where youth workers build that trusted relationship with a young person, helping to steer them along the right path. We have put £2.5 million towards disadvantaged children and young people accessing green spaces.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome all funding for youth services, but will the Minister accept that this is a piecemeal, project-by-project approach rather than a place-based strategy that asks what young people in one area have access to? A more joined-up strategy for youth services is required.

Stuart Andrew: I will come on to further work that we are doing. The hon. Lady is right, which is why I am listening to those areas that have joined together and are working in the same direction, rather than trying to find different pots of money and struggling. There is that local strategy, and I am interested to learn from those areas where that is working well, and see what we can do to roll out something similar in future.

Our summer jobs programme, which we will launch this year, will also support 2,600 young people at risk of becoming involved in youth crime, alongside the UK Year of Service, which will also provide meaningful work placements for those at risk of falling out of education, training or employment. I have met some of the young people who have been involved, and it has been so inspiring to see how their lives have completely turned around. In addition, we have invested £60 million in the Turnaround programme, which improves outcomes for up to 17,500 more young people on the cusp of entering the youth justice system.

I recognise that we have to do more in working with our workforce. I am glad that so many people have raised that. We are funding the National Youth Agency to maintain and improve youth work qualifications and to provide guidance on issues such as safeguarding. We work with it on the attractiveness of the career, but I recognise that there are challenges. When youth workers want to start a family, it becomes challenging financially for them to sustain that career. These are areas that I will be keen to continue to work on. It is why we are also continuing to fund bursaries for those who would otherwise be unable to undertake youth work qualifications because of cost. We have already awarded more than 2,000 bursaries, with a further 500 expected this year.

With all that said, to deliver the services that young people want and deserve, central Government, local government, and community and voluntary sector organisations—as well as the young people themselves—all have to work together on this. We need that collaboration in order to ensure that high-quality experiences are accessible for young people, no matter where they live or what their circumstances are. I can assure the Members here today that cross-Government work does happen. In fact, just yesterday I chaired the latest inter-ministerial group on youth, and I particularly wanted us to talk about giving youth a voice in relation to policy decisions and encouraging colleagues in other Departments to do what we have done. Whenever we talk about youth provision, whatever it may be, I always ensure that there are young people around the table, because this middle-aged, grey-haired man does not really know what they want today. I hope that I have been able to show that I am as passionate as other Members here today about increasing access to youth services and improving the outcomes for young people, because I recognise its value. I have seen it for myself, and the positive impact that it makes.

I conclude by saying thank you to everybody who does so much to support our young people in this country.

10.57 am

Rachel Hopkins: I thank the Minister for his closing comments. I do not doubt his sincerity in what he wants to achieve. However, it is notable that it was predominantly Members from the Opposition who wanted to come and raise important issues about youth services and youth workers here today. It was perhaps more by chance than design, but we have representation from the north-east, the north-west, London, the midlands, the east and the south-west, so this really is an issue that needs attention up and down England.

We are talking about the importance of a safe place to go and to be—to be a young person and feel safe—and one that is open access and universal, but also targeted, particularly at those who need it most, in some of our most deprived areas. Importantly, that means rural areas as well as urban areas. This is so important, and I hope that the Minister continues to work on that cross-departmental basis so that we really can see improvements in our youth services, because too many young people are missing out on things that could give them the best start in life. The Minister referred to the importance of the youth voice. As a middle-aged woman, I also want to champion the voices of our young people, who are our future, as so many other people have said today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered trends in funding levels for youth services.

Cycle Trails

11 am

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of cycle trails.

As always, Mr Twigg, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I sit on the board of British Cycling Events, which is a subsidiary of British Cycling. That has no direct relevance to this debate, but I thought it safest to refer to it.

This debate is inspired by a young constituent of mine, Harrison Crick, who emailed me last year with what I thought at the time was a simple request to help him improve local mountain bike trails:

"I am wondering whether you could help me with putting forward an idea to improve mountain bike trails in Medway as there are no decent parks or trails that include jumps, berms and drops. As a teenager I can't travel far on my own without it being very expensive and even if I can get driven some of the closest places are over an hour away. The Capstone trails",

which are in my constituency,

"are alright but could use development and implement new features or possible new lines or areas. This is what I was wondering if you could help me with to see if this idea is possible as it would give me and many other teens proper facilities to ride our bikes locally."

As an enthusiastic cyclist who always welcomes and applauds young people's contributions to local politics, I did not think that that was an unreasonable ask. However, it came in just before the local elections, so I advised Harrison that I would do some investigating and get back to him once the local political situation had settled down.

It was really an excuse to jump on my gravel bike with Luke, who worked for British Cycling at the time, and with Stewart Vanns from Community Cycleworks, an incredible organisation that has done wonders with young cyclists in and around Snodland, a town in my constituency that had an issue with antisocial biking that seems to have calmed thanks to a new pump track and Stewart's amazing energy for taking kids out on trails. The three of us met at Capstone and headed out on the trails before venturing into the wider Medway towns. It was fun, but the fact that I—a complete trail novice on a gravel bike, not a mountain bike—felt comfortable on the adventure made Harrison's point that the trails needed some improvement.

I wrote to the council to make those points. For once, it was not about the money; our Conservative police and crime commissioner had given money to the council for exactly this kind of initiative. It took some months to get a reply, but eventually I received one:

"Medway Council is not able to offer such an extent of land in our ownership in the area of Capstone that would include that type of riding challenge with respect to both distance and gradient."

The reply was helpful in that it directed to other trails in Medway, but sadly it also reinforced Harrison's point:

"I have been riding mountain bikes off road for over 40 years all over the UK, so I speak with some experience of this matter. When I advanced my riding skills I had to travel much further from home either by taking my bike on the back of my car or planning a route from my home that took in local bridleways, trails and roads over a much further distance as I had outgrown what was on offer on my doorstep."

The reply was meant kindly, and the officer clearly wanted to highlight that his own experience and interest in this area had enabled him to respond intelligently. But the Minister has visited Medway on many occasions and will be aware of the deprivation in the towns, so he will appreciate that for some people, advancing their skills further afield is not possible.

I am now looking at other areas that are near Harrison but not actually within the Medway local authority, where the PCC's generous funding could be better used. That is not within the Minister's remit, but loving cycling and accessibility to good cycle trails is. Harrison's tale inspires a wider discussion of active travel schemes.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): In Batley and Spen we have the amazing Spen Valley greenway, which is a much-loved and well-used part of the national cycle network and is used by many groups, including the fantastic Streetbikes. The greenway is run by Sustrans, which does an excellent job. Does the hon. Lady agree that what we really need is a national strategy for cycle trails, to enable them to reach their full potential?

Tracey Crouch: I agree with the hon. Lady, as I often do. I will come to that point later on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for all her endeavours and her commitment to sport. We all appreciate her work. She has also been a guest at one of my Strangford dinners, and I was very pleased to have her there. She visited Comber Rec women's football team; that is just an example of her work with sports.

Does the hon. Lady agree that by encouraging cycling trails, of which my constituency has many, we are also encouraging improved health, socialisation and understanding of our natural environment? It is certainly worth the focus of this House and the funding that is required from this Government.

Tracey Crouch: I agree wholeheartedly. I am a passionate advocate for the outdoors and all that it can bring, and the hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to learn that I think that cycling is just one way of bringing that natural wellbeing. It does not have to be cycling; it can be walking, rambling, climbing or canoeing—there are all sorts of wonderful activities. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I am hosting an event next week with the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) on bringing the outdoors to everyone. Cycling is an important part of that story.

The more I travel around on my bike, on and off-road, the more I despair. I know that the Minister shares my desperate desire to get people out of their cars and on bikes, but the roads and cycle lanes around my constituency and beyond are dangerous. I certainly would not let my son ride his bike on the road; instead, I would willingly accept the wrath of those he negotiates on a path. Where cycle lanes do exist, they are often left unswept and covered in debris, meaning that cyclists have to cycle in the road. There are potholes that not only damage bicycles but are frankly dangerous on many routes.

In some situations, section 106 money has been offered to improve existing cycle routes, whether they are trails or lanes, that are pleasantly away from traffic, such as

[Tracey Crouch]

those between Aylesford and Larkfield. Instead, however, it is being used to create cycle paths that share the road with enormous lorries and delivery trucks. Sustrans, which the hon. Member for Batley and Spen mentioned, was kind enough to send me a note before this debate, pointing out route 17 in my constituency. I know parts of that route very well. This morning, I invited Sustrans to cycle it with me, because personally I do not think it is a viable route, especially in the winter months.

There is the most wonderful path between Aylesford and Maidstone, which I had the pleasure of opening in 2017. It was much loved and well used; it was flat and perfect for teaching little people how to ride a bike. Unfortunately, a small section of the Aylesford river path crumbled and part collapsed into the river at the beginning of lockdown. I have been campaigning constantly ever since, to the point of exasperation, for it to be fixed. It is a regular grumble on local residents' pages. The Minister has been the unfortunate victim of my ear-bending about how the path needs some funding—not least because, as the main off-road walk from Aylesford to Maidstone, it had several thousand users per month at one point. It feels like such a wasted resource for walkers, riders and runners alike. Any news from the Minister today on the path would be very welcome.

Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) led a debate in the House, to which the Minister responded and I contributed, that highlighted the health benefits of learning to cycle. Kent's Bikeability stats are woeful. Just 13% reach the required level against a target of 50%, which is well below the national target of 50%. Medway's is better, at 47% against a target of 60%, but it can be much improved. Both appear to have had central Government investment. It would be useful to hear from the Minister what more he could do in Kent in particular to scale up provision.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The hon. Lady refers to statistics on provision in Kent. To get good statistics on cycle trail provision in our constituencies, consultation is necessary. A consultation opened yesterday on the Cullompton and Tiverton local cycling and walking infrastructure plan, which is very welcome; I encourage people to get involved. Does the hon. Lady, like me, pay tribute to people in Sidmouth in the East Devon constituency, who provided more than 185 responses to a questionnaire from a Sidmouth cycling campaign?

Tracey Crouch: I pay tribute to the people who responded. I was speaking last week to my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) about it, because he wanted some advice on cycle trails; he is clearly passionate about providing cycle trails and routes. I fondly recollected that the first people I met when I did the recent Ride the Night charity ride from Windsor to Buckingham Palace and back were a couple from Honiton. Cycling is obviously important in Devon, as is having the appropriate routes.

It is really important that we have routes that people want to use, rather than ones provided by local authorities without any consultation. One of my frustrations is that planners quite often put a line in and think it is the appropriate route, when they have not engaged with people on whether it will be used. I definitely welcome

the consultation in the constituency of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and in the neighbouring constituency of East Devon.

It would be really helpful if the Minister outlined what he thinks good provision for cycle paths and trails looks like, because there is no point in learning to cycle if we have nowhere safe to ride. Cycling is great for physical and mental health, and it is also good for the environment. Establishing a proper trail network benefits everyone, but it requires a proper strategy that connects transport and planning. It is so infuriating to see cycle routes being retrofitted to new developments as an afterthought. The Minister, who shares our love of the outdoors, would be the perfect person to lead a trail strategy that recognised the health, economic, tourism and environmental benefits of a safe network of trails.

Finally, we have some inspirational elite riders who we hope will dominate the Paris Olympics this summer. What message does the Minister have for local authorities to provide to youngsters such as Harrison who wish to take their trail riding to the next level?

I love my bikes; I have a special room for them. I know that I am fortunate to have more than one, but I love the freedom that cycling gives me on and off the road. It can take us into the fresh air away from our trials and tribulations and forge new friendships, build resilience and tackle antisocial behaviour. The more we can do to open provision up to all levels for all types of activities, the better. I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), a fellow ardent cyclist, on securing this important debate. Although I have a very good speech written by the Department, I will try to respond to the individual points that she made.

I will start with the origin of the debate, which is Harrison. My hon. Friend told the tale of a young man getting in contact with a Member of Parliament in the probably slightly sceptical hope that he could make a difference—both locally and by getting through to the MP. Clearly, that is why we have this debate. I hope that I will be able to give some good long-term news to both Harrison and the wider Medway community of which my hon. Friend is part. That is a great story—it really is—and I for one want to put on record my personal thanks as, frankly, this is what Parliament and representative democracy are all about. I sincerely hope that Harrison not only wins various future cycling competitions, but contemplates running for the local council and being a Member of Parliament. I look forward to welcoming him to the green Benches and, ultimately, to him becoming Prime Minister in about 25 years.

That is my first point. The second is that I must also make a declaration as an ardent but slightly fat cyclist, who has done everything from the Rye 100 to the Dunwich Dynamo as well as a variety of interesting cycle routes, including through most parts of Kent. I took the train down to Margate and cycled all the way back to London along the coast on the amazing trails that Kent has. As my hon. Friend rightly says, it is a fantastic opportunity to get out and about, get into the

fresh air, try to fight the flab, get fitter and do all the things that we want to do. She is right to highlight the interesting differences in Bikeability stats in Medway and Kent, and we would like to work on them. I will come on to that in more detail. The figures for year 6 pupils of 13% in Kent and 47% in Medway are not too bad, but we would like to make that bigger. I encourage local authorities to get behind that supportive scheme, and we have to ask why they are not fully behind such things.

We should put on record our thanks to Luke, Stewart and the PCC for getting behind the individual cycle trails and then putting forward the money for the initiative locally, which sounds eminently sensible to me.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. I remind the Minister that he is supposed to be addressing the subject.

Guy Opperman: I apologise, I was focusing far too much on my hon. Friend.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Mr Speaker is very clear about that.

Guy Opperman: That is a good point. I apologise unreservedly for not addressing the House and for speaking too much to one individual colleague. As I say, we put on record our thanks to the individuals involved.

I will now return to the cycling and walking investment strategies of 2017 and 2022 and the establishment of Active Travel England. Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) led a debate on active travel in the main Chamber, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford spoke, and, as we said, we are on a journey in this country, without a shadow of a doubt. Countries such as Holland have a whole host of state-of-the-art cycling infrastructure that has transformed their cities, yet decades ago they looked exactly the same as the UK. Those countries had the same problems and difficulties of trying to build infrastructure, segregated lanes and so on.

First and foremost, we have committed more than £3 billion that will be invested across Government in active travel up to 2025. That includes money from the city region sustainable transport settlements and the levelling-up fund. I should declare that I have a £9 million project in my constituency of Hexham. There are also other opportunities through the local transport fund, which was the money announced for northern and midland regions through the termination of the second leg of High Speed 2. It was announced on Monday, and many billions will go to local authorities up and down the country to ensure they can drive forward infrastructure, which can include cycle trails and all manners of road improvements.

On delivery, Active Travel England has been providing capital funding to local authorities for active travel infrastructure through the active travel fund. Since then, £515 million has been provided to local authorities for the development and construction of almost 1,000 permanent schemes, of which 299 have been delivered. In May of last year, we announced £200 million of capital funding for walking and cycling schemes to improve road safety, ease congestion and ultimately improve the health and wellbeing of the millions of people we want to choose active travel.

To turn specifically to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, that funding included £138,976 of dedicated capital funding from the fourth tranche of the active travel fund that is being used to fund two school streets in the area, among other projects. Since 2020, over four tranches of the active travel fund, more than £12 million of dedicated capital funding has been provided for active travel within Kent and Medway. Indeed, Kent and Medway have also received £1.3 million of revenue funding through the capability fund and I am pleased to say that both are in the process of developing authority-wide local cycling and walking infrastructure plans.

On the Aylesford river path, it is fair to say that my hon. Friend has been extremely assiduous—that is how I think they describe it in the House of Commons—in standing up for her local community as a Member of Parliament, as we all should do. I am aware that Kent County Council has been working with Active Travel England to undertake further design and assurance work to put the scheme forward under the active travel fund 4 extension programme. I can confirm that I have approved ATE's recommendations for allocating funding through the programme. Although I cannot announce the funding for the scheme today, we expect to announce further capital and revenue funding allocations very shortly. I sincerely hope that I will be jumping on my bike and coming down to Aylesford to meet my hon. Friend, Harrison and anyone else so that we can formally announce the Aylesford river path and the work that my hon. Friend has so assiduously sought.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): When the Minister makes that visit to Aylesford, will he also come to the west of the county of Kent and visit the Bedgebury forest, where there is a much-used network of cycle trails? It is used by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) as well as by me. The Minister will enjoy that, but he will also see that it is quite isolated from public transport and towns such as Tunbridge Wells. It may give him pause for thought about how we can make cycle trails accessible for people who live in towns and may not have access to cars.

