Thursday
29 February 2024

Volume 746
No. 57

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Thursday 29 February 2024

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House of Commons

Thursday 29 February 2024

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Angiolini Inquiry

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report, entitled The Angiolini Inquiry Part 1 Report, dated 29 February 2024.—(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Infected Blood Inquiry: Recommendations

1. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he has made on considering the recommendations of the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry. [901710]

2. **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What progress he has made on considering the recommendations of the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry. [901711]

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What progress he has made on considering the recommendations of the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry. [901712]

4. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What progress he has made on responding to the final recommendations on compensation by the infected blood inquiry. [901714]

6. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What progress he has made on considering the recommendations of the second interim report of the infected blood inquiry. [901716]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen): The Government recognise the urgency of the issue and are committed to progressing the work as quickly as we can. For that reason, we have appointed an expert group to advise the Cabinet Office on detailed technical considerations. On Monday in the other place, the Government committed to bring forward an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill on Report, with the intention of speeding up the implementation of the Government's response to the infected blood inquiry.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: My constituent Mark Ward, a haemophiliac, contracted HIV after being given contaminated blood at the Royal Free Hospital. He was 14. He is now 54, and it is four and a half years since he gave evidence at the inquiry and a year since the initial recommendations came out. It is a scandal, is it not, that the Government were forced to give in by a defeat in the other place? Frankly, the Government have been complicit in people's lives continuing to be lost. How long before compensation will be paid? What date should I give Mr Ward? How many people's lives will be lost while we wait for the Government to get into action?

John Glen: There are 54 working days before the report is published on Monday 20 May. The Government have committed to respond to it within 25 sitting days, but I will do everything I can to bring forward as substantive a response as possible as soon as possible after that date.

Alex Davies-Jones: My constituent Gerald Stone, a victim of the contaminated blood scandal, is 80 years old. He is in and out of hospital and is having to take morphine for the insurmountable pain he suffers. After bravely giving evidence to the public inquiry and the public seeing that story, his lifelong neighbours began to question whether it was safe to live on the same street as him and even went to the police. Victims such as Gerald deal with the physical and mental consequences every day, but one query he has for the Minister is the figure of 30,000 potential claimants, which has been disputed regularly and is one reason for the hold-up in providing justice. Will the Minister provide clarity on that figure?

John Glen: I am trying to ensure a comprehensive response as soon as possible. That is why we have appointed Professor Sir Jonathan Montgomery to head up a team to advise on how to implement the recommendations of the report. I am doing that as quickly as I can. There are issues around eligibility, the severity of disease and its progression, and so on, which I need to be sure on so that I can address the challenges that exist. With respect to the 30,000 figure, I cannot give a number from the Dispatch Box, but I will ensure that the Government response, when it comes, will be as comprehensive as possible, to give some assurance to the hon. Lady's constituent.

Kerry McCarthy: ITV is now set to produce a drama about the contaminated blood scandal, following the success of "Mr Bates vs The Post Office". As we know, thousands of people have been affected by the scandal, including my constituents, Catherine, who lost her husband in 2005, and Margaret, who lost her husband Bill in 2021. Bill was a local councillor. I knew him very well. He was an absolutely lovely man. He was also a trustee of the Haemophilia Society. Some people, including Bill, have been fighting this battle for 40 years. Why has it taken us this long to get to this point? Will it really take a TV drama to make the Government finally act?

John Glen: I am aware of the comments about a TV drama, but I am concerned to ensure that we build on the decision of this place on 4 December with respect to the Victims and Prisoners Bill. That Bill is working its way through the other place. Committee will finish on 12 March, so Report stage cannot happen before 15 April. Listening to the testimony of the hon. Lady and of those in the other place, whose nephews and husbands died as a result of contaminated blood, has made me more determined to ensure that the Government's response is as comprehensive as possible and that it meets the expectations of everyone in this place and of the country at large.