Guy Opperman: My right hon. Friend makes a very serious point. I have the great honour and privilege of being asked to visit a whole host of cycle trails, whether they are in Tunbridge Wells, Batley and Spen, or Strangford, all of which possess amazing countryside that I would be very happy to visit. However, getting to and from these locations, particularly for children and those on a low income—with all those complications—is not easy, bluntly. We must take that on board.

This and future Governments need to wrestle with a whole host of challenges, as do local authorities. Some of that is funding, but we also need to have a different sort of vision about the community we are looking after. There are examples of train companies that will not allow bicycles on trains, and of bus companies that are reluctant to have bicycles on their buses—I could go on. Frankly, that sort of stuff must stop.

When I took this brief on, I specifically made the strong point that although, yes, I would be looking after roads and buses, there was relatively little point for the active travel aspect not to be integrated with other parts of the portfolio. The beauty of that is that if we are

[Guy Opperman]

having a conversation with local authorities or bus companies about trying to do things in a different way, we are also trying to integrate active travel and accessible travel so that the system is joined up. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford know the great joy of being a Minister—it is amazing—but any Minister knows that joined-up Government is a holy grail that we all aspire to and cannot always achieve. Getting different Departments and parts of an individual portfolio to talk to and integrate with each other is utterly key.

Richard Foord: There are places where we have public transport links and good rail services, such as in my Tiverton and Honiton constituency. Does that suggest that perhaps the Department would be more welcoming of constructing cycle trails around places such as Tiverton Parkway, the new railway station at Cullompton, and Feniton, Axminster, Honiton and Whimple?

Guy Opperman: As the hon. Gentleman knows, this amazing Government brought forward the new railway station at Cullompton.

It is clear that I want to see more people on a bike, and more accessible and active travel. The best bit of that is Bikeability. I will just talk about that very briefly, because it really matters. The Government have given £21 million for Bikeability, which has delivered almost 500,000 places and reached 51% of year 6 children in 60% of primary schools. I genuinely believe, however, that we can do a lot more. Local authorities really need to step up to the plate, because this matters. Learning to cycle from a young age is a life skill. Aside from all the health benefits and independence that it provides, and aside from the fact that it is so much cheaper in the long term, cycling gives individuals great confidence in their capabilities and develops our children in a game-changing way.

Over the coming years, we will invest a further £50 million in Bikeability to deliver training for over 1 million more children. We believe that, by 2025, 80% of year 6 children will be taking part in on-road cycle training before leaving primary school. Turning to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, although teaching kids in school how to ride a bike is great, we also need local authorities to use their local cycling and walking infrastructure plans and development

funding to ensure that it is easy for kids to cycle to school, as we discussed in the debate on active travel in the House last week. That is the holy grail. With no disrespect to individual parents, we want kids to walk or cycle to the local school. That is why so many of us support 20 mph zones outside schools, which make total sense and support ongoing cycling.

I echo the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for the national cycle network and the work of Sustrans. The network is clearly a national asset; it provides more than 12,000 miles of signed paths and routes for walking, wheeling, cycling and exploring the outdoors. The Department has supported the upkeep of this national asset to the tune of £75 million. I take my hon. Friend's point about cycle trails, and note her example of cycle trails funded by the police and crime commissioner. Without a shadow of a doubt, we want to do more, and I am keen to look at that. I will engage with Danny Williams and the Active Travel England team in York to see what more we can do.

Kim Leadbeater: The Minister is making fantastic points about the amazing work of Sustrans, but will he commit to looking at its funding? It is a charity, and unfortunately the lack of funding means that we have lost the warden for the Spen valley greenway, which is in my constituency. The warden did a fantastic job of making people on the greenway feel safe and ensuring it was a clean and tidy space for people to work.

Guy Opperman: I am not going to get into the question of funding decisions for charities, but this Government have backed active travelling and cycling to a degree that no other Government ever have, and are continuing to do so. My respectful view is that this House should welcome the journey that we are on.

I look forward to visiting Aylesford in the near future. We are here only because Harrison stuck his hand up and had the courage to do something that we wish everybody would do: write to their MP, in a respectful, kind and constructive way. I put on record the due thanks of the House to him. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for securing the debate, and look forward to driving forward greater cycling infrastructure in her part of the world.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Leasehold Reform and New Homes

2.30 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered leasehold reform and new homes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. Yesterday, we had an excellent Report stage debate on the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill. I was really encouraged to hear from the Minister that the Government are looking at going further on two of the big things that we need to improve in the Bill: ending forfeiture and ending the private estates, or so-called fleecehold estates, model. I once again thank all the different bodies that have worked so hard to get us to this point, the Minister, who managed to get the time for this legislation, the ministerial team that came before him, and all the different bodies that provided useful evidence in Committee, including the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the National Leasehold Campaign, Harry Scoffin and Free Leaseholders, HorNet, the HomeOwners Alliance, and many more.

I do not want to just repeat all the points we made yesterday, but I will briefly touch on some, because my speech flows on from them. Yesterday, I quoted my constituent Karen, who said that dealing with FirstPort, her fleecehold company, is

“like having a part time job”,

and who is being charged for, among other things, terrorism insurance for a fence. I quoted my constituent James, who says that he spent

“about 50 days’ work over the first couple of years”

dealing with his unadopted estate and trying to put right some of the mistakes made by developers.

I quoted the residents of Hursley Park, who managed to get control over their residents management company because of a legal mistake by the developer, but years on are still fighting to avoid being lumbered with the cost of botched work by Mulberry Homes. Disappointingly, that developer will not even meet them to discuss it. I also quoted one of the residents of the Farndon Fields estate, who has had a long battle with a faceless fleecehold company called Chamomix that billed people for large sums, did almost no work, repeatedly billed people several times for things they had already paid, and generally behaved appallingly.

I want to bring out how some of those stories show the different ways that we can intervene to get rid of this awful, scamming industry, which sees councils and developers effectively colluding to stiff residents with big bills and poor services. The first step is to look at how homes are sold. Numerous Members in yesterday’s debate talked about constituents who had not realised what they would be liable for. That seems to be particularly the case where people are bribed by the developers to use their lawyers—oddly enough, developers’ lawyers do not always point out the big bills that people will face. That is the first thing we should look at.

The second step is to look at the whole planning process and the fact that permission is often given before there is clarity on adoption. That is a bizarre way of going about things. The residents of Devana Way in my constituency, who I did not mention yesterday, found that out the hard way. They bought beautiful,

expensive homes on a nice tree-lined street, but during the process of haggling with the county council over adoption and who was going to look after the trees, the developer concluded that it would be cheaper to simply rip out all the trees—and that is what it did one morning, to the horror of residents. I do not blame councils for wanting funds to look after trees; in fact, I think we should make it a priority in local government finance to make sure that all residential streets come with trees. However, there needs to be clarity about the rules of adoption up front, not after the fact.

Likewise, we need to stop developers wriggling out of planning conditions more generally through variations, as one developer is trying to do at the top of Kettering Road in Market Harborough—it is trying to get rid of a bus service it promised when it was trying to get planning permission. One of the most common abuses is that developers promise that there will be a new GP surgery as part of a new estate, but in fact have no plan, no intention or no way to deliver it. I am afraid I know several colleagues who have had that happen in their constituencies.

The Minister has promised to make progress on forfeiture, one of the most important things we have to deal with. That is important across leasehold and on fleecehold estates, too, because the disproportionate threat that someone might lose their home over a tiny unpaid sum enables the fleecehold cowboys to terrorise people into paying up. People are being conned about what they are buying. As we said yesterday, Margaret Thatcher said that there was no prouder word in our language than “freeholder”. Many of those people believe they are freeholders, but do not realise the threat hanging over them. My constituent Karen said that purchasers on her estate were not told that they would have to pay an annual rent charge:

“the word ‘rent’ wasn’t used by anyone we spoke to. It was referred to as a ‘maintenance charge’—if it was referred to at all. I didn’t fully understand what ‘rent charges’ meant until about four years after we bought.”

That is another way that people are being mugged by the fleecehold estates model.

We need to do two things. First, we need to help the 3 million to 4 million people who are stuck on fleecehold estates. We could do that through something such as a right to manage, or better still we could give them the opportunity to have their estates adopted by the council, which is what many of them want.

Secondly, we need to end this model for the future, which again could be done in numerous ways. We could do what my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) suggested and prevent companies from charging for things that are usually provided by councils. Alternatively, we could use guidance to ban the model except in extreme and exceptional circumstances. I do not mind how we go about it, but we have to end the model.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a fantastic speech—I do not always say that to Government Members—but does he agree that this is about fairness? The current leasehold system is not fair, and it is certainly not just. In 2022, my Battersea constituency was area with the 18th highest number of leasehold transactions. The hon. Gentleman is part of the governing party, and the Government have really

[Marsha De Cordova]

missed an opportunity to do away with this outdated system and bring about fairness and justice for leaseholders. Thousands of my constituents, like his, have been calling for that.

Neil O'Brien: I got a sense from the Minister yesterday that the legislation will go further. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill is already a great achievement. It is the first time since 2002, I think, that we have legislated on this matter. According to the Opposition, there were some big missed opportunities when we passed that legislation, which has never been commenced—I think everyone across the House agrees with that. The Bill is already good, but I think I detected from the Minister that there are ways we can make it better, and I hope we will collectively be able to do that. To be clear, the people who have been stuffed by the fleecehold estates model do not want a marginal change; they want to end this fundamentally rip-off model.

I asked for this debate to be about new homes as well as leasehold, because sadly fleecehold is just one of the issues affecting buyers of new homes. I have been conducting a survey across Harborough, Oadby and Wigston of buyers of new homes, and I am struck by how widespread the problems are. In two different streets in different places in my constituency, residents have faced sewage in their street and even flowing up into their sinks, dishwashers and showers. There have been occasions when they have been unable to wash because of that.

In the first location, which I visited the other day, the problems have been going on for about four years. The developer plugged the sewage system from a new estate into a sewer for an older estate, causing the older sewage system to overflow with rain water. After four years of denials from the developer, the residents have proved, with the help of Severn Trent, where the problem is coming from. The developer has, in fairness, finally fessed up to causing the problem, and the new person in charge locally seems serious about fixing the problem, so I will not name them for now.

In the second case, Meadow Hill in Wigston, the problem has been going on for about six years. The sewage system in the new estate is simply inadequate. The homes were originally built by Westleigh Homes and were taken over by Countryside Partnerships after completion, which itself has been taken over by Vistry Group. Vistry continues to deny the problem and will not take responsibility, even though I have seen for myself bits of toilet paper in the road that have come spurting up from overflowing sewers. Vistry does not fix the problem. It occasionally sends people to clean up, but mainly it is left to residents to clean up the faeces. I would like to invite Greg Fitzgerald, the chief executive officer of Vistry, to come to see the filth for himself, and I will perhaps ask him how much he would like to have it in his street and coming up into his home. Stephen Teagle, who runs Countryside Partnerships, would also be very welcome to join us to see that disgusting case.

Those are extreme cases, but I am struck by how often British developers sell homes with serious problems, either with the property or with the new estate. For example, a constituent in Wigston has faced a bill of about £10,000 to fix problems caused by his developer,

which left his garden at a very steep angle. After two years of fighting, the developer, David Wilson Homes, has agreed to pay about 20% of the cost—a tiny fraction.

A constituent who moved into a new development in Kibworth faced numerous rat infestations due to the pipes in her new home not being fitted correctly. She also experienced mould in the bathroom because the bath was also not fitted correctly.

A constituent who moved into Wellington Place in Market Harborough had more than 200 snags on their property. The toilets did not drain properly, and the downstairs toilet did not work at all for many months, which meant that their disabled daughter had to go upstairs to use the loo. The entire garden needed to be excavated to be fixed and, alarmingly, the fire alarms did not work properly. My constituent found it difficult to get hold of the developer, Davidsons, to get any of those issues addressed, because it had sacked the people responsible for aftercare on the estate.

There are reasons such things happen. On the surface level, some developers are simply more serious about ensuring quality than others. It is not impossible to get it right in the current system, and many do. The Government's creation of the new homes ombudsman service is a big and very welcome move towards tackling the problems directly. However, some of the problems also reflect wider problems with this country's model of development: the so-called fast-turn model. In Britain, so much of the profitability of the industry turns on its ability to play our dysfunctional planning system rather than its ability to build in quality.

I was going to make this point today anyway, but as it happens the Competition and Markets Authority's monumental investigation of the housing market, which was published earlier this week, gives us a huge amount of further evidence that the current model is dysfunctional. Naturally, the sharing of information and cartel-like behaviour between firms was the headline of the report, but many of the other findings are just as explosive. The CMA notes that

"housebuilders don't have strong incentives to compete on quality and consumers have unclear routes of redress."

It also notes:

"We see evidence of a statistically significant increase over time in the proportion of homeowners reporting higher numbers of snags, with 35% of respondents...in 2021-22 reporting 16 or more different problems."

The report brings out what some of those "snags" look like in the real world. One homeowner notes:

"After moving in, my attic hatch fell completely out of the ceiling of its own, because the joiner had only used three screws to fix it instead of sixteen".

Another says:

"The stairs collapsed while walking up [them] with my son."

The CMA notes the growing volume of complaints about hidden charges. Among the CMA's recommendations is "requiring councils to adopt amenities on all new housing estates."

That is a very good idea, which takes us back to the issue of leasehold, and I hope that the Government adopt it.

One of the great strengths of the CMA report is the way that it draws the links between the broken planning system and the industry that results from it. Following the conclusions of the Letwin review, the report concludes:

“The evidence shows that private developers produce houses at a rate at which they can be sold without needing to reduce their prices”.

In a paper that I wrote for the think-tank Onward six years ago, I tried to set out some of these dysfunctions. The complexity of the planning system increases market concentration directly and also indirectly, by amplifying the land price cycle, which leads to fewer and fewer developers in each economic cycle, as the small players go bust and are forced out of the market. I am encouraged that the Government are taking great strides towards a better model of development in this country by fixing those deeper, underlying problems.

The vision for more purposive urban regeneration set out in the long-term plan for housing is a good one. The recently passed Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 creates stronger compulsory purchase order powers and requires the dark market in land options to be replaced by a register of land options. I look forward to us cracking on with the secondary legislation needed to bring that about. I also look forward to the Government taking further steps towards creating a more purposive, less passive planning system, in which deliberate, plan-led development becomes a greater share of development and small, speculative development, without the necessary infrastructure, becomes a smaller part of development. The Government are sold on that vision and are making big strides towards it. The current ministerial team—the Secretary of State and our brilliant Housing Minister, who is here today—have that vision and experience these issues in their own constituencies.

I am confident that we are moving in the right direction. I hope that, when the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill arrives in the House of Lords, the Government will proactively take steps to improve it to address these issues. If I read the Minister’s body language right, he clearly understands those issues and wants to act on them. I hope that we can agree to act as quickly as possible, because the issues that I have described in my constituency are horrendous. People have worked hard, saved up a lot, done all the right things, and bought a new home, but they are getting mugged by an industry that, although also having some good players, has some real cowboys. As I said yesterday, the people in my constituency want a new sheriff—in the form of our current Housing Minister—to ride into town on his white horse, blow some of those bad guys away, put right what is being done wrongly and address the glaring injustices that my constituents are experiencing.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak.

2.44 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) for securing the debate. He is doing a great service to leaseholders in every constituency and I can see that the Minister is determined to improve the situation for them. All Members receive loads of emails about this issue from constituents, who are often in very

stressful situations regarding their leaseholds, and I hope that the wide-ranging reforms that the Government are pushing through will change that. Of course, for many, those changes cannot come quickly enough.

I want to raise one discrete issue that I urge the Minister to consider. When constituents contact me about an issue with leasehold, be it a service charge dispute or a problem with lease extension or parking, a theme that comes up far too frequently is that the leaseholder is required to receive advice on their purchase from a conveyancer recommended to them by the estate agent, who is of course the representative of the seller-freeholder. Although I understand that there is nothing unlawful or improper about that arrangement, its practical effect seems to be that the buyer does not get the robust and impartial advice that they need.

We have a particularly upsetting case in my constituency involving the purchase of a new build shared ownership flat using solicitors that the seller told the leaseholder to use. At no point was the purchaser told that if they wanted to extend the lease, they would have to do so before it dropped below 80 years—the marriage value threshold. They have missed that chance and now face a huge bill to extend the lease. That case may yet be greatly assisted by the abolition of marriage value, although I think the Minister should consider some of the unintended consequences that may come from that—but that is a separate question. The point remains that leaseholders, and particularly first-time homeowners, need clear and impartial advice about their rights and responsibilities, and any pitfalls and possible expenditures, during their lease term.

When I wrote to the Minister on this point, I was told:

“We can also say that we would expect conveyancers to deliver an effective service to their clients, including making them aware of any changes or conditions attached to the property before a purchase is finalised. It is essential that conveyancers deliver an effective service to their clients.”

Of course it is, but the problem is that few people have the means to take action when they do not receive an effective service, so the opportunity to hold conveyancers to account is limited for many people.

The Government should act to ensure that leaseholders have access to high-quality, unbiased legal advice. It must be relatively straightforward for the Government to prevent sellers from recommending conveyancers, simply leaving buyers to choose their own conveyancer, as most purchasers do already. One possible route to achieving that, alongside looking again at the rules relating to referrals to conveyancers—we actually need tougher rules—is an enhanced role for the Leasehold Advisory Service. As many people will know, that organisation provides brilliant advice to many leaseholders, but with additional resources it could perhaps do more to provide bespoke support in cases where it appears that the legal advice has somehow been dud. There does not necessarily need to be a cost to that; it might operate as a deterrent and straighten people up a bit.

Alongside new legislation, access to impartial advice and support when things have gone wrong would hugely empower leaseholders across my constituency, particularly in areas such as Denton and Springhead, and indeed across all constituencies, and we would spend less time late at night answering emails from people who find themselves in an unhappy and stressful situation.

2.49 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and I thank the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for securing this important debate. I want to focus on the issue of maintenance charges, given that the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill gives homeowners paying charges for the maintenance of communal areas the right to challenge the reasonableness of those charges and the standard of the service provided.

This Parliament has run out of road on so many issues. The Government have in deed, if not in word, taken the decision not to meet many of the challenges that people in my constituency face—problems I see every day—with measures such as social care reform, special educational needs and disabilities expansion, and fair changes to small and medium-sized enterprises taxation. However, I am glad that they are finally willing to tackle maintenance charges. Whether that is due to the particular passion of the Secretary of State will mean little to my constituents, many of whom are leaseholders and freeholders on new build estates who so desperately need this place to sit up and take notice of their plight.

The present system of maintenance charges and management fees is outrageous. A cowboy system with limited regulation has taken root and left residents with no transparency over how funds are used and no clarity on whether services provide value for money, and the fees charged are exorbitant and quite frankly offensive in the context of a crippling cost of living crisis and the highest tax burden on working people for 70 years. My constituents, as well as many of the constituents of Conservative Members, are being fleeced by these charges.

In the seven months since becoming the Member of Parliament for Selby and Ainsty, I have seen many instances of these charges being levied unfairly on local residents. I have already written to the Minister about a particularly egregious example in Carlton, so I will refrain from mentioning that case to give him adequate time to respond. However, I will mention the Harron Homes estate off Flaxley Road in Selby. The estate has been built for five years and is still plagued with problems. Residents still do not have working street lights, with families not able to go out in the dark. They have to put up with roads that have literal craters in them, ruining the cars on which people rely for work, since public transport in my area is so poor. I spoke to one resident who cannot even lock her front door at night, due to shoddy building work, and has to prop her door closed with a chair so that criminals do not break in and steal her possessions. That is all while each resident on the estate is shackled with eye-watering maintenance charges.

The lack of transparency and accountability in the new build homes sector has led to countless issues. From construction defects to unfair lease terms, homeowners are left feeling helpless, hopeless and at the mercy of developers who are seemingly determined to squeeze every penny they can out of hard-working people. That is a sad part of life in modern Britain. On new build estates across the Selby district, working people live in a broken system, being asked to pay more and more for less and less in return. They have been waiting for the Government to come and help them.

Perhaps the Bill will be the answer, but I caution against any watering down of its provisions; rather, I encourage ambition to ensure that it goes further and gives residents the support that they so desperately need, as the hon. Member for Harborough so eloquently outlined. I am sure that my constituents regret the lack of ambition that we have seen in the past, and although the Government are not going the whole way to provide leaseholders in my constituency with the help that they need, I am glad that they are taking action after 14 years to deal with the problem that, as the hon. Member outlined, has existed since at least 2002.

We can and should go further on this issue, and I am proud to support Labour's plans to make it a requirement to establish and operate a residents' management company responsible for all service charges, to give homeowners the accountability and responsibility that they deserve. I support the implementation of the Law Commission's proposals on the right to manage, covering both flats and houses, as well as the proposals on enfranchisement and on commonhold reform. It is imperative that we address these challenges head on and enact meaningful reform to ensure fairness, transparency and security for all homeowners. The Government have started the job, but ultimately it will be a Labour Government who finally liberate leaseholders from the mercy of an arcane and discriminatory industry.

2.54 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) and to the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather). They both spoke well yesterday on Report on the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for his contribution and, if I may do so through you, Mrs Harris, I pay tribute to his late father, Rev. Roger Holloway, who got the OBE for services to whisky.

The problem of rentcharges that has been brought up matches the problem with estate management charges. Even today, in Durrington in my constituency, Terry Woodjetts has to make it a full-time job to get the developers to do what they said they would and justify their charges. I hope that the developers will co-operate fully. They say they will. They have made some progress, but why can they not get it right first time? If they do not get it right first time, why can they not get it right the second time when attention is drawn to it?

One of the issues that was rightly brought up in the debate yesterday is whether developers should lay down a bond that is available until an impartial local authority can say whether or not they have delivered. There should be ways of making it in their own self-interest to act in the interests of those to whom they sell homes.

I turn to rentcharges. The Rentcharges Act 1977 said that, except in limited circumstances, new rentcharges could not be created after 1977, and that existing rentcharges would evaporate in 2037. One of those "limited circumstances" is when a freeholder has not paid a due cost, in which case the owner of the rentcharge, who might have no other interest, can apply to a court. The court has no discretion; it must grant a 99-year lease on a freehold property. Unwinding that can be expensive because there is no limit to the charge that the rentcharge owner can make on remedying the situation.

I believe it is time for the Minister and his advisers to work on what they know is a difficult problem and deal with it.

Let me read what the Government themselves say about rentcharges. Their website states:

“A rentcharge is not the same as ground rent on leasehold properties. Find out more about leasehold ground rents.

Please do not send applications to redeem leasehold ground rents as they cannot be redeemed under the Rentcharges Act 1977.

If you are not sure if your property is freehold or leasehold, you can find out by looking at your property deeds or by visiting the HM Land Registry website.

Please do not send applications to redeem estate rentcharges or rentcharges that have been created after 22 August 1977, as these cannot be redeemed under the Rentcharges Act 1977.

Please do not apply if the rentcharge has already been redeemed directly with your rentowner (known as a private redemption). The Rentcharges team cannot provide a redemption certificate where a private redemption has occurred. Contact your rentowner or HM Land Registry”—

and it goes on.

It seems to me, having read that, that it ought to be possible for the Government, with or without the help of the Law Commission, to remedy the situation. If rentcharges should not exist and the powers of the rentcharge owner should not continue, the Government should act—deal with it, resolve it—and do so now. Anybody buying a freehold home where there might be a rentcharge liability has to get their seller to deal with it or take it on, with the consent of the mortgage lender if a mortgage is involved, which it will be, either for the new purchaser or the person they are going to sell to.

When they see these problems, Ministers should not delay or regard it as NIMTOO—“not in my term of office”. They should take responsibility and deal with it. The Government should get a social survey of people on new estates to see the problems that they have with estate management companies and estate management charges, and they should do a survey of solicitors, all of whom deal on their websites with the problems of rentcharges. They should get them together, have a roundtable, work out what would be effective and act. That would make people happier, take away the risks and take away half the fun that lawyers will have in trying to sort out the problems when they eventually come to court.

2.58 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) on securing this important debate. I am sure we all have constituency issues that emanate from this issue and I echo the points that he made yesterday and in today’s debate. In particular, I want to mention the issue of developers wriggling out of planning commitments. I have several examples of that and one, which I have discussed with the Minister, that is particularly egregious. I am sure I will mention it again in this House.

The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill is a landmark piece of legislation that will help every leaseholder in Hertford and Stortford and beyond, throughout the country. I know the Minister is more than aware of the problems with leasehold ownership. They are there for all to see: no control over agency fees, how the value of

the property dwindles as the lease begins to elapse, how tricky and often expensive it is to extend a lease and how, in essence, it is not true property ownership.

I have heard the argument that if prospective leaseholders do not want to endure all those issues, they should simply not sign on the dotted line to become a leaseholder. That frame of mind shows a misunderstanding of the system and the lack of choice in it. To begin with, becoming a leaseholder is practically a rite of passage in climbing the property ladder nowadays. Many young people buy flats to begin with because they are smaller and cheaper, and try to use them as a platform to climb the property ladder, upsizing as they can, which is how I started. I should declare that I am the owner of a leasehold property now, although my freeholder is as wonderful and fair as they come. Perhaps that makes me the lucky one.

In many cases, people become leaseholders only to have the wool pulled over their eyes. For instance, I have heard stories of first-time buyers signing up to be leaseholders, accepting the estimated service charge amount when they do so. They then exchange contracts and, when they receive their leases to sign a few days before completion, the service charge amounts have more than doubled. What are the leaseholders to do? They have already exchanged contracts by that stage, which is the legal point of no return. Are we asking them to throw away their life savings—their deposit—or are we asking them to find hundreds or thousands of extra pounds out of their back pockets to cover the difference? I appreciate that advertising a lower than anticipated service charge might get more sales over the line, but I am sure that everyone would agree that more than doubling the amount on completion day shows how managing agents are seldom on the side of leaseholders.

I want to share a couple of examples from my constituents. One Hertford resident bought his flat seven years ago, with 109 years left to run on the lease. He has, however, received a quote from the freeholder of £10,000 to extend—not money he would find down the back of a sofa. That is an extraordinary amount. The other side of the coin is that, as the years of a lease become fewer, the value of the asset dwindles. My constituents have worked extraordinarily hard to buy their homes, and now they have to face headaches not that far down the line. It goes without saying that if someone owns a house by freehold, they do not experience any issues like that. They own a property and that is it.

Another constituent owns a flat with a doubling ground rent, which is currently £750 a year. They want to sell the flat but are having issues, as very few mortgage companies will lend against the property when a buyer’s affordability capacity is hampered so significantly by such ground rent levels. That leaseholder asked the freeholder for a quote to have the lease amended and a reduced ground rent. The freeholder flat out refused to negotiate. Why would they engage in negotiations? Ground rent is literally money for nothing for them. Meanwhile, either my constituent is stuck in a property that will become only more problematic over time, or they will manage to sell it to someone else who will simply inherit the same issues, not solving the problem. The greatest irony is that the leaseholder in question works as an estate agent. That totally dispels the notion that all one needs to avoid leasehold’s fundamental flaws is to be savvy in the property market.

[Julie Marson]

I tell those stories to show how too common they are, and I know that the Minister is very engaged in these issues. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill is the greatest opportunity in 30 years to put things right, and I support and welcome it. Personally, I would love to be more radical. I would like to see all leaseholders in flats turned into commonholders overnight, but I appreciate the complexity of doing so. Will the Minister mull over and comment on a two-stage plan? Even then, I know that it will not happen overnight. The first part will be to ensure that all future flat sales come with a share of the freehold. That will be a much-needed stopgap until the second stage, which is the total abolition of leasehold ownership in this country, turning leaseholders into commonholders.

We should commit to the total abolition of leasehold. It is time to be radical and ambitious, and to liberate millions of leaseholders from the myriad issues they face. With such an objective we can turn millions of people into proper homeowners overnight. It would give leaseholders more security and peaceable enjoyment of their tenancies, and it would truly give them a proper stake in society.

3.5 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris, and to follow the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson). I am very glad that she mentioned the question of a share of freehold: we pushed for that in Committee, and it is one of several measures necessary to pave the way for the commonhold future that so many of us in the House want to see.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this important debate, on opening it as compellingly as he did and on the persuasive argument he made yesterday on Report on the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill. He spoke in support of greater ambition in addressing the many inequities of the leasehold system. Although I disagree with his assertion in yesterday's debate that that Bill is our one chance to end the arcane and discriminatory practices that leaseholders and residential freeholders are at the mercy of, it certainly represents our only chance to do so in this Parliament. On the Labour Benches, we wholeheartedly agree that the Government should go further than the Bill does.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. Those contributions, like yesterday's debate, highlight that there is widespread support across the House for ambitious leasehold and commonhold reform. Once again, I want to put on record the thanks of those on the Labour Benches to all those who have campaigned tirelessly, often over many decades, for an overhaul of leasehold law. In particular, I thank the leaseholders and residential freeholders who have resolutely refused to accept the inequities of the flawed system they are so often at the mercy of, and who have taken it on themselves to vigorously make the case for change.

In responding to the debate, I do not intend to revisit yesterday's many principled arguments and exchanges on leasehold reform in general. Instead, I will simply provide some further detailed thoughts on some of the specific issues that have been raised this afternoon,

starting with the management of private and mixed-tenure estates. The distinct set of problems faced by residential freeholders on those estates with charges and fees is well known and well understood. The Government have publicly recognised for at least six years that it is a very serious problem, and we welcome their decision to use the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill to introduce statutory protections for freehold homeowners that are equivalent to those enjoyed by long leaseholders in respect of service charges.

As the Minister will recall, in Committee we pressed for specific changes to strengthen the new estate management regulatory framework, not least to rectify some of the obvious deficiencies of the existing leasehold regulation regime that it mirrors. We hope that the Government will give them further consideration. In our view, of particular importance is the need for a right-to-manage regime for freeholders on private and mixed-tenure estates. It is not enough merely to give residential freeholders on those estates the right to challenge the reasonableness of charges and to hold estate management companies to account. They should enjoy the right to take over the management functions on their estate, and we believe there is appetite among freehold homeowners to exert more direct control in that way. In yesterday's debate on Report, the Minister made it clear that the Government understand the strength of feeling on the issue and are considering it further. Will the Minister provide a little more clarity today and tell us whether the Government are seriously considering tabling amendments in the other place to provide parity between residential leaseholders and freeholders when it comes to the right to manage?

As the hon. Member for Harborough rightly argued yesterday, ensuring that residential freeholders on existing private and mixed-tenure estates are better protected is one thing, but reducing the prevalence of the arrangements is another. The Government must act to do the latter, as that is the best way of addressing the root causes of so many of the problems that residential freeholders face. However, we believe it would be wrong simply to force local authorities to adopt such estates without corresponding changes to ensure that the public infrastructure and amenities built on them are built to a determined, adoptable standard, so that financially hard-pressed councils are not forced to repair and maintain poor quality roads and common services at great cost. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some assurances—we touched on this on Committee—that the Government are actively exploring the mix of legislative and policy changes that will be required to make progress on both of those fronts, adoption and common adoptable standards.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise that I could not be here when I was supposed to be, Mrs Harris. I was meeting some people from Hong Kong on issues of human rights and freedom. I thank the shadow Minister for letting me intervene. Leasehold reform has been the subject of much discussion, such as in yesterday's debate in the main Chamber. Does he not agree that there is a real need for urgent leasehold reform? It affects so many of our constituents—from young people, who are starting their lives, to older people, who are trying to downsize. We must make this change, especially at a time when every penny counts for most people, whether they are young or old.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was starting to get troubled when I could not see him out of the corner of my eye; I am glad he has attended the debate and made that point. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know Labour's position: our concern is that the Bill does not go far enough by any means. It is distinctly unambitious. However, it does make important changes, and we think it is important that it receives Royal Assent before the end of the Parliament. For the reasons he outlined, we want to see it make speedy progress.