Dame Diana Johnson: I think the Minister is a good man and is trying to do his best, but this is the biggest treatment scandal in the history of the NHS. We have had six years of a public inquiry. The Government have now had the recommendations on compensation for 12 months. I understand that the Minister has not yet met anyone infected or affected, or taken any soundings from any of the campaign groups. Now, we hear in a written question this week that his expert group were not allowed to know the names of those people or to have the minutes of those meetings or of any of the workings that are taking place. Does he understand that, after decades of cover-up and criminal activity, the lack of transparency with which the infected and affected are being treated is totally unacceptable?

John Glen: I explained to the right hon. Lady when I met her on 6 February, and again when I spoke to her on 8 February, the context of Professor Sir Jonathan Montgomery's appointment. As she knows, Sir Brian recommends that eligibility for compensation includes those with hepatitis C, HIV and all chronic cases of hepatitis B.

On the right hon. Lady's question about engagement with the groups, I am very keen to engage when the Report stage happens in the middle of April. I will then work on plans to engage with as many groups as possible across the United Kingdom, building on my conversations with representatives of the devolved Administrations on 6 February.

Grahame Morris: Since the recommendations of the infected blood inquiry were announced, another 82 victims of the scandal have sadly died. I note what the Minister said about the appointment of Sir Jonathan Montgomery as chair of the experts offering technical advice on the compensation talks, but may I express the anger of one of my constituents, who is a victim of the scandal, about that appointment? He has asked me to ask: what confidence can victims have in the compensation process when an individual who is linked to pharmaceutical firm Bayer—a company that supplied infected blood—and chairs the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which was at the epicentre of the scandal, is advising the Cabinet Office?

John Glen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The appointment of Sir Jonathan Montgomery was compliant with all the processes, similar to those used for the appointment of Sir Robert Francis and others. I recognise the concern expressed around Jonathan's involvement with Bayer. That ceased at the end of October last year. He was part of an independent advisory group—not making executive decisions—for the pharmaceutical company. In the other place, the noble Baroness Brinton described Sir Jonathan as a "well-respected ethicist". He has been asked not for further recommendations, but to advise the Government on the implementation of the recommendations made in the report. I hope that is helpful.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Like other Members, I have constituents and friends who have been profoundly affected by the scandal, through both hepatitis and HIV. I recognise that my right hon. Friend is working extremely hard to come up with a solution to move the conversation forward, but can he update the House on any conversations he has had with the Treasury on delivering compensation as swiftly as possible once it is available?

John Glen: Conversation about this is taking place all the time across Whitehall. That will continue at pace as we move towards the 20 May publication. My determination is to bring forward as substantive a response as possible on the compensation issue as soon as possible after that. Obviously, those conversations happen over time, but I undertake to update the House at the next opportunity when there is something substantive to say.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In his second interim report, of 5 April 2023, Sir Brian Langstaff set out:

"I recommend that a compensation scheme should be set up now and it should begin work this year."

Now we are into the next year, 2024, and the scheme has not been set up. We have no timetable from the Government on when work will begin. The Minister does not need to wait until 20 May for the final report. Can the Minister tell the victims' groups, who have waited for so long, whether he has persuaded the Chancellor to include the funding for the scheme in next week's Budget, and when will the first substantive payments be made?

John Glen: I think the right hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot pre-announce aspects of the Budget, but his general point about urgency is one that I hear, as I said to him when I met him before the February recess. As I also explained, Report stage in this place on 4 December left us with legislation that was not fit for purpose, which is why further changes need to be made. Those changes are being made as urgently as possible.

On Monday of this week, the Government committed that on Report in the other place, we will bring forward the appropriate amendment to enable that arm's length body to be created with the legal functions and UK-wide remit that is necessary. I have been working closely with Earl Howe, meeting with him as the Bill has gone through the other place. However, I cannot announce aspects of the Budget in any form—I hope the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Veteran ID Cards

5. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What recent progress he has made on the roll-out of veteran ID cards. [901715]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): To date, we have received over 70,000 applications. We are committed to ensuring that as many veterans as possible know how to apply for a card: we have launched a national promotional campaign to raise awareness of the card's availability, and over the next few months, we will continue to work with the charity sector and others to ensure as many people as possible know about the card and its benefits.