Let me turn to the issue of forfeiture, which the hon. Member for Harborough raised in his speech. As hon. Members will know, throughout the passage of the Bill, Labour has made the principled case for abolishing forfeiture and the windfall it provides to freeholders. As I argued in the debate yesterday, forfeiture is a wholly disproportionate and horrifically draconian mechanism for ensuring compliance with a lease agreement. Its continued use, and the chilling effect that results from its mere existence, continues to put landlords in a nearly unassailable position of strength in disputes with leaseholders. That is why it is routinely used by landlords as a first resort when seeking to recover alleged arrears of payments from leaseholders, and why the threat of it is invoked so often to deter leaseholders from disputing any unreasonable costs and defending claims.

Yesterday's debate reinforced the fact that there is clearly a broad consensus in the House for getting rid of forfeiture. Although Labour is understandably disappointed that the Government resisted our second attempt to achieve that, we welcome the Minister making it clear that the Government are

"working through the detail of the issue"—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2024; Vol. 746, c. 197.]

and intend to report back to the House shortly. Can I encourage the Minister to do so as quickly as possible, and to provide us with assurances to that effect today? Determining precisely what, if anything, the House will put in place of the existing system of forfeiture is an extremely complicated undertaking. Given that the Government have had years to develop considered proposals in this area, it would be unfortunate if hon. Members were asked to take a view on complex and technical proposals without the time necessary to properly scrutinise them.

As the Minister considers the matter of forfeiture, can I also press him to review the issue of rent charges? I am glad that the Father of the House and, I think, the hon. Member for Harborough mentioned it in their contributions. We must ensure there are no unintended consequences, but in our view there is a cast-iron case for abolishing section 121 of the Law of Property Act 1925 altogether. The remedies provided for by the Act, which amount, in essence, to freehold forfeiture, are a wholly disproportionate and draconian legacy of Victorian-era property law. Through clause 83 of the Bill, the Government are seeking to make palatable methods of enforcing legitimate and reasonable rent charges that are simply not justifiable in any form, and must be removed. I urge the Minister to reconsider the Government's position on rent charges.

Before I conclude, I will touch briefly on ground rents, which the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford mentioned. As Labour argued in Committee, over the past two decades, we have seen a system develop that is increasingly focused on generating assets by gouging

leaseholders through ground rents that are, in historical terms, high to start with, and that escalate over the term of the lease. Leaseholders who have worked hard to purchase their homes in good faith are being asked to pay ever more money for no clear service in return, and many are experiencing considerable financial distress and difficulty selling their property, all to sustain the income streams of third-party investors. Unregulated ground rents of this nature in existing leases cannot be justified in our view. As I have previously made clear, I personally share the Secretary of State's preference to cap ground rent at a peppercorn.

Although we do not discount the risks involved in any of the five options outlined in the recent Government consultation, Labour is clear that the Government must act to protect leaseholders from ground rent exploitation, and that, as I said in Committee, they should be courageous in determining which of the consultation proposals should be enacted.

The Minister made it clear in yesterday's debate that the Government are considering next steps and were moving at speed in doing so. I will not press him this afternoon for any further detail, as I accept he will not be able to say any more today. However, can I press on him again, as I did on forfeiture, the need to share any detailed proposals with the House at the earliest possible stage, particularly given the implications of the range of options consulted on for the Bill that has now been sent to the other place? It will, as the Minister knows, involve the rewriting of several substantive clauses in the Bill, so we need that detail early on. I look forward to his response.

3.14 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate and those who are listening to it. The fact that we are talking about this issue for the second time in two days shows how important it is. It is clear, as we discussed yesterday, that Members on both sides of the House recognise that this area badly needs attention and reform. Thankfully, the general consensus across the House is that we have to move in that direction, so I hope the Bill, which went to the other place yesterday, will make fast progress there.

To be clear, the Government absolutely acknowledge this issue. We did so on Report yesterday, in Committee, on Second Reading and before that. Hon. Members have made very important points today, and have raised similar issues previously, about the iniquities in the system. They have spoken about the historical problems on the leasehold side and, more recently, but just as iniquitously, on the estate management side. Even those of us who believe that the Government should be very temperate in intervening in markets know it is right that when markets are not working, we should take action to straighten them out and remove the distortions within them. That is exactly why we introduced the Bill and are trying to ensure that it makes progress in the months ahead. We welcome the Opposition's commitment to getting it on to the statute book at the earliest opportunity.

There are problems within the leasehold part of the discussion. The estate management issues have come into much sharper relief over the past couple of decades,

[*Lee Rowley*]

particularly for those of us who have had significant amounts of new building in our areas. We can see, on a day-to-day basis, that a set of issues with individual estates clearly needs to be resolved.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) and the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) outlined, there is a particular issue with new homes, which I will talk about in a moment. Without rehearsing some of the previous arguments and discussions, I want to read into the record, for about a minute, the real progress that the Bill makes. It is important that the House and the other place do not forget that, as a baseline, we are making the biggest and most significant change to property law in this country in a generation; we absolutely need to acknowledge that.

We are making it cheaper and easier for leaseholders in houses and flats to extend their lease or buy their freehold. That is a significant intervention. We are increasing the standard lease extension term from just 90 years to 990 years, with ground rent reduced to zero. That is an extremely significant intervention. We are removing the requirement for a new leaseholder to have owned their house or flat for two years before they can benefit from these changes. We are changing the thresholds and non-residential limits within properties, and for the first time allowing leaseholders in buildings with up to 50% non-residential floor space to buy their freehold and take over its management.

Yesterday on Report, we added protections on top of the Building Safety Act 2022 to make the purchase and sale of leasehold and freehold estate properties quicker and easier by proving a maximum time and fee for the provision of information. Vitally, we are requiring transparency over leasehold service charges, which hon. Members talked about a moment ago. We are replacing building insurance commissions for managing agents, landlords and freeholders so that we get away from the frankly outrageous situation whereby there is little clarity about what is being paid for, who pays for it and whether there are kickbacks in the background.

We are scrapping the presumption that leaseholders will pay the freeholder's legal costs when challenging poor practice. That is another absolutely outrageous historical iniquity that needs resolution. We are rightly extending redress schemes to managed estates. I know that some hon. Members would prefer them to be abolished, but it is absolutely right that there is a redress scheme in place.

As hon. Members know, yesterday we banned the creation of new leasehold houses. I do not like to ban anything at all because I think we have banned far too much in the United Kingdom over the past generation, but sadly, I am absolutely convinced of the necessity of a preclusion on leasehold houses, given the horror stories that have been outlined during the passage of the Bill and in the years leading up to it.

Matthew Pennycook: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman; I hope he is about to agree with me about the necessity of banning only very proportionately.

Matthew Pennycook: I am afraid that I am going to have to disappoint the Minister, because I disagree that the Government banned new leasehold houses yesterday. He did not address this in his wind-up speech yesterday, because he did not have a huge amount of time, but I want him to respond to my concerns about new schedule 2 providing for exemptions that are potentially so wide that they could allow for the creation of significant numbers of new leasehold homes over the coming years. Will the Government review their position on new schedule 2? Are they convinced that it provides for only very limited exceptions in unusual circumstances, as the Minister said yesterday?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. He and I have an active discussion about this, and possibly a slight difference of opinion about the potential impact of what we introduced. I do not wish to misrepresent him, but I think he accepts that some elements of what we brought forward yesterday, possibly those regarding the National Trust, are not controversial or contentious. There is a question about whether the measures should apply if, historically, organisations, entities or companies have agreements in certain ways. It is clear that this will be swept away; we are effectively discussing whether existing permissions on a particular type of prospectus, other than the small number of things such as the National Trust, should be swept away as well. I am sure that we will continue to talk about that, but we think that this proposition is a major intervention that honours the spirit of banning leasehold houses. Others may take a different view, but the Government's view is that this is a significant step forward that adheres to the spirit of a ban or preclusion, and that will allow us to move forward.

I have highlighted the progress that has been and is being made, subject to what the other place does. I know, however, that hon. Members are very keen that we go further in certain areas, so I want to spend a few moments going through some of their suggestions. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough made a powerful speech—again, he is the reason why we are speaking about this matter today, and it is important that we continue to have this conversation. We have heard some of the examples, both named and referred to, of the realities created by the system. No system is perfect—we can never design it such that there will not be some attempt to prang it in some way, shape or form—but large holes in the system have clearly built up and been exploited. Those have resulted in, for instance, the removal of trees from a tree-lined street. Unless there is some other reality behind that, there is absolutely no reason for it to happen. We have to move to a place where that does not occur, and we hope that that will be achieved in part by the changes made by the Bill. We recognise that there are further concerns, and we are considering those, but we all agree that some of the examples mentioned are not where we want to be. I hope that we may be able to say more on that going forward.

As I mentioned briefly yesterday, I also recognise this issue personally. I am not speaking today as a constituency MP, but only in the last month I have been in meetings with constituents who raised concerns about a Persimmon development and the clarity of information about service charges. So in my part of the world, I see issues similar to those raised by hon. Members, including my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend also raised an important point about GP provision. I have been in this job for only four months, but I recognise the importance of this issue. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is particularly concerned about that, and I have spoken about it with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson). It is another clear iniquity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough says, people are doing the right thing, have worked hard all their lives and are buying properties, and although the sales particulars of those properties state that new GP provision will be on or near the site, suddenly that provision disappears into thin air between the point when the ink goes on the contract and the point when they move in, or within a few years.

We have already held a meeting on that issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who is a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, and we are committed to trying to make further progress. A detailed discussion is needed, because a number of different issues on GP provision need to be unpacked.

First, there is the physical ability to provide bricks—places for people to operate out of—which is obviously the responsibility of the planning system or associated with it. The second issue is whether there could be some provision, but for whatever reason, the configurations, the preferred designs and so on make that cost higher than it otherwise should be. If that is the case, that needs to be looked into again, because there is no reason for making perfect the enemy of the good. Thirdly, we may have the bricks or provisions to provide the bricks, but if we do not have the people to provide the services, it does not help in any instance the people who have been sold the promise in the first place. A number of different issues will need to be unpicked, and I am working with my right hon. Friend from the Department of Health and Social Care on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough talked passionately and importantly about new homes and the related issues. As he indicated, when someone has done the right thing, it is absolutely incredible and unacceptable that there are the kind of problems that he has highlighted around sewage, snagging and the amount of time people have to take to get their homes up to the standard they thought they were buying in the first place, or to solve the problems they did not think there would be. It is also fair to say that, as MPs, we only hear about the difficult issues, and there are many thousands of homeowners who move into homes on a monthly and annual basis who do not have those issues. That is absolutely great, but we can all see in our postbags that there are significant challenges with regards to new homes. As my hon. Friend indicates, I hope that the new homes ombudsman will make progress, and the New Homes Quality Board is currently seeking to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) is no longer in his place, but he raises an important point about conveyancing. The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty made a similar point about people being encouraged to use a particular conveyancer, or a particular set of solicitors, and it may be that the output of that process, however it happened, meant they did not get all the information or certain things were not as clear as they could be. That is unacceptable. I recognise that we have to work through that issue. There is a very

complicated interaction between standards, regulation and whether people are doing the right thing, even within a regulated industry. I think I should pick that up with my Ministry of Justice colleagues to see whether there is anything that we may be able to take forward.

The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty made an important and eloquent case relating to some challenges that he and his constituents have experienced. I was campaigning on one of his new estates just a few months ago, possibly for a different candidate. I will make two points. He raised an issue with regards to Harron Homes. I say this not to make any particular point, other than that I had a similar personal and constituency issue with Harron Homes on the Regents Green estate in Grassmoor in my constituency a number of years ago. It took quite a bit of pushing, but in the end, Harron Homes moved and we got hundreds of snags unsnagged. I hope he has similar success on that.

I know the hon. Member's point was not about seeking advice on how to approach Harron Homes; it was more broadly about the reality that this should not happen in the first place, and he is absolutely right. I hope that some of the work in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, and some of the things that the New Homes Quality Board is doing on a voluntary basis and the new homes ombudsman will do in the coming years will help to address some of those problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) is not just the Father of the House but the father of many of the innovations and suggestions in the Bill, given how long he has campaigned on this issue. He raised the specific issue of rentcharges, and I would say to him that I am always happy to hold roundtables, but we must make sure they have utility. We are clearly making progress with the Bill, and I hope hon. Members accept that that includes progress on rentcharges. Both I and the Secretary of State continue to be keen to have the discussion around rentcharges to see what might be possible in the future.

It is important to note that there is a complicated interaction, as there always is in such difficult areas of law, between the clear problems we see with rentcharges and the overall structure of how rentcharges are used on a broader basis—rentcharges are, for example, part of the estate management system. That is something we have to try and work through in the round, but I am always happy to talk more and to hold roundtables. We do understand that there continues to be a challenge there.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I should have said that I am a leaseholder. Let us say that one of my grandchildren was buying a freehold property where there was a requirement to pay charges. The idea that the rentcharge holder can, if there is a slip in paying the charge, turn a freehold property into a 99-year lease, which may knock hundreds of thousands of pounds off the value of a London property, is absurd. The sooner we can please have the roundtable, followed by action, the better.

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the current system, and I look forward to continuing to discuss that with him and those who are interested in this area and who wish to see further progress.

[Lee Rowley]

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford made a clear point about the importance of clarity of information for leaseholders. Given the preclusion that we are bringing forward, I hope she has seen that we have added clauses to the Bill to make it imperative that there is explicit clarity about whether leasehold houses are still being sold, in the limited instances where we think it is proportionate to do so. From a house perspective, there will be no ability for people not to know what they are buying because others choose not to make that clear.

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich—we have rehearsed many of these points already, so I will not seek to detain hon. Members—raised the issue of forfeiture. As I have said, and as I will happily repeat here again, we are working through the detail of that issue. We are very serious, and we recognise that it is an important issue and one on which the House has already indicated that it has a very strong view. We hope to be able to say something more on it shortly.

After we had had a number of Divisions yesterday, I saw on Twitter—I do read Twitter—that there was quite a lot of disappointment about the choice on forfeiture. I want to assure people who may be reading the *Hansard* of this debate or watching online that the Government are absolutely serious about this issue. We have been clear that we are looking at it seriously, and I hope we will be able to say something more. Many of us who have been in this place for a number of years now will know that there is some arcanity—if that is a word—or an arcaneness to some of the procedures. Sometimes things do not appear in exactly the linear sequence or sequential order that people would like, but I can assure those who are interested in this issue that the Government are looking at it seriously, and I hope to be able to report back to the House on it shortly.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who is no longer in her place, but who raised important points about leasehold. I also thank, as ever, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who highlighted the importance of reform in general. That is one of the reasons why we are bringing the Bill forward and seeking to make as strong progress as possible.

I recognise the useful contributions today, which build on Report stage yesterday and on the progress that the Bill has made in the House already. I hope that hon. Members who have been in today's debate or been part of the process so far recognise that this is a strong proposition that the Government have brought forward. It is the biggest change to property law in a generation.

The Government and I recognise the desire of Members here, and of the House in general, to go further. We have said very clearly that we are looking at a number of areas, and my Secretary of State—my boss and the person who ultimately makes the choice—has indicated very clearly that he is keen to improve the Bill further. As I said in Committee, we will not be able to do everything, and there is always a discussion and a decision about how we prioritise the limited time of this House and the other place. However, we think that the Bill is a strong start, and we hope we will be able to improve it further. We look forward to being able to

make real progress in this important area, which has needed reform for so long. Finally, after 20 years, we will be able to deliver that as part of this Bill.

3.33 pm

Neil O'Brien: Thank you for chairing this session, Mrs Harris. I thank all hon. Members for their interesting and important contributions during the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) raised the issue of conveyancing being done by someone tied to the developer, and the bad incentives that that sets up. The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) welcomed the action on maintenance charges but gave us a terrifying example of constituents getting the charges but no actual maintenance.

The Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), raised the case of Terry Woodjetts, and I really like his idea of a bond. I have long thought that, instead of councils having to take developers to court for infringements of planning conditions and building conditions, it would be much simpler if the onus was reversed so that a bond was held by the council and only released if developers did the right thing during the development process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) made important points about people finding out terms only once it was too late because they had paid the deposit or the whole whack, and about how even quite sophisticated people such as estate agents can end up being trapped by this complex system.

I have raised lots of harrowing cases in the debate, and lots of other Members have done the same. However, to end on a moment of light, when I think about the document I wrote in 2018, I am struck by the fact that, although politics—particularly this field—is not for the impatient, it is possible to make progress, and we are making progress. An example of that is leasehold houses. The promise alone that we were going to take the legislative action that we are now taking has driven down the number of leasehold houses very dramatically over recent years. I raised the issue of getting new GP surgeries in new estates, and we have already made progress on that through the new NPPF guidance. The conversation is continuing, and it is not a straightforward one. The Minister is right to read into the record the different elements of progress that have already been made in the Bill and to highlight the complexity and the fact that it is not straightforward to make further progress.

However, to end on a moment of optimism, I wrote about things such as the transparency of land options in 2018. I published my paper in 2018 and, as a Minister in the Department in 2021, I made the case for us putting that in legislation. We legislated in 2023, and we will be doing the secondary legislation in 2024. It takes a long time to do things, but we do eventually get there.

Capturing more land value for the community is something they do brilliantly in Hong Kong—the hon. Member for Strangford has been communicating with people whose human rights have been violated there. One thing they have always done well there is capture land value for the community, and we are making progress on that through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act—not just the new infrastructure levy that we will roll out over the coming years, but the new compulsory purchase order powers, which I look forward to being used.

I have been making arguments for a long time about building in the wrong places without the right infrastructure. Again, we have made progress on that, whether that is the urban uplift, the objectively assessed housing need, which came in a few years ago, or the moves to liberalise brownfield development that have been mooted more recently. We have made progress towards all those things. I talk about the broken planning system, and we are making progress towards it being less broken than it was, but there is still a lot to do.

From that story of progress and of a lot of things needing fixing, I take an optimistic point, which is simply that, although there is a lot for the Minister to do, and it is not easy to make progress on these things, we have already made good progress, and we have another opportunity to make some big strides forward through the Bill. I am encouraged not just by the fact that the Minister is an able and brilliant Minister, but by his saying today that we will take the opportunity to go further on these things, which have caused such a lot of grief for my constituents. These are issues that we can fix.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered leasehold reform and new homes.

3.38 pm

Sitting suspended.

Leighton Hospital Rebuild

4 pm

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I will call Dr Kieran Mullan to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the rebuild of Leighton Hospital.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. My aim today is to take this opportunity to ensure that the rebuild of Leighton Hospital is front and centre of the Minister's priorities, because a successful rebuild and management of the short-term challenges on the way there are vital to ensuring that my constituents, and residents across the region more broadly, can access excellent healthcare from their local hospital.

All of us involved in the campaign were delighted when we secured Leighton's place in the £20 billion new hospital programme, which will see 40 hospitals benefit in the largest concerted effort in a generation to modernise our hospital estate. As part of that, Leighton Hospital will receive hundreds of millions of pounds in funding to be rebuilt. The current hospital is a crucial part of our local healthcare services. Built in the early 1970s, Leighton Hospital was opened by the late Queen in 1972. Generations of families have been born there and millions of people have received treatment there, and I know our local community is incredibly proud of its local hospital. Each year, the Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, of which Leighton is the primary site, has more than 100,000 A&E attendances and 290,000 outpatient appointments, and carries out more than 100,000 diagnostic tests. Leighton provides not just healthcare, but over 4,500 job opportunities to members of staff employed at the trust. Those fantastic members of staff cover a whole range of roles, including porters, cooks, receptionists, cleaners, occupational therapists, healthcare assistants, physiotherapists, nurses, doctors and many others.

Having worked in the NHS prior to becoming an MP, I know the difficulties that can arise working in buildings that are in need of refurbishment or, in this case, replacement. The physical infrastructure of the building being worked in is outside the control of the frontline staff, and they often have to do whatever it takes to make it work, but it would be better if they did not have to. Since it was built, Leighton has been expanded with new, modern buildings added on, including a new intensive therapy unit and theatre suite, campaigned for by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) when he represented Crewe and Nantwich.

More recently, I worked with others to secure £15 million for a new A&E department. When it was originally built, much of the building was made with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. RAAC is a lightweight, bubbly form of concrete, which was often used in schools, colleges and hospitals from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. It is usually found in roofs and occasionally walls and floors, and has since proven to be at risk of structural failure. Since that came to light, it was clear that something needed to be done to ensure that Leighton remains safe for patients.

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

By the time we started our campaign for a new hospital building, much work had already been done to manage that risk, but it was clear that remedial work would only take us so far and that the best thing to do—not least the better use of taxpayers' money—was to have a whole new building, so the campaign was launched. Thousands of local residents signed our petition for a rebuild and shared their positive experiences of being treated at Leighton, often having been born there, and they very much wanted to see its future secured. The inclusion of Leighton Hospital in the hospital building programme is a win for its staff and the patients it serves. It has been a privilege to have played a part in securing it, alongside the hard work of so many other key players, including my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury, and the cross-party support we achieved.

My hon. and learned Friend very much wanted to be here today, but is on an important visit with the Justice Committee. As I know he has done already, I have been glad today to be able to sit down and discuss this important local issue with the excellent Chester South and Eddisbury Conservative candidate for the forthcoming general election, Aphra Brandreth, who is in the Gallery. I know Aphra will continue championing the cause if she is elected as the next MP, which I very much hope she will be.

Having spoken recently with the leadership at Leighton Hospital, I understand that the building programme is coming along well, and I want to thank all those working on the project at Leighton, in NHS England and in the Department of Health and Social Care for their hard work to date. I am delighted that the Leighton site has been selected as the national low-rise hospital 2.0 design template reference site. Procurement of technical advisers is ongoing, and there has been positive engagement with the Cheshire East planning department. The funding allocated for the purchase of the land required to enable a new build has been received, with the purchase expected to be made in the next few weeks. While the trust is waiting for full DHSC and Treasury approval, the current timeline for completion runs through to 2029. That achieves the Government's goal of ensuring that the proposed projects in the hospital building programme are done before 2030.

However, as with any large infrastructure project, there will always be challenges and room for improvement. Most critically, the RAAC issue has not gone away. The hospital building programme is the long-term solution and we intend to have a whole new hospital to deal with the issue, but in the meantime, remedial works are absolutely necessary to ensure the continued safety of the building.

These challenges can be expected to persist for the next six to seven years. There has been encouraging support to manage them to date, with over £55 million spent in 2022-23 and £28 million in 2023-24, with further spending likely to be needed in the next financial year. A wide range of work has been undertaken, including the construction of a two-storey modular decant ward building. The development provides decant accommodation, which in turn has allowed the trust to undertake essential RAAC refurbishment and stabilisation works to existing wards, ensuring patient safety.

However, the remedial works inevitably create challenges for the dedicated team of staff. Access routes and clinical areas sometimes need to be closed, forcing staff to make large detours and creating a negative impact on the patient and staff experience. It can be difficult to deliver business as usual. Although I appreciate that disruption is at times unavoidable, it would greatly assist the trust if the Minister could talk to colleagues in DHSC and the local NHS to agree a clear, forward-looking timetable for the RAAC work, which will need to carry on and progress as the rebuild does. If there are elements that cannot be agreed in advance, perhaps there could be a smoother mechanism for sign-off to allow more timely decisions to be made.

My second ask is for the Minister to use his considerable skill to work with officials and agree the full cost envelopes and timescales for the whole rebuild as soon as possible, and agree a more streamlined approval process for the elements that are tentatively agreed locally but need sign-off higher up as the work progresses. His attention will benefit the rebuild process not only in Leighton but in other areas if changes can be agreed and implemented across the programme. I am confident that a deep dive by the Minister to understand how it has all been working to date would help identify where improvements in the process could be made.

While I have the Minister's attention, I want to highlight the potential for Leighton and other NHS hospitals to be heated by deep geothermal resources. A recent study by the British Geological Society identified more than 100 hospitals that sit on deep geothermal resources. As the Minister knows, with a net zero target of 2040, the NHS and hospitals in particular face a considerable challenge to secure net zero heat. I have been working with the Carbon and Energy Fund to develop proposals for identifying the best public sector candidates for deep geothermal, with a focus on NHS sites. I was glad to have the opportunity to meet the Hospitals Minister from the other place, Lord Markham, and his team. We are continuing discussions with them, the Treasury and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to see what we might be able to achieve.

I conclude by again paying tribute to all those who were part of the campaign to secure a rebuild of Leighton Hospital, and to all those at the hospital and in the wider NHS who put in an enormous amount of work to secure the progress we have made to date. I know that the Minister will take my questions in the spirit in which they are intended—as positive suggestions as to how we might deliver even more efficient progress—and see what he can do. We remain very happy to have secured the rebuild. We just want to ensure that it is delivered as swiftly as possible, and that Leighton staff and patients are supported to keep on delivering and receiving healthcare within the existing building in the meantime.

4.8 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) on securing this important debate on the rebuild of Leighton Hospital. He is a tireless campaigner for improving healthcare in his constituency and across our country. I commend him for the frontline service that he gave in

our NHS as an A&E doctor before entering the House, and for returning to work on the NHS frontline during the pandemic.

Securing the rebuild of the hospital was a long-term team effort. My hon. Friend worked hard alongside the local hospital leadership, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and thousands of their constituents who signed a petition to show their support. I myself have spoken to Aphra Brandreth, the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Chester South and Eddisbury, who has told me of the huge benefits that the rebuild will have for local residents.

The Government announced the rebuild of Leighton Hospital in May 2023 as part of the new hospital programme. Like Leighton, six other hospitals that we are rebuilding were initially constructed using reinforced autoclave aerated concrete, more commonly known as RAAC. We took the decision to rebuild those hospitals by 2030 not only to protect the safety of patients and staff but to give them access to the best facilities and the newest technology, which is progress that will allow our NHS to improve patient outcomes, cut waiting lists and deliver for another 75 years.

I was particularly delighted by that announcement because, as the MP for Pendle, I was campaigning, like my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, for the full rebuild of my own local hospital—Airedale General Hospital, which is just “over the border” in the Keighley constituency—so I was incredibly pleased that its rebuild was also approved by the Government on the same day. For the sake of clarity, I was not a Health Minister at the time when I was campaigning for that rebuild, so all propriety and ethical rules were followed.

I know that my hon. Friend and his constituents are eager to hear about how the rebuild of Leighton Hospital is progressing and I hope to provide a comprehensive update today. I am pleased to say that the local trust is working in lockstep with the new hospital programme to develop designs for its new hospital, following the standardised designs that we have developed to accelerate construction and get patients better care faster. The trust is also working with the programme to prepare its strategic outline case, which will be submitted to my Department this year.

By providing more than £2 million of funding, we have already supported the trust to develop the business case for critical early works, which will prepare the site for main construction, including more than £350,000 to support upgrades to the new hospital’s electricity capacity and over £250,000 to support geothermal and solar enablers. The support that we are giving to Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust signals this Government’s commitment to rebuilding Leighton Hospital as quickly as possible; I will keep my hon. Friend updated as further funding is released and the strategic outline case progresses.

The rebuild of Leighton Hospital is just one part of this Government’s commitment to improve healthcare in Crewe and Nantwich, and across Cheshire. We have provided Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

with over £50 million to address RAAC at the existing hospital, £15 million to upgrade its accident and emergency department, and £19 million to build a new surgical hub at the Victoria Infirmary in Northwich.

I know that my hon. Friend is championing cross-Government work to utilise geothermal energy, which he referred to in his speech, and I also know that he has already engaged with the Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust’s chief executive officer and with my ministerial colleague, Lord Markham, on how geothermal energy could be used at Leighton Hospital and across our NHS. This is incredibly exciting technology and the Government are exploring how it could be used throughout our economy. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is working on proposals to do that and my ministerial colleagues will keep the House updated on progress.

If I may, I will provide the House with a broader update on the new hospital programme. We are engaging with the market to build awareness of the programme among businesses, particularly main works contractors and those operating in the mechanical, electrical and plumbing markets. In all, we have held over 100 engagement events and spoken directly to over 1,500 businesses. What is more, later this year we will launch the full version of Hospital 2.0, which is our national approach to standardisation. That will be a major milestone for the programme and we will continue to develop our designs over time, in order to deliver better care for patients and better value for taxpayers.

I am also very pleased that four of our new hospitals are already open to patients: the Northern Centre for Cancer Care in Newcastle; the Royal Liverpool University Hospital; and Northgate Hospital and Ferndene Hospital, which are both in Northumberland. In addition, there is stage one of the Louisa Martindale building, which is also known as the “3Ts hospital”, in Brighton.

By the end of the next financial year, we expect to open another four hospitals: Salford Royal Hospital’s major trauma centre; the Dyson Cancer Centre in Bath; the National Rehabilitation Centre near Loughborough; and the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital. I am delighted that at another 18 hospitals, either construction is already taking place or early work has started—or been completed—to get the sites ready for construction.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich for securing this debate on the rebuild of Leighton Hospital. He is right to hold our feet to the fire on this issue and he is also right to demand that patients and staff, both in his constituency and throughout the country, have access to world-class facilities and world-class care. This is what the new hospital programme will deliver. The Government remain absolutely committed to delivering every scheme that has been announced as part of this programme and we are also absolutely committed to delivering the rebuild of Leighton Hospital by 2030.

Question put and agreed to.

4.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

Digital Exclusion

4.30 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered digital exclusion.

Prynhawn da, Mrs Harris; it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon. It is abundantly clear that we are living in an increasingly digital world where technology has become essential to the way we socialise, work, shop, learn, manage finances and gain access to vital services. Digital skills, connectivity and equipment are all now essential to enabling an individual to fully participate in modern society. For the majority of the population, that has made life easier.

Tasks that would have required someone to leave the comfort of their own house in the past are now performed at the tap of a screen or the click of a button. Information that might once have required significant research can be recovered instantaneously. For the most part, those trends do not pose problems for people, but for the minority who might lack the digital skills or confidence to gain access to those services, it can make the world more and more inaccessible.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Many of my constituents cannot work the system. They do not know how to or they give up, which means they miss out on vital NHS appointments and so on. Does the hon. Member agree with me that a back-up, offline system with a real voice at the end of a line would be a good idea?

Justin Madders: I agree. I will say no more about that because of the number of people who want to speak.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has clearly touched a nerve, given the number of people here. I think digital exclusion is often about rationing. I came across that with the legal aid cuts, where a lot of services are online and not accessed by people. It is now happening with GP services. There are 2 million people in north-west London who, from April, might have to go through a GP hub to access where they go. Already we have practices deciding that people have to send an online form and photographs before they can even get access to a GP. It excludes so many people from basic services.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is right. Age UK conducted a survey in 2022 on the trends in digital technology for those over 65. It found that in total there are about 2.7 million people over the age of 65 who do not use the internet, which is about one fifth of that population group. Similarly, it was found that over 40% of the over-75s were unable to turn on their device and successfully log in, and 47% were unable to find and open programs. Those are people who had internet access. That aspect is sometimes overlooked. For someone who has grown up in the world of computers, using them seems like second nature, but to some people it is something that they just cannot deal with.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman has really touched on what a lot of people feel in their daily lives: digital exclusion. So much of life today talks about inclusion. Is it not time

the Government and business looked for strategies to enable digital inclusion for the wider public? We know from our postbags and everything else that people have real difficulty with this. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for taking this matter forward because it is something that touches so many.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I will come on to some questions and challenges for the Government. The fact that we have so many Members here suggests that many things that we deal with as Members of Parliament are a result of digital exclusion.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. I can give a live example of digital exclusion in my constituency. The local council is introducing a charge on emptying garden bins from 1 April. It has an early bird offer of £20 rather than £37, but that is available only to residents who pay online. That not only excludes people, but impacts them financially. Will he join me in condemning Erewash Borough Council and its blatant digital exclusion?