Virginia Crosbie: Veterans in my constituency of Ynys Môn, such as the brilliant Mark Davis who served our country for many years, are now eligible for a veteran card. Can my right hon. Friend confirm how veterans such as Mark Davis are being told about that card and how to get one? Diolch yn fawr.

Johnny Mercer: A significant program of work is going on at the moment to make sure everyone is aware of the card. This has been the No. 1 ask of the major six military charities in this country for some time, and I encourage everybody who is eligible—who has served and is a veteran—to apply for their veteran ID card, which opens up a whole gamut of services. We have completely transformed what it means to be a veteran in this country. Those services are available: you can get help with so many issues. Please do apply for your card, and slowly, we will make this the best country in the world to be a veteran.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, I thank the Minister for his very positive response. He will know, of course, that people in Northern Ireland are joining up to serve—whether it be in the Army, the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force—as they have done over the years. Beyond the Battlefield, which I hope the Minister will visit shortly, is one of the organisations that helps veterans. Does the Minister hold any statistics on how many service personnel from Northern Ireland have applied for veteran ID cards?

Johnny Mercer: I do not have those figures to hand, but Northern Ireland traditionally has a higher representation of service personnel. I was in Northern Ireland two weeks ago, and I was impressed with some of the services, but to be honest, Northern Ireland is not where I want it to be in terms of veterans' affairs. We are looking at all options for how the Office for Veterans' Affairs can really lean in—while mindful of the fact that health, housing and many other things are devolved—and make sure that the standard that we now see in England for veterans' care is replicated across the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I congratulate the Office for Veterans' Affairs and the Ministry of Defence on its achievements with the roll-out so far, although it is probably fair to acknowledge that there is still some way to go. Is it not quite surprising that the veteran ID card cannot be used for the purpose of ID in a UK election? When does the Minister hope to put that right?

Johnny Mercer: The ID card is the first phase in a multi-phase operation to ensure that that objective can be achieved, alongside a whole load of other objectives. The challenge is digitising 13 million veterans' records to ensure that we have an accurate picture of veterans. Getting the ID card out was the first phase, but of course, the ambition is to ensure that the card is used for all sorts of purposes, including the one that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

SMEs: Public Sector Procurement

7. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to public sector procurement processes for small and medium-sized businesses. [901717]

12. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to public sector procurement processes for small and medium-sized businesses. [901724]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The landmark Procurement Act 2023, which this Government passed last year, will deliver simpler and more effective public sector procurement and help small and medium-sized enterprises across the country secure a greater share of that expenditure, which totals approximately £300 billion every year. The Act includes a new duty on contracting authorities to have regard for the particular barriers faced by SMEs and consider what can be done to overcome them.

Mark Pawsey: Small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy. There are 5.5 million of them in the UK, making up over 99% of all businesses and 61% of private sector employment. However, currently only a fraction of 1% offer their goods and services to the public sector. Could the Minister say a little more about the work that is being done to encourage more of them to enter tender processes?

Alex Burghart: I would be delighted to, because the Government are entirely committed to ensuring that SMEs get a bigger share of that pie. The latest published SME spend figures show that UK small businesses received £21 billion of work, which was an increase of £1.7 billion on the previous year's figures. That is the highest since records began, and the fifth consecutive year that Government work won by small businesses has increased. Crucially, that is before the effects of the Procurement Act kick in.

Peter Aldous: As my hon. Friend has said in his reply, the Procurement Act is I hope the solution to many of these problems, but it is not due to come into force until the beginning of October. Can he confirm that it will definitely come into force then, and that the necessary secondary legislation is in hand?

Alex Burghart: I am pleased to be able to report that, despite the fact that this is complex legislation that requires workstreams in a number of areas—not just secondary legislation, but learning and development for those working for contracting authorities, and a new online platform that will make procurement much easier and better for both those supplying services and those procuring them—we are on track to meet our targets.

Border Target Operating Model

9. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the border target operating model on cross-border flows of goods. [901719]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Government are delivering a programme of engagement with stakeholders across all sectors in all parts of the country, and with key European Union trading partners, to ensure that goods continue to move across the border. We have not identified any specific risk to the cross-border flow of goods.

Daniel Zeichner: The Minister may not have identified risks, but businesses are certainly very worried about potential delays and costs. Alongside the "not for EU" labelling issues, the Food and Drink Federation estimates that there will be an extra £250 million a year in costs. So I challenge him: is he really saying there will be no extra costs for our hard-pressed constituents as a result of all this extra bureaucracy?

Mr Baker: We are not saying that, no, but I would say to the hon. Member that appropriate import controls are fundamental to ensure that we can protect the UK's food supply chain, our food and farming industries, and our natural environment from biosecurity risks. The border target operating model will have very little impact on most of our fruit and vegetable imports, which have been classified as low risk. As he presses me, I would say to him that inflationary impacts on food for consumers will be at most less than 0.2 percentage points over a three-year period, and we have published the methodology online. Of course, no one should ever be cavalier about the cost of food, but I am sure he would agree with me that 0.2 percentage points over three years is a small figure.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I am absolutely astonished—I really am astonished—at the complacency about the impact on UK food bills, because the Government's own projections say that this border scheme will cost UK businesses some £330 million per year, while the British Chambers of Commerce has highlighted charges for EU goods coming into the UK. What assessment has the Minister made of the full inflationary impact of these measures on UK food bills, and with further checks due to start in April, what preparations are in hand to prevent a repeat of the chaotic scenes at our ports that we have seen before on this Government's watch?

Mr Baker: Alas that there are disease outbreaks in the European Union and alas that food is circulating that does not comply with EU standards. I hope to protect the people of Wycombe and the whole United Kingdom from unsafe pork and chicken, and to ensure that we do not end up vulnerable to things such as the horsemeat scandal. As I understand it, the Labour party wishes to revert to the regime we had when we were an EU member state by aligning with the EU on sanitary and phytosanitary matters. I remember very well the horsemeat scandal that arose, and I do not want to see anything like that occur again.

I would just point out that an outbreak of African swine fever would be a fundamental threat to the viability of our pig industry. Foot and mouth cost British businesses £12.8 billion, at 2022 prices, in 2001. The cost of ash dieback is forecast to be £15 billion to the UK. I think we need to take seriously the need to protect our borders and the need to check these medium to high-risk products, and that is what this Government will responsibly do.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Have the Government made any assessment of the additional cost to SMEs of these changes—the red tape they have had and will have to wrangle with—and how many businesses will go under as a result?

Mr Baker: We are not expecting businesses to go under as a result of this, but I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I just gave: it is vital that we protect our borders. The reality is that there are risks to public health from food and we need to make sure that we are not cavalier about these checks. It is vital that we protect our borders and protect the public, and that is what we are going to do. We are continuing to engage with businesses, we expect there to be very few problems, and we will work our way through. There is no question of being cavalier: we have been working very carefully to consult stakeholders and make sure there have not been great problems.

Kirsty Blackman *indicated dissent.*

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but I just point out that the 31 January deadline for export health certificates passed by and there were not the problems that were forecast.

Veteran Cards: Devon and Cornwall

10. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): How many applications have been made for HM armed forces veteran cards by military veterans living in Devon and Cornwall. [901722]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): The Office for Veterans' Affairs and the Ministry of Defence launched a new service in January to allow veterans to apply for their cards. Since then, 1,259 veterans have applied from Cornwall and 2,793 from Devon.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister, my fellow Devon MP, for his answer. It is very encouraging to have had positive feedback from veterans in Torbay about the simplicity of applying online, but one question comes to mind: what work is being done with local authorities that encounter veterans through services such as housing to encourage them to apply online or make an application if they have not done so?

Johnny Mercer: That is a good question and I cannot emphasise this point enough. Obviously, this is my responsibility as the veterans Minister, but it is also the nation's duty to look after these people. We need local authorities to understand what is available to look after these people. We have armed forces champions in local authorities now and I want to see that role taken seriously. There are multiple pathways specifically for veterans through health, housing, employment and a

number of other topics, but clearly it is incumbent on all of us in public life to understand what is available for veterans so that when we find one in need, they get the world-class help they deserve.