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I suggest she talks to the leadership of the council to see whether an accommodation can be reached. Services should be available at the same price to everyone, regardless of their digital access.

I will not take any more interventions because I realise others wish to speak, but I will talk briefly about the banking sector, which has seen many branches close across the country, including in my own constituency of Ellesmere Port and Neston. In Neston there are no banks any more and Ellesmere Port has lost some. The nearest offline options for customers of the banks are often a significant journey away. With public transport the way it is, it is not always easy. Banks now expect customers to switch to online provisions, but that is not possible for some people. Even if they can do that, there is increased hesitation because of concerns about online fraud. Being able to access banking facilities readily should be a basic tenet of our society. At the moment, it is too difficult for too many people.

Car parking payment is another area that has increasingly moved online. App-based payment systems are becoming commonplace, but those without smartphones can find that difficult. Even when they have a smartphone, they may not have the knowhow or mobile data to download the app, meaning they can sometimes struggle to pay for car parking. One of my constituents, Keith, said:

“My problem is with car parking. Everything is done through the phone, and if you have an old phone it is a problem downloading an app while standing in the rain, with an impatient queue behind you.”

He is, no doubt, not alone. This is mainly a problem with private parking outfits. To be fair, my local authority does offer the alternative of paying in cash for the machines, but they do not always work. In relation to local authorities, Age UK has highlighted the difficulties in making applications for blue badges, housing support and council tax reductions.

In London, Age UK used a combination of freedom of information requests and mystery shopping to see how offline services were provided. It found that 17% of those responding did not offer any of those services offline.

One quarter did not offer online access to blue badge applicants, and almost one third did not offer council tax reduction services offline. It also found that half of those claiming to offer those services offline were unable to point the mystery shopper to the information that would enable them to access those services. There were problems with waiting times in phone queues, as well as call handlers not being aware of the offline offer for services.

I want to be clear that this should not be misconstrued as an attack on local authorities. I know the level of cuts they have had to face since 2010. I am delighted that my local authority, Cheshire West and Chester, has introduced a call-back service, which is available for those unable to complete online forms. It directs people to a number to secure assistance. That is an example of best practice that should be spread across the whole country.

Before I wind up, I want to touch on the impact that the issue can have on people. Age UK has noted that this trend has a profound impact on older people. It causes many more people to feel lonely, frustrated and overlooked. Those feelings are completely understandable. It is about time that society realised that not everyone walks around with a smartphone, nor has the confidence to use one. It is all well and good saying people can use their rights under equality laws to ensure they are not denied access, but even that is dominated by online processes.

I suggest that most services do have an offline option, but it can be extremely difficult to access. We have heard that many of the organisations offering those services do not tell people they exist. In reality, that could be taking someone to a computer and taking them through that system. That is not really offering an offline service; it is just pointing people to a computer. Will the Minister advise whether any consideration has been given to providing local authorities with some support, practically and financially, to promote best practice, to ensure that people are able to access services offline?

Charities, businesses and interest groups have long been calling for an updated digital inclusion strategy. The previous one is rapidly approaching its 10th birthday, and was due for an update in 2020. These calls were also heard resoundingly by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, which said last year:

“The Government has taken its eye off the ball.”

It had no confidence that it remained a priority.

In defence, the Government claimed there was no need for a new strategy and that the principles remained relevant. I disagree: it is clear that the digital landscape has altered massively in the past decade, since the strategy was first written. Putting to one side the rapid changes in technology, the strategy has no mention of affordability, which is still a huge issue. It cannot have considered the rapid shift we are seeing to online services. Do the Government now accept that a new strategy needs to be created? Can the Minister update the House on whether they are considering doing so?

Will the Government also reconsider their approach to providing training? They do offer the essential digital skills qualification to provide some training free of charge. Organisations, such as the Good Things Foundation, believe those courses are too big a step, and are not meeting the needs of the digitally excluded. Many people

are not interested in gaining formal qualifications. They just want to be able to undertake basic functions and access services in a community setting.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Justin Madders: I give way one more time.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It is not just those who are digitally excluded. There are various levels of digital exclusion. The other week I was in touch with my mobile phone company and I felt digitally excluded from EE, trying to get through the gates. The issue is not just about those who we assume are digitally excluded in all areas; some of us are digitally excluded in some areas, given the levels of sophistication that are coming in. As the hon. Gentleman says, things have changed so much over the past number of years.

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, sometimes organisations will use that as a way of rationing access. Many hon. Members who have tried to cancel a contract will know that it is very difficult and they have to go through a series of gateways.

I will conclude because I know many other hon. Members want to speak. I do not want to stand in the way of progress, but we must be careful not to leave people behind. We need cast-iron, enforceable commitments that all services, whether public or private, can be accessed in person. There will always be people who, for whatever reason, will not be able to access services online, and there will always be situations where individual circumstances need to be explained in person. That right needs not just to exist on a piece of paper but to be exercisable in reality. Signposting to in-person options should be clear and easy to use and not something that should be squirreled away just to fulfil a duty that is not actually accessible in practice. We would not tolerate people being denied access to services on any other basis so we should not tolerate it on this basis either.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. As hon. Members can see, the debate is oversubscribed and there will therefore be a two-minute time limit. I remind colleagues of two things: if they wish to speak, they need to bob; and any interventions taken will cause other colleagues to lose time further on in the debate.

4.41 pm

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing this important debate. Digital exclusion is a social, economic and increasingly political issue. I came into politics to preserve what we should all be preserving in this place: the freedom of the individual. Sadly, those rights are being diminished day after day. I am not a luddite and I am not against the technological age—indeed, I welcome it. Yet with every advance, we must also make sure that the rights and freedoms of the individual advance at a similar pace.

Derbyshire Dales, where I live, is particularly affected because of the geography. We have had a lot of money from the Government and they have upheld their promises

[Miss Sarah Dines]

in a large regard. However, we still have patches of poor connectivity. I remind everybody of what Lloyds bank said in 2021: as many as 10 million people do not have the basic foundation skills to be able to access the digital world. That is one in six individuals. Putting aside other things that might disadvantage them, such as not having a smartphone or, as in Derbyshire Dales, not having technology that can work in the dales because of the difficulty with signals, that is a huge number of people.

Digital exclusion disproportionately erodes the rights of our elderly and disadvantaged people, along with the basic tenets of society such as small businesses. I have seen that quickly in Derbyshire Dales and with my experience in the campaign against the National Westminster Bank. The chief executive was not available to see me for months, so the managing director told me he was committed to helping people transition. He said, "We have 60% of the people in your area connected to our online app." I said, "I am talking about the 40%; that is what I am concerned about."

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I call Sarah Dyke.

Miss Dines: Thank you very much. I am very pleased that I was able to raise these issues because we have to protect the rights of the individual.

4.43 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing this debate.

As we have heard today, the modern world is digital. We need digital technology to study, access banks, make health appointments and use local services and Government resources. However, in rural areas such as Somerton and Frome, access to the digital space is limited by poor broadband and mobile connectivity. Rural areas such as Somerset have an ageing population that is more reliant on diminishing in-person services and Somerton and Frome has an average age of 54 compared with the national average of 40. In Somerton and Frome, only around 40% of houses have access to full fibre broadband and 75% of my constituency is a partial 5G hotspot.

I often hear from constituents that they feel disenfranchised from the modern world due to their poor broadband and mobile connectivity. A constituent in Sticklinch told me recently that they have a download speed of only 6 megabits per second on their broadband. For comparison, the shared rural network, which aims to roll out 4G to 95% of the country, estimates that the average download speed in rural areas when using mobile data will be 7 megabits per second. My constituents tell me that they want to be "dragged into the 21st century" and not left "isolated from modern communications". Although we have seen some improvements in that area, we need to go further and faster.

A recent report from the National Audit Office on the shared rural network stated that it is behind where it is meant to be, and I know that my constituents are frustrated that they will be let down and left behind yet again. Rural areas have watched the modern world move online. They have been instructed to join in, but far too often they have been left without the tools that

they need to participate. They feel excluded, they are let down and they are on the wrong side of the digital divide.

4.45 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing the debate.

In terms of digital exclusion, it really matters that we try to have digital by default; it is a modern way of doing business. However, the key request of many constituents who have emailed me is that Government services in particular always have an offline option, and that we continue to try to ensure that we roll out broadband in as many ways as possible, including on a mobile phone. There is good progress on the shared rural network, but I encourage the Minister to publish a map of where masts will be in the future, as well as where masts have already been placed, and to make it as easy as possible to get planning permission or whatever consent is needed.

On some of the other aspects, I must confess that I set up an email address for my mother. I do not do anything on behalf of my mother, because I do not have the legal powers to do so, but that is the way in which I facilitate somebody who is not used to using a computer in accessing the services that they can. We cannot rely simply on other members of the family doing that all the time. However, it is important that that does not become a barrier to getting the help that is needed by people; it is often in an emergency that they end up not being able to get that help.

I will also give some credit. During the time of the covid pandemic, in the Department for Work and Pensions we kept jobcentres open right around the country. That was done deliberately because we knew that not everybody would have access to digital. We know that online is not the only way that people can do that, and I commend the work coaches who came in and helped the most vulnerable. This issue really matters to our constituents: I know that the Minister cares, and I am sure that he will share that today.

4.47 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my good and hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for securing this important debate.

Members of this House, charities and trade unions have been warning for years that increasingly essential digital services are becoming out of reach for many. According to a survey for Citizens Advice, 1 million disconnected their broadband in the last year because they could not afford it, and people on universal credit were more than six times as likely to be disconnected. Age UK also told me that 6 million people aged 65+ are either unable to use the internet safely or successfully or are not online at all. Thatcher's ambition for there to be "no such thing as society" is unfolding before our very eyes due to digital exclusion. Isolating and disengaging huge swathes of the public is not how we build a fair, equitable and equal society.

I have no doubt that one of the drivers of digital exclusion is the 14 years of brutal austerity imposed by this Government. The situation cannot continue. All public services, including the NHS and council services, must offer and promote an affordable, easy-to-access and offline way of using them. The Government must provide local authorities and public services with the funding to do that. Banks, including Lloyds, Barclays and HSBC, made record profits last year. They must provide face-to-face banking for many constituents and avoid leaving communities to become banking deserts. There is no excuse to continue closing branches with such profits being made.

As we have heard in this debate so far, broadband is an essential utility, and I was extremely proud to stand on a manifesto in 2019 that recognised that. It could and should be made free and available to every home in the country as a universal public service, if only the Government had the political will to do so. I hope that the Minister takes note.

4.49 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I am a Member of Parliament for a very remote rural constituency, and when I was elected our broadband roll-out was definitely behind the curve. I am delighted that we have seen dramatic improvements in North Devon during my time in this place, but our digital skills have been left behind the curve. Indeed, my constituency is home to the train station with the highest face-to-face usage in the country, and I am delighted that our ticket office is staying open.

I was approached at my constituency surgery on Friday and told that it was unacceptable that a Government agency did not have a phone app—that there was not enough digital availability. We need to bring people along with us on these digital changes, so that people are part of them and are not excluded from society. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on broadband and digital communication, which is looking to put forward a campaign to explain some of the coming changes in the digital landscape, as we did with digital TV switchover.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): On that point, when the Minister sums up, perhaps he can address BT's plans for the switchover from analogue to fibre lines for phones. That will cause huge problems in constituencies that still have power cuts and poor mobile signal, such as my North Norfolk constituency.

Selaine Saxby: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. That is a huge concern for rural constituencies that lose power at the time when they need landlines the most.

As we move forward, there is a need for education. I very much hope that people will take up offers at public libraries. An Age Concern report looked at digital availability for the over-70s and found that people who went to the library were far more able to get online. I thank Lloyds Bank, which is bringing its online training to Barnstaple library; anyone who would like to join should contact my office. In her mid-70s, my grandmother went on a digital training course at the bingo hall, so there is training out there. I know that it is difficult—my parents are digitally unavailable at this time.

If anyone does not get the opportunity to say everything that they wanted to this afternoon, I encourage them to join the all-party parliamentary group. We are putting together a digital manifesto, which we will send to all parties ahead of the election. I thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for securing this important debate.

4.51 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. On the subject of digital exclusion, we should also look at the opposite: digital literacy. When I go home on a Thursday or Friday, I am struck by how very digitally literate the next generation is. My children and their peer group are way in advance of anything that I can do online or with computers. I make that point because we tend to think that it is older people who are digitally excluded. Yes, they are, but lots of other people are also less digitally literate. Recent years have seen a rush, even a stampede, in company boardrooms towards moving services online at the expense of doing things in person. That has been to the detriment of many older people, particularly in rural and coastal communities, such as those I represent.

I want to highlight one specific example and give voice to a constituent. Brian, who lives in Weston, a small coastal hamlet that is tucked away on the beautiful east Devon coastline, wrote to me to explain how he lives somewhere where there is such poor 4G mobile phone signal and internet access that he is completely and utterly dependent on a landline. As has already been said, losing copper will have a profound effect on some people in our rural constituencies.

Finally, another constituent, who lives in the village of Luppitt, has no mobile signal or fibre broadband connection, and is concerned about the landlines being phased out. He writes:

“Think of all those who are unaware, infirm or technically naive. Will we be cast adrift and simply forgotten?”

4.53 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. Many will remember that I secured a debate on loneliness, isolation, and digital and financial inclusion back in December, and I want briefly to pick up on some of the topics that were raised then. On the digital phone switchover, which is supposed to be completed next year, what assurance can the Minister give us that communication will be possible in a power outage, particularly in rural and very isolated areas?

Since that debate, the Government have confirmed that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency will continue to offer licence renewals in post offices. What further Government services can the Government return and put into post offices, so that we can provide the inclusion for which we are arguing today?

Finally, what can the Minister say about the ongoing cross-departmental, inter-ministerial work that was spoken about in the last debate? How is bringing all those Ministers together working to ensure that loneliness, isolation and exclusion are things of the past and can be addressed?

4.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on bringing this debate forward. Whether or not this is a generational issue, we cannot hide from the fact that there are people unable to use the internet in the ways necessary to engage fully in modern society. I will make three quick points on accessibility and affordability. On access, sufficient broadband is a requirement for people to be digital, and I have at least three ongoing cases in my office where broadband provision is the issue. As a quick example, my constituent runs a business from an address in an area in which he cannot get sufficient broadband, and that ultimately means that he cannot take card payments, issue receipts or invoices, and place online orders. Digital exclusion could be the ruin of his business.

Secondly, electoral registration has become increasingly online in the last couple of years, and the Northern Ireland Office is now offering a digital registration number for online applications. At the time of registering, many were unaware that that number should have been noted or required. As a result, people are being disenfranchised because they cannot vote digitally: maybe the Minister will come back on that one.

Thirdly, there is the issue of elderly people being forced to use online banking by the persistent closures in villages. They do not find it easy, with no access to broadband, no smartphone, and no community hubs available, and they are becoming financially excluded through no fault of their own.

I have done this in record time, with my voice, and I think I have got a ten-minute speech down to two. It is particularly our elderly generation who perhaps do not have the necessary support system, and it is important that they are reminded that our MP offices are there to help. The Government must do more to address issues such as rural broadband connectivity, so our constituents across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have the opportunity to be digitally included.

4.57 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing this debate. Digital exclusion is a really important issue, and like other Members, I have been contacted by lots of constituents as part of the Age UK campaign on this. While it is of course true that the older generation are particularly affected, we should remember that young people can also be affected by digital exclusion. During the pandemic, we saw a big move towards digital education online, and ensuring that the right devices and broadband access were provided to young people was a key part of the challenge. In areas of digital notspots, those people would not have been able to receive the support they needed.

I have to say that the situation in my constituency has improved a great deal over the last 15 years. We have gone from having a number of areas that did not have digital access to now having 5G pilots and universal high-speed access in the city of Worcester. But it is a city, and I recognise the challenge for more rural colleagues.