Covid-19: Procurement Fraud

13. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of procurement fraud during the covid-19 pandemic. [901725]

15. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of procurement fraud during the covid-19 pandemic. [901727]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Government's "Cross-Government Fraud Landscape Annual Report 2022" includes data from the first year of the Government's response to the pandemic. The report suggests that in 2020-21, Government Departments and arm's length bodies reported a total of £124.6 million of detected procurement fraud. The same report showed that at the end of March 2021, some £88.2 million of fraud and error had been recovered within covid-19 schemes. Since then, crucially, further funds have been recovered and the Government will continue to update the House as fresh data becomes available.

Justin Madders: When people think back to the sacrifices they made during the pandemic, the greed associated with the personal protective equipment scandal really jars with them, so will the Minister commit to following the Labour party's lead and appoint a covid corruption commissioner to chase down and claw back every penny of taxpayers' money that was wasted?

Alex Burghart: This Government take PPE fraud extremely seriously. To remind the House of the figures, 1.8% of expenditure on PPE was lost to fraud at a time when there was the most extraordinary public crisis in several generations and we were competing in an extremely overheated international market. To date, we have recovered more than a quarter of that 1.8% and the fight to recover more continues. PPE procurement is subject to ongoing contract management controls, active dispute resolution and recovery action. The law is on our side and we are using it.

Sarah Edwards: The covid procurement scandal upset many people, and rightly so. I spoke with a fantastic local business in Tamworth, Wearwell (UK), which was manufacturing PPE as part of the regional procurement but was cut out of the process during the pandemic. The UK must be prepared in the event of another pandemic, and British manufacturing offers a greater response time and a more stable supply chain. When will we return to regional procurement to ensure that local businesses are prioritised when providing PPE for the nation?

Alex Burghart: I welcome the hon. Lady to what I think are her first Cabinet Office questions. She is right to draw attention to the fantastic textile manufacturing that exists in the region in which her constituency sits. She will have heard me talk about the Procurement Act 2023, which was passed last year and will make sure that small and medium-sized enterprises, which by their nature are often local enterprises, will have a bigger share of public procurement.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): We have not just had the infamous Baroness Mone scandal; at the time, there were reports of a hedge fund in Mauritius that got a £250 million contract for face masks that could not be used and a jeweller in Florida that got a multimillion-pound contract for gowns that could not be used. The Government had to incinerate billions of pounds-worth of faulty personal protective equipment. That is taxpayers' money literally going up in smoke. In the pandemic the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), told me at the Dispatch Box

"where a contract is not delivered against, we do not intend to pay taxpayers' money".—[*Official Report*, 23 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 758.]

But taxpayers' money was spent, wasn't it? Why was that promise not met?

Alex Burghart: I gently refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I just gave. The fact is that, although problems arose with PPE procurement in this uniquely difficult environment in which officials were working unbelievably hard for the public good, PPE procurement is still subject to ongoing contract management controls, active dispute resolution and recovery action. The fact of the matter is that this Government took it seriously during the pandemic. The Department of Health and Social Care realised the risk of fraud early on, and the Government established a counter-fraud team to counter that threat. We are using all the legal tools at our disposal to get taxpayers' money back. The House should be in no doubt that the Government's speed of action during the crisis enabled many lives to be saved and for the country to overcome the covid-19 crisis.

Veterans: Cost of Living

14. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support veterans with the cost of living. [901726]

21. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support veterans with the cost of living. [901734]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): The Government have successfully reduced inflation by more than half, which will make the cost of living more affordable for veterans along with every other resident in the United Kingdom. We are also getting support directly to those who need it with the £104 billion cost of living package, worth an average of £3,700 a household. In addition, the Government are providing £33 million over three years to better support veterans.

Tonia Antoniazzi: My constituents in Gower, and especially my veterans, want to know whether the Minister for Veterans' Affairs stands by his comments that food bank usage is a personal choice.

Johnny Mercer: It is important in this place that we do not misrepresent what other Members say. I very clearly said that service personnel who receive subsidised accommodation should not be using food banks. There is no requirement for them to do it, and that is not appropriate. That is what I have said. I have obviously never said that food banks are a personal choice. This is a real opportunity to come here and ask me any questions at all about veterans' affairs. I suggest we try to raise the debate and actually improve their lives.

Carolyn Harris: With tens of thousands of veterans across the UK forced to rely on universal credit to get by, what is the Minister doing to help veterans in Swansea East and right across the country who are in receipt of universal credit to cope with the increased cost of living caused by this Government's economic failings?

Johnny Mercer: I spend my entire life visiting veterans who consistently raise with me the help that they get. There are plenty of places for them to go to, whether it is the Royal British Legion or others, that have specific grants. On top of that, the Government have put in an enormous package of help for citizens across the United Kingdom of £104 billion. That is £3,700 a household, and that is just for the cost of living. It is an incredibly difficult time for lots of people across the United Kingdom, but I am comfortable that the Government are doing all we can, and we stand ready to do more.

House of Lords Appointments: Diversity

16. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of trends in the diversity of appointments to the House of Lords. [901728]

The Minister without Portfolio (Esther McVey): Since 2010, female representation has risen to 29.1% and ethnic minority representation had risen by November 2021—those are the latest verified figures I have—to 6.6%.

Andrew Gwynne: That is good progress, but can the Minister explain why her right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—Liz of the 50-day reign—was allowed to award her mates for their part in her failure with jobs for life in the legislature? Is she proud of that?

Esther McVey: It is a long-standing tradition that anybody who reaches the height of Prime Minister—irrespective of which party that is for—has a resignation list. The former Prime Minister has appointed accomplished people, and I am quite sure that they will contribute significantly to the other House.

Resignation Honours List: Public Trust

17. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the publication of the resignation honours list of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk on public trust in (a) politicians and (b) political institutions. [901729]

The Minister without Portfolio (Esther McVey): It is a long-standing convention under successive Governments that outgoing Prime Ministers can draw up a resignation list. That has been the case under past Governments from across the political spectrum, and any names proposed are subject to the usual propriety checks.

Steven Bonnar: Political polarisation is more prevalent than ever, but polling consistently shows that voters across the political spectrum are united in their opposition to an unelected House of Lords. The trouble the public face is that this place and this Government do not want to know—they merrily carry on stuffing the House of Lords full of loyal stooges. When will the Government finally take their fingers out of their ears, listen to the public and begin to consider long-required reform of the place through those doors?

Esther McVey: Many people in the other House are probably somewhat insulted by the hon. Member's words. Many of them are highly accomplished in a variety of specialisms and bring much insight as they scrutinise the legislation that comes from this House.

Gov.uk: Effectiveness

18. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): If he will undertake a review of the effectiveness of gov.uk for the public and businesses. [901730]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): Gov.uk is among the UK's most recognised and trusted digital services. It is constantly monitored to assure and improve the service it provides to its users through data analytics, user research and feedback, while the latest gov.uk strategy prioritises proactively reaching more people in more places.

Wendy Chamberlain: Government processes need to work if our democratic system is to have the trust of our constituents. We know that many people who use Government IT systems to manage their tax payments, national insurance credits or benefits experience errors in how their accounts of money are handled, which is unacceptable. Will the Minister accept that a cross-departmental review of how those IT systems work needs to be carried out so that constituents can trust that the Government are not losing their hard-earned money?

Alex Burghart: I am pleased to tell the hon. Lady that polling at the end of last year found that 76% of respondents were satisfied with gov.uk, 78% agreed that they could typically find what they wanted and 74% trusted the information they found. Obviously, we keep all our systems under review, but gov.uk is a trusted brand and it is getting better every day.

Ministerial Code: Compliance

19. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the independent adviser on Ministers' interests on trends in the level of compliance with the ministerial code. [901731]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen): The Prime Minister has been clear that he will lead a Government of

"integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level."