I want to sound one note of caution about the drive to go ever more digital. The Education Committee are currently carrying out an inquiry into the impact of

screen time on young people, and there are serious concerns about their mental health and the impact of too much screen time in that respect. We are often told that part of the challenge with telling young people to reduce their screen time is the modelling they see from adults—we are all walking around staring at our phones the whole time. The youngest children see their parents spending a lot of time online and in front of devices. UNESCO has recently changed its advice from a big drive towards digital education worldwide, and particularly in developing countries, to sounding some warning notes on the risks of too heavy a focus on digital. In this debate, we absolutely need to focus on eliminating digital exclusion and ensuring that there is support and offline services for those who need to access public services. We also need to think about the balance that adults, as well as children, need to strike between their digital lives and real lives.

4.58 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris, and I give a huge thanks to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for securing this debate. I simply want to talk about rural connectivity. Digital exclusion for many of us in rural communities is simply about not being connected at all. Let me focus on Project Gigabit in particular, which is a good thing and the Government are to be commended on its roll-out. However, it is important that we do not think that one size fits all. Project Gigabit is very good, but there will be hundreds of communities in Cumbria, even those within scope, that will not be connected as a result of it. There is no sign so far of the Government having a plan to connect those houses and communities, which are often isolated properties such as hill farms.

I am also very concerned about properties, businesses and communities in what is referred to as deferred scope when it comes to gigabit. I will mention a bunch of places: parts of Sedburgh, Kaber, Murton, Long Marton, Winton, Warcop, Ormside, Hilton, Hartley and Bleatarn. If the Government restored the broadband voucher scheme to those few parishes, we would be able to connect every single property within them with gigabit upload and download speed with our work through B4RN—Broadband for the Rural North—which would be able to take up the slack. I encourage the Minister to intervene in those specific communities to restore the voucher scheme so that those places will not be excluded.

My final word is about Digital Voice, which others have mentioned. During Storm Arwen, we saw places and communities such as Coniston, Torver, Flookburgh, Allithwaite, Backbarrow and Haverthwaite completely disconnected from every kind of communication simply because if the copper wire has been lost, when the electricity goes down, so does the phone. It seems wrong that Digital Voice has been rolled out without thinking about the isolation and lack of communication available as a fallback for communities such as ours in the lakes.

5.1 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for your work chairing this debate, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on bringing forward such a popular and important debate.

I will focus my comments on the skills required to access digital. The access issues have been raised, and are incredibly important—I do not want to take away from that. However, on the issues with skills, by 2030, 5 million workers will be acutely under-skilled in basic digital skills. That is a significant number, and it must be a massive concern for the Government.

The skills that people require to access digital must be considered. There is a generational issue: younger people are better at accessing these things. However, that is not true across the board. There is an intersectionality of issues. People are less likely to be able to have digital skills if they are more vulnerable, older, or in poverty, or if they do not have the capacity or time to access them. Given the cost of living crisis, I am increasingly seeing constituents working multiple jobs who just do not have the time to work on their digital skills because they are too busy trying to make ends meet. That is a really big concern for me.

Covid and the roll-out of accessing things online were mentioned. During covid, the Scottish Government provided 72,000 devices and 14,000 internet connections to individuals, children and families that were at risk of being digitally excluded. That has massively increased—the number of devices was up to 280,000 in 2022. We are increasing that as we go in order to ensure that young people are not digitally excluded and are able to spend time typing up documents in Microsoft Word, Google Sheets, or whatever the school prefers them to use when they are at home, because it is so important that digital skills are available for people and that the workforce of the future has digital skills.

Mr Robin Walker: I recognise the good work the Scottish Government, and indeed the English Government—the UK Government—did on getting devices out to people. However, UNESCO highlighted to us, among other things, the cost of devices: having gone out to people, they need to be maintained and their security needs to be upgraded. One of the things we need to think about very carefully in all our Government budgets as we go forward is how to ensure that there is ongoing investment in the digital technologies that are needed both for the people receiving them and those distributing them.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree. On continual access to the internet, a universal credit social tariff is available for people. Every time I meet with my local jobcentre, I make clear how important it is to stress that the social tariff is available so that people can access that reduced-cost internet access. It is important that we have that and that people know that it exists so that they can take it up.

Within my constituency, I have spoken to Virgin Money, which provides access to internet services. There is also an organisation called Silver Surfers, which provides older people with access to the services and advice they need to access the internet. We have heard about some of the negatives of the internet and some of the positives of online life. It is important to be able to access services online, particularly for people in rural communities who are a long way away from those services. It is important for tackling loneliness to be able to access communities online.

Sarah Dyke: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: I am really sorry but I will not; I am just going to finish.

As I was saying, it is really important that people can access those things, and like-minded individuals. When my son had Kawasaki disease, it was something that hardly anybody had ever heard of, but I was able to access other parents whose children had been through the same thing to find out how my son's disease might progress and how things might change—so access to the internet is really important.

Lastly on disenfranchisement, if someone wants to get a voter authority certificate, the main way they can do that is online. It is possible to get a certificate by post, but the process of proving their identity in order to access a certificate—a requirement that the UK Government have brought in—is mainly online. Therefore, people who are disenfranchised and unable to access those services are even more disenfranchised by the fact that the service is mainly online. I encourage the Government to ensure that particularly things like voter authority certificates are as available as possible to people, and that they are not just available online.

5.5 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): At this moment I would usually thank everybody who has spoken, but because of time constraints I will have to hurry up. Far be it from me to suggest anything to the House, so I hope I am not out of order, Mrs Harris, in suggesting that maybe some Back-Bench MP would like to make an application for a debate on this issue to the Backbench Business Committee, because I believe it is of such importance that it requires more than just an hour. Like many others, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing what has been a very over-subscribed debate. Even though we have had a number of very fast speeches, we have had some very good contributions.

Digital exclusion is real for so many people, whether in work, education or access to online services—from banking to benefit applications. Failing to take action here would be to say that digitally-excluded people are not as worthy of the opportunities enjoyed by people who have the skills, confidence and income to regularly get online. Some 7% of UK households do not have an internet connection at home. That figure rises to 23% when we look at households with an annual income of under £10,400.

In 1924 the challenge of lawmakers was to ensure that everyone could read and write; the challenge in 2024 is to ensure that everyone has the digital skills they need. As we have heard, full participation in modern life often requires a suitably fast internet connection, a reliable device and an evolving skillset. That reality does not mean that digitisation should be stopped; we cannot be like King Canute trying to hold back the tide. It means we need to take the necessary action to ensure that everyone is empowered to access what they need.

It is also important to recognise that not everyone falls neatly into the groups of “digitally excluded” or “online”. Lloyds Bank's consumer digital index uses the Department for Education's essential digital skills framework to establish how many people can do certain types of task. Such tasks include communication through

[Chris Evans]

email, buying goods and services, staying safe and avoiding scams, and using search engines to find information. The index identifies various skillsets and knowledge gaps, and a wide range of confidence levels.

Moreover, digital skills and confidence are not always the reason why someone is partially digitally excluded. As we have heard from many hon. Members today, someone's broadband may not be strong enough in rural areas for them to fill out a form or stream educational content. People with particular disabilities face many barriers to accessing visual or audio content that does not support screen-reading or full captions.

The range of challenges demands a range of solutions that are centred around skills, affordability and accessibility, and—crucially—ensure that the individual is at the heart of the process. Such solutions can, where appropriate, involve ensuring the availability of an in-person equivalent to digital services. That can include community banking hubs where high street banking is no longer available—something that has affected me and you personally, Mrs Harris, in south Wales constituencies such as ours. Such solutions can also include financial support or the offering of skills. Public libraries in particular are brilliant; they do essential work by providing computers and a helping hand to their communities, but they cannot help in all cases, and they need funding and support to meet demand.

However, no amount of community-based upskilling can get suitable devices and quality broadband into the hands of young or elderly people at home. One in five children do not have consistent home access to a device suitable for completing schoolwork, and the potential consequences for their learning and their futures are rather obvious. Practically every week I have a conversation about how good tech policy needs to be nimble and up to date, and I find that sometimes we speak in clichés. Sometimes it feels as though we go to the doctor and say we are sick, and the doctor turns around and says, “Yes, you are sick, but what are you going to do about it?”

The last Government's digital inclusion strategy was published a whole decade ago. We often talk about how fast technology moves on; that is now ancient history, and something must be done. In less than half that time, people have been through a pandemic, a cost of living crisis, and countless technological developments that all completely reshaped our relationship with the internet for work, school, leisure, our finances and access to public services. As somebody once said, we cannot act in an analogue manner in a digital world. It is vital that digital exclusion is given as much importance as we gave to literacy in schools over a century ago. Much has changed, but we are at a stage now where people are at a massive disadvantage. We have to do something to change that.

5.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Saqib Bhatti): I thank you for your excellent chairmanship, Mrs Harris, of this over-subscribed debate on an important topic. I thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for securing the debate. I am grateful to him

and other speakers for their insightful contributions. I am conscious of time, so I will be limiting the interventions I take, as I want to try to address as many of the issues that have been raised as I can.

Digital technologies offer extraordinary opportunities; if we take full advantage of them, we can grow our economy, create new jobs and improve lives for British people right across the country. They can have other benefits too, such as connecting communities, reducing loneliness and making public services easier and faster to access. All those points have been very well made today. Right now, though, too many people across the country cannot experience those benefits.

Digitally excluded people are less likely to be in well-paying jobs, and they have worse health outcomes and an overall lower quality of life. As a result, digital exclusion does not just create new inequalities, but exacerbates existing ones, making it more difficult to fully participate in society. That is why, even as we look towards investing in the transformative technologies of tomorrow, from AI to quantum, the Government remain resolutely committed to ensuring no one is left behind in today's digital age. If Britain is to be a real science and tech superpower, our superpower status has got to deliver tangible benefits for every British person.

We are under no illusions: this is a difficult task that requires work right across Government to address the many complex barriers we face. That is why the 2022 digital strategy outlined work across Government that will promote digital inclusion, from accelerating the roll-out of gigabit broadband to delivering landmark legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. By doubling down on the four key principles we set out 10 years ago in the digital inclusion strategy—access, skills, motivation and trust—we believe we have the foundations in place to succeed. I will now take each of these principles in turn.

First, on access, we understand the importance of staying connected in the modern age. That is why we have prioritised access to fixed and mobile broadband, including wifi, affordable tariffs and access to suitable devices. To ensure everyone has the access they need, the Government introduced the broadband universal service obligation in 2020, which gives everyone the legal right to request a decent and affordable broadband connection of at least 10 megabits per second. To ensure the USO remains up to date, in October 2023 we launched a consultation to review the obligation and will be publishing a Government response later this year. In March 2021 we launched Project Gigabit, our £5 billion mission to deliver lightning-fast, reliable broadband to the hardest-to-reach parts of the UK, areas that would have otherwise been left out of commercial gigabit roll-out plans without Government subsidy.

Last week we announced that 1 million premises across the UK have received a gigabit-capable connection thanks to Government investment. The majority of these premises are in hard-to-reach locations where previously many people would have struggled to stream TV shows, access online services or run small businesses. I am happy to report that, as I am sure the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston already knows, his constituency benefits from excellent broadband connectivity. In his constituency, over 99% of premises can access a superfast connection, while 93% can access a gigabit-capable connection.

Selaine Saxby: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am very envious of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for having such high levels of connectivity. Those of us who find ourselves in the Project Gigabit type C contract are now seeing that the voucher schemes have been turned off. Would the Minister agree that we need that procurement system to be speeded up so that we can all get to at least 99%?

Saqib Bhatti: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point and I will come on to some of the issues that she has raised; I am also happy to have a conversation with her about what support her community needs.

We know that, in addition to excellent coverage, we have competitive pricing in the UK. The cost of a gigabyte of data is 50p in the UK; that is less than half the average price in the EU, which is £1.18. We have also worked closely with the telecoms industry to ensure the availability and provision of low-cost, high-quality fixed and mobile social tariffs in the market. In total, 27 operators now offer social tariffs across 99% of the UK to those on universal credit and some other means-tested benefits.

We have seen social tariff take-up increase by almost 160% since September 2022. Although this represents just 8% of the total number of eligible households, progress is being made and we will continue to work with telecoms providers to increase awareness of this provision. We have also supported access to devices and wi-fi. Around 2,900 public libraries in England provide a trusted network of accessible locations with free wi-fi, which is funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

The Department for Education has also delivered over 1.95 million laptops and tablets to schools, trusts, local authorities and further education providers for disadvantaged children and young people since 2020. This is part of a £520 million Government investment to support access to remote education and online social care services. To support those seeking work, our Jobcentre Plus work coaches can provide support to eligible claimants who are not online, with financial support to buy six months' worth of broadband connection. This scheme is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions through the flexible support fund, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who did excellent work through the pandemic. I am sure that I must have written to her on behalf of my constituents during that very uncertain time, and I will certainly take away her points and ideas.

Sarah Dyke: Will the Minister give way?

Saqib Bhatti: I will make some more progress, if that is okay.

That package, which includes free wi-fi, access to devices and affordable fixed and mobile tariffs for 99% of the UK, supports access to the digital products and services that are needed for modern life.

Now I turn to the issue of digital skills. As well as working to provide the right access, we are working to ensure that everyone has the right skills to be able to navigate their personal and professional lives. On a personal note, this is a particular passion of mine and something that I wholeheartedly believe in. My hon.

Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines) mentioned digital skills in her contribution, as did other Members in theirs.

Digital skills are central to the jobs of today and the workforce of tomorrow. Ensuring that the workforce has the digital skills for the future will be crucial to meet the UK's ambition to be a global science and tech superpower. We are supporting skills development at every level—or, as I like to say, at every age and at every stage.

The Department for Education supports adults with low digital skills through the digital entitlement, which fully funds adults to gain essential digital skills qualifications, based on the essential digital skills framework. Since the introduction of the digital entitlement in 2020, the Department has supported over 40,000 learners to study for a qualification in essential digital skills. We are working closely with the Department for Education, industry and academia through the digital and computing skills education taskforce, which was launched last summer to increase the numbers of students choosing digital and tech educational pathways into tech careers.

To inspire the next generation of tech professionals, we have also launched two initiatives: the Cyber Explorers platform for 11 to 14-year-olds, which has reached almost 60,000 students; and the CyberFirst Girls competition, which supported 12,500 12 and 13-year-old girls in 2023 alone.

The Department for Education also funds digital skills provision through Community learning, which is an important stepping stone for learners, particularly post-19 disadvantaged learners, who are not ready for formal accredited learning or who would benefit from learning in a more informal way.

In June 2022, the Government launched the Digital Skills Council, which I co-chair. It brings together Government and industry to strengthen the digital workforce. Last year, the Digital Skills Council partnered with FutureDotNow to fund the publication of the digital skills roadmap, which lays out collective commitments to ensure that all working-age adults have basic digital capabilities.

Finally, we are also supporting people to develop advanced skills in our priority technology areas. We have established the £30 million data science and artificial intelligence conversion programme course to broaden the supply of AI talent in the UK. It funds universities to develop masters level or data science courses suitable for non-STEM students and up to 2,600 scholarships for students from under-represented backgrounds. Just last week we launched a pilot advertising campaign designed to generate awareness of the benefits of learning advanced digital skills and to drive people towards a new website that has details on Government-funded digital skills bootcamps. These bootcamps are 16-week courses that are fully funded, with a guaranteed job interview at the end.

To support workers to understand and apply AI in their jobs, last year, in partnership with Innovate UK and the Alan Turing Institute, we published the first version of a new guidance document that helps businesses to identify what skills their non-technical workers need to be able to successfully use AI in the workplace.

The secondary barriers of trust and motivation, which I mentioned at the start, must be tackled to have a truly positive impact on digital inclusion, but those are harder

[*Saqib Bhatti*]

to measure. We recognise that some people are hesitant to access online services because they fear they may become victims of fraud or that it is an unsafe environment for their personal data. We are taking a number of steps to improve the safety and trustworthiness of the online space, including through the Online Safety Act 2023. The Act will ensure that technology companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users online, particularly children. It is a major step in protecting UK citizens from the scourge of online scams. The motivation barrier requires influencing decision making and motivation at the individual level. That challenge is difficult to overcome and is best addressed through ensuring that access, skills and trust are in place, which is why those remain our focus. That is why we have supported work through libraries, charities and communities, including the digital lifeline fund, and why we continue to fund free public wi-fi in libraries across the UK.