He is delivering on that promise. I met Sir Laurie Magnus, the independent adviser on Ministers' interests, in November.

Munira Wilson: A survey published just this week by the Institute for Government revealed that two thirds of the public do not believe that the Government behave according to high ethical standards. I do not think anyone in the House will be surprised by that, given the behaviour we have seen from some—particularly former—Ministers over the past five years. Even in the last few weeks, questions have been raised about potential breaches of the ministerial code by the Business Secretary, and we have seen failure rewarded constantly with outrageous severance payments. Will the Minister finally fully enshrine the ministerial code into law?

John Glen: That matter has been discussed. The Committee on Standards in Public Life did not recommend that in 2021, because it would afford significant authority to a body that is outwith accountability to the House.

Veterans: Northern Ireland

20. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve support for veterans who served in Northern Ireland. [901733]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): We have expanded the Veterans Welfare Service provision in Northern Ireland and allocated £500,000 to a defence medical welfare service pilot to support veterans' health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland. On legacy, we are committed to working with the Northern Ireland Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery to ensure that veterans are fully engaged and supported.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What support can veterans expect from the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery?

Johnny Mercer: We are doing everything we can to support veterans who are going through that process. It is essential that veterans are engaged as the commission develops its policies and processes. We are working closely with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that legal and welfare provisions are established, to ensure that veterans are supported through that process.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: We now come to topical questions. I call Barry Sheerman—not here.

T2. [901736] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Later today, I will set out how we are putting more artificial intelligence experts at the heart of Government to drive the adoption of AI right across the public sector. We will not only revolutionise services but increase productivity, cut inefficiencies and save taxpayers millions of pounds. Earlier this month, I launched the Pall Mall Process alongside international allies, which will combat the proliferation of the irresponsible use of cyber-intrusion tools that are commercially available. I am determined that the Cabinet Office will lead the way in seizing the opportunities presented by these new technologies, while guarding against the risks.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for his update. Every day this place is combating cyber-security challenges. What action is he taking to ensure that not only this place but the whole of the United Kingdom is safe from Iran, Russia and other hostile elements that want to intrude on our security?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is entirely right to raise that risk. We live in a more dangerous and hostile world. I am particularly mindful of the risks posed by hostile foreign states such as Iran. We rely heavily on the National Cyber Security Centre, with which we work closely to ensure the security of Government, this House and the private sector. In addition, I chair a ministerial cyber board, where we constantly challenge Departments to improve their cyber-security—which we are improving, but the risks continue to arise.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): As the Minister has seen, many questions have been asked today on the infected blood scandal. Will he confirm that it is no part of the Government's decision-making process on the timescale of granting compensation payments to create the fiscal headroom needed for the much anticipated pre-election tax cuts in next week's Budget?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen): I can confirm that is not the case.

Mr McFadden: Baroness Mone and her husband made a £60 million profit on a £200 million contract for personal protective equipment, much of which the NHS deemed unusable. The couple, reportedly, have had £75 million of assets frozen, but they also have a horse running in Britain's favourite horserace, the grand national. That is not racing's fault, but would it not be a grand national disgrace if the owners were able to walk away with winnings while taxpayers are still waiting to get their money back from being sold a mountain of unusable PPE?

Oliver Dowden: The Government continue to take robust action to recover any misused funds. As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, both criminal and civil proceedings are ongoing, so there are limited things I can say in respect of the allegations that he has made. As the Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office and Deputy Prime Minister, my remit runs to many areas, but unfortunately not to the outcome of the grand national.

Mr Speaker: If it did, we could all win.