There are many community-based initiatives at the local level, including work through libraries, as I have mentioned, and from the third sector, such as the National Digital Inclusion Network, run by the Good Things Foundation, which is a vital resource to many working in this space. The excellent work done by the Good Things Foundation, Age UK and others plays an important role in providing support with technology and the internet. Those charities supplement Government engagement by offering guides, training courses and volunteers to help people make the most of the internet.

I will address some of the issues raised around financial services. The Government recognise that digital payments play an incredibly important role for businesses and individuals, with many making payments faster, easier and cheaper. However, the Government also believe that all customers, wherever they live, should have appropriate access to banking and cash services. It is imperative that banks and building societies recognise the needs of all their customers, including those who still need to use in-person services. The Government legislated through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to protect access to cash for individuals and businesses. The Act establishes the Financial Conduct Authority as the lead regulator and provides with it responsibility and powers to ensure that reasonable provision of cash withdrawal and deposit services is made, including free services for individuals.

The FCA recently consulted on proposals for its regulatory regime and expects to finalise its rules in the second half of the year. An alternative option to access everyday banking services can be made by telephone banking and via the Post Office or banking hubs. The Post Office allows personal and business customers to carry out everyday banking services at 11,500 Post Office branches across the UK, and banking hubs are a shared initiative that enables customers of participating banks to access cash and banking services in shared facilities.

The issue of local authorities was also raised. Digital inclusion interventions are included in a UK shared prosperity fund prospectus. That has allowed local authorities to allocate funding to digital inclusion interventions. That is because we know from key stakeholders that digital inclusion interventions work

best when they are tailored to local needs and when support is provided in the community on an ongoing basis. I was surprised to learn of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who spoke about the disparity in non-digital access and cost discrimination. I did check, and I know that her Labour-led council are the ones in charge of this matter. I hope they are listening to this, and realise and appreciate that this is a priority for Government and that it should be a priority for them, too.

My hon. Friends the Members for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) raised some important points about the switchover from the public switched telephone network. There was a wonderful plug for the all-party parliamentary group that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon runs, and I am sure that has been heard loud and clear. The fact is that the way that landlines work in the UK is changing. Communication providers, such as BT and Virgin Media, are upgrading their old analogue landline network—also known as the PSTN—to a new digital technology that carries voice calls over an internet connection, which is also known as Digital Voice. The decision to switch off the analogue landline network was made by the telecoms industry, and a transition to Digital Voice networks is an industry-led process, which is expected to conclude in 2025.

However, the Government were made aware of some serious shortcomings in how the telecoms industry managed the PSTN migration. As a result, the Technology Secretary convened a meeting in December 2023 with the UK's leading telecoms providers to discuss ways to improve the protection of vulnerable households through the migration. In response, the major telecoms providers have now signed a charter committing to concrete measures to protect vulnerable households, particularly those using telecare alarms. That is a positive step, which we hope will ensure that safety continues to be at the heart of the nationwide switchover.

Let me turn to next steps. Digital skills permeate through every aspect of policy. I view it as part of a cross-Government agenda to integrate digital inclusion into all policy decisions, rather than a stand-alone issue. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) mentioned the cross-Whitehall ministerial group for loneliness; I can assure him that I attended a meeting last week. I chair the group on digital inclusion, and I will be addressing some of the issues that have been raised there. All Departments are considering the needs of people who are digitally excluded in their policymaking.

The ministerial group on digital inclusion first met in September. It discussed issues such as parking payments, website accessibility and device donation schemes. I am looking forward to hearing updates on those areas from my ministerial colleagues at our next meeting in three weeks' time. Since our last discussion, the Department for Transport, which leads on the national parking platform, has already said that it expects the full features of the NPP to be available from late 2024, making parking simpler and less stressful. The group also agreed to undertake a departmental mapping exercise and to review the viability of each Department joining donation schemes. This work is an important step forward in our joint efforts to tackle digital inclusion, and I look forward to building on these conversations.

In closing, I again thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston for raising such an important issue. I am hopeful that we can work together. We are working hard on this issue across Government and we have made some credible steps to tackle it. As the digital transformation picks up pace, we know that there is more to do to ensure that no one is left behind in our digital age, but we are already rising to that challenge. Departments forming the cross-Whitehall ministerial group will work hand in hand across Government, as well as with industry and our partners in the third sector, to deliver the benefits of a better digital future for communities all over the country.

5.27 pm

Justin Madders: I thank all the Members who have spoken today. As the Opposition spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), indicated, there is clearly a lot of interest in this area. A much longer debate would probably be in order, because we did not get enough time to fit in all the points that we wanted to.

It is worth referring to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee report last year, which said:

“Digital exclusion arises from a complex interplay of factors including age, socio-economic status, disability, geography, educational attainment, literacy and language, and housing circumstances.”

I think that covers most of the points that Members have raised today. In response, the Minister talked a lot about what the Government are doing in terms of access, skills and affordability, but the central point that I and a lot of other Members made was missed: some people, no matter how much the Government invest in these areas, will not be able to access services online, and there needs to be an offline, in-person option.

There is a significant group of people—whom we have all been talking about—who are in that category at the moment. They feel excluded from fully participating in society. It affects their independence and finances, and it can actually affect their health. What I ask for is a clear statement of principle from the Government, which we can all get behind, that all services—public or private—should be provided in-person where there is the opportunity to do so. Whatever we do here, there will always be those people who, for whatever reason, need to have that in-person dialogue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered digital exclusion.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 28 February 2024

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I am pleased to inform the House that my Department has today confirmed further funding for three of our homelessness and rough sleeping grants:

£107 million allocated through the single homelessness accommodation programme;

£109 million allocated to councils across England as a top up to the homelessness prevention grant to help address Ukraine and homelessness pressures; and

£6 million allocated to London and across 101 local authorities in England, via the 2023-24 rough sleeping winter pressures funding, bringing the total of the fund to £10 million.

Taken together with our existing investment this means Government are providing nearly £2.4 billion to tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping between 2022 and 2025. These announcements build on the significant support we have put in through our rough sleeping strategy, “Ending Rough Sleeping For Good”, and are a further example of our ongoing commitment to end rough sleeping.

We have confirmed today that we are allocating a further £107 million to councils in England through the single homelessness accommodation programme. The programme aims to increase the supply of high-quality accommodation with accompanying support for people with the longest histories of rough sleeping or the most complex needs and vulnerable young people—aged 18 to 25—who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping.

This allocation, following a final bidding round, will fund the delivery of 808 homes and three years of support for their occupants. This adds to 1,230 homes funded through the previous four bidding rounds. Meanwhile, we have funded 6,000 homes through the £433 million rough sleeping accommodation programme and housed over 1,090 people through the £42 million Housing First programme. The Government are also providing additional support to house Afghans and others in temporary accommodation through the £1.2 billion local authority housing fund, which is expected to deliver around 7,000 homes by 2026.

We have also confirmed today that councils in England will receive an additional £109 million in 2024-25 via a top up to the homelessness prevention grant. This funding can be used flexibly—for example, to offer financial support for people to find a new home or to work with landlords to prevent evictions, among other preventive measures, or to provide temporary accommodation.

This funding forms part of the £120 million UK-wide funding announced at autumn statement 2023 to help councils address homelessness pressures and support Ukrainian guests who can no longer remain in sponsorship in 2024-25. The remaining funding has been allocated

to Scotland (£7.7 million), Wales (£2.6 million) and Northern Ireland (£0.6 million) to help prevent homelessness among Ukrainians.

Finally, we have given a further £6 million to councils in England through the rough sleeping winter pressures funding, which builds on the initial allocation of £4 million announced in January. We know that winter is particularly high-risk for individuals who are sleeping rough, increasing the demand for immediate “off-the-street” accommodation, and this funding will support councils to create additional off-street capacity and reduce the risk of deaths from exposure to extreme weather. This complements funding already provided to councils through the rough sleeping initiative 2022 to 2025, which totals over £547 million across three years.

The funding announced today forms part of a wider package of support for people who are homeless or sleeping rough, and further demonstrates the Government’s commitment to tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping, working in partnership with local government and the voluntary sector to achieve this ambitious aim.

[HCWS297]

SCOTLAND

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):

I hereby give notice of the Scotland Office’s intention to seek a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund. The Department requires an advance to meet the Scottish Government’s cash requirements pending parliamentary approval of the supplementary estimate 2023-24.

The Scottish Government are operating within their budgets, so this does not represent additional spending. However, an increase in net cash requirement will be sought in the supplementary estimate, so accessing the Contingencies Fund will allow the Scottish Government to fund this existing spending in the meantime.

The advance will be repaid immediately following approval of the supplementary estimate.

Parliamentary approval for additional non-budget expenditure of £703,711,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Scotland Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £703,711,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS296]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Decommissioning Temporary Jobcentres

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): We previously provided updates on decommissioning Temporary Jobcentres (“Expanding Our Services” on 23 March 2021, and “Expanding Our Services: Update” on 21 October 2021). These statements reaffirmed the Department’s commitment to reducing its Jobcentre estate back to pre-pandemic levels by decommissioning the temporary jobcentres or the additional space in established jobcentres in a phased approach, where the

increased capacity is no longer needed. The full list of temporary jobcentres and their current status can be found here: www.gov.uk/guidance/temporary-jobcentres-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic.

As part of this ongoing, phased approach to decommissioning the temporary jobcentres, the Department is today announcing the sixth and latest phase, which consists of decommissioning a further 42 temporary sites or additional spaces in existing jobcentres. This latest phase brings the total number of temporary sites announced to date to 182. Details of the sites being decommissioned in this latest phase are listed below.

The remaining 12 sites of the 194 originally opened will be either decommissioned or absorbed into the estate in the coming months and we will individually update all those Members whose constituencies are affected at the time.

The decommissioning of temporary jobcentres will not reduce the levels of service, or access to face-to-face appointments. Customers will return to being served by an established Jobcentre and there will be no reduction in the number of work coaches supporting customers as a result of the decommissioning.

The Department continues to support and update colleagues in a timely and sensitive manner. We also remain committed to ensuring all relevant stakeholders, unions, organisations and Parliament are engaged and regularly updated on our work. Letters are being sent to each right hon. and hon. Member with changes in their constituency to explain what this means for their local jobcentre, its staff, and their constituents.

Finally, in conjunction with this carefully planned decommissioning programme, we are looking to improve and upgrade jobcentres over time. It is important that all those who come to jobcentres are given the highest level of attention and service.

The 42 temporary jobcentres or additional space in existing sites to be formally decommissioned are:

Temporary Jobcentres	
Temporary Jobcentre Location	Address
Aberdeen	Unit C and D City Wharf, Shiprow, Aberdeen AB11 5BY
Basingstoke	Centenary House, 10 Winchester Road, Basingstoke RG21 8UG
Birmingham (South)	1 Facet Road, Kings Norton, Birmingham B38 9PT
Blackpool	8 Albert Road, Blackpool FY1 4SW
Bradford	Unit D, Bradford Business Park, Kings Gate, Bradford BD1 4SJ
Chatham	Unit 61A, Dockside Outlet Centre, Maritime Way, St Mary's Island, Chatham ME4 3ED
Coventry	MSU D First Floor, West Orchards Shopping Centre, Smithford Way, Coventry CV1 1QL
Eastbourne	1 Grove Road, Eastbourne BN21 4TW
Edinburgh Waverley Bridge	Unit L23, Waverley Mall, Waverley Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1BQ

Temporary Jobcentres	
Temporary Jobcentre Location	Address
Fareham	95 West Street, Fareham PO16 0AQ
Halesowen	60 Whitehall Road, Halesowen B63 3JS
Kidderminster	Unit J2 Crossley Retail Park, Carpet Trades Way, Kidderminster DY11 6DY
Leicester	Pegasus House, 17 Burleys Way, Leicester LE1 3BE
London Barnet	Building 2, North London Business Park, Oakleigh Road South, Barnet N11 1GN
London Cooks Road (Newham)	1-4 Cooks Road, London E15 2PW
London Ilford (Redbridge)	The Exchange, High Road, Ilford, IG1 1RS
London Queen's Park (Brent Wembley)	111-115 Salusbury Road, Queens Park, London NW6 6RG
London Royal Albert Dock (Newham)	Altitude, 14 Lascars Avenue, Royal Albert Dock London E16 2YP
London Woolwich	71-77 Powis Street, Woolwich, Greenwich SE18 6JB
Macclesfield	Unit 2 The Silk Works, Pickford Street, Macclesfield SK11 6JD
Manchester (Central)	58 Mosley Street, Manchester M2 3HZ
Milton Keynes	Phoenix House, Elder Gate, Milton Keynes MK9 1AW
Norwich	Lower Units 16, 17, 18 and Upper Units 10, 11, 12, Castle Quarter, Norwich NR1 3DD
Peterlee	56 Yoden Way, Peterlee SR8 1AS
Portsmouth	5a Edinburgh Road, Portsmouth PO1 1DE
Slough	4 The Observatory, High Street, Slough SL1 1LE
Solihull	Jago House, 692 Warwick Road, Solihull B91 3DX
Staines upon Thames	100 Church Street, Staines upon Thames TW18 4DQ
Sutton in Ashfield	Broadway, Brook Street, Sutton in Ashfield NG17 1AL

Additional space in established jobcentres

Additional space will be decommissioned or reabsorbed into the estate and services will continue as usual.

Additional Space Location	Address
Ayr (reabsorbed)	Wallacetoun House, John Street, Ayr KA8 0BX
Cambridge (reabsorbed)	Henry Giles House, 73-79 Chesterton Road, Cambridge CB4 3BQ
Horsham (reabsorbed)	Marlborough House, 50 East Street, Horsham RH12 1HN
Lancaster (reabsorbed)	Mitre House, Church Street, Lancaster LA1 1JW
Leamington Spa (reabsorbed)	Brandon House, Holly Walk, Leamington Spa CV32 4JE
London Peckham (Southwark) (reabsorbed)	24-26 Peckham High Street, Peckham, London SE15 5DS
Shrewsbury (decommissioned)	Princess House 3 rd Floor, 17-19 The Square, Shrewsbury SY1 1YA

Additional Space Location	Address
Sittingbourne (reabsorbed)	Roman House, 9 Roman Square, Sittingbourne ME10 4BP
Southport (reabsorbed)	Eastbank House, Eastbank Street, Southport PR8 1HE
St Albans (reabsorbed)	Beaver House, 6 Bricket Road, St Albans AL1 3JU
St Helens (reabsorbed)	Gregson House, Central Street, St Helens WA10 1UF
Waltham Cross (reabsorbed)	235 High Street, Waltham Cross EN8 7BA
York (reabsorbed)	1st Floor, 11-17 Monkgate, York YO31 7JZ

The 12 remaining temporary jobcentres or additional space in existing sites to be decommissioned or absorbed into the estate in the coming months are:

Temporary Jobcentre Location	Address
Ashton Under Lyne	101 Old Street, Ashton Under-Lyne OL6 6BJ
Birmingham	B1, 50 Summer Hill Road, Birmingham B1 3RB
Bournemouth	580 Tringham House, Deansleigh Road Bournemouth BH7 7DT

Temporary Jobcentre Location	Address
Bradford	Aldermanbury House, 2 - 4 Godwin Street, Bradford BD1 2ST
Colwyn Bay	Unit B, Bay View Centre, Sea View Road, Colwyn Bay LL29 8DG
Doncaster	The Blue Building, 39-40 High Street, Doncaster DN1 1DE
Keighley	Unit 1 Hanover House, 49 Low Street, Keighley BD21 3PP
Kings Lynn	30-34 Broad Street, Kings Lynn PE30 1DP
London Barnsbury (Islington)	Unit 1a and 1b, 427 - 429 Caledonian Road, London, N7 9BG
London Clapham (Lambeth)	Clapham Place, Unit 1, 340 Clapham Road, London SW9 9FA
Preston	Fishergate Shopping Centre, Preston PR1 8HJ
Stafford	30 Greengate Street, Stafford ST16 2HY

[HCWS295]

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