T9. [901743] **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): Dedicated people such as Kath Eastment of SSAFA, Piers Beeland from the Royal British Legion and the RAF Valley Padre Mike Hall work tirelessly to support veterans across Ynys Môn. I am delighted that a veterans hub is to open at RAF Valley on Friday 22 March, which will give local veterans a place to meet and access support. Will my right hon. Friend extend his congratulations to the team responsible, and will he come to RAF Valley to visit the hub?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): I would love to come to RAF Valley at some point. I visited my hon. Friend's constituency before she was a Member; it is a beautiful part of the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to everybody who works in this sector and who steps into the breach and works hard to ensure that those coming out of service with particular needs are supported, and that we look after them in the manner that I want to see.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In response to the question from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), the Minister stressed the importance of Ministers being accountable to this House, particularly for breaches of the ministerial code, but neither the independent adviser on Ministers' interests nor the Prime Minister are truly accountable to the House when it comes to the ministerial code—and the Foreign Secretary is not accountable to this House at all. Trust is at an all-time low, and breaches of the ministerial code are rife. When will the Government revise the code to include appropriate sanctions, so that Ministers can no longer break the code with impunity?

Oliver Dowden: The Government continue to keep the ministerial code under review. The Prime Minister of the day has to be able to determine who the Ministers will be in the Government that he leads on behalf of His Majesty. That is an important constitutional principle, but the Prime Minister will not hesitate to take action if there have been inappropriate breaches. On the accountability of the Foreign Secretary, discussions continue on the best way to ensure that this House holds him to account, in the same way that he is already accountable to, for example, Select Committees.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): In July 2019, the Minister's Department issued new guidance effectively outlawing gagging clauses across Government Departments. Does the Department have any plans to extend that to local authorities? I am sure that the Minister would, like me, be appalled that Labour-run Rossendale Borough Council has issued a gagging clause against its elected representatives, backed up by a threat of legal proceedings, because it wants to cover up a £12 million fraud, in which Labour councillors may have been complicit, and about which they certainly have questions to answer.

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend rightly raises some very concerning allegations. So-called gagging orders should not be used in that way, and I undertake to look into the matter on his behalf.

T3. [901737] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I have raised the subject of the pressures facing prison officers on a number of occasions. Prison officers are part of the civil service pension scheme and must work until the age of 68 to retire on a full pension. Does the Minister recognise that that is unrealistic, given the number of assaults on them and the pressures they face? Will he work with me and the Prison Officers Association to seek an exception for prison officers, so that they can retire at 60 after 30 years' services, as is currently the case for firefighters and the police?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman rightly raises the matter of the enormous contribution of prison officers. They are often under-sung members of our public services, risking their life day in, day out, to protect us all from dangerous and violent criminals. Of course, as Ministers, we have a duty to protect the public purse. We have set out a clear principle on the age of retirement from government roles. We would be reluctant to start varying that for a further group of people, because it is very difficult to draw the line once we start unpicking that principle.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): It has been reported in *The Daily Telegraph* that the Starmerite think-tank Labour Together has had to pay a fine of just over £14,000 for failing to declare hundreds of thousands of donations. The rationale it gave was that it did not want to name some of its donors. Does my right hon. Friend think that simply not wanting to do something is a reasonable basis on which to break the law?

Oliver Dowden: The short answer is clearly no. Indeed, it really worries me that things have come to a state where the Labour party allegedly did not want to declare donations because of concerns about growing antisemitism. That is a very worrying allegation.

T4. [901738] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The independent review into the Teesworks project found there to be a lack of

"transparency and oversight across the system to evidence value for money,"

as well as

"a persistent theme or culture of excessive confidentiality".

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities does not seem to be interested in pursuing those matters, and refuses to refer them to the National Audit Office. Can the Minister explain what his Department is doing to make sure that public money is spent properly?

Oliver Dowden: The Government remain committed to ensuring value for the taxpayer across all projects. As the hon. Gentleman highlights, this is principally a matter for DLUHC.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): What is the latest position on a review of the impact of the statute of limitations on the ability of people injured by covid-19 vaccines to bring civil claims? More than 3,000 claims have not yet been dealt with by the Government's compensation scheme, and people's ability to begin civil litigation will be prejudiced unless something is done quickly.

The Minister without Portfolio (Esther McVey): My hon. Friend is a champion and a campaigner on behalf of all those people who have suffered covid vaccine damage. We have met, and I have taken the issue to the permanent secretary to see what we can do, whether it would involve extending the timeframe that he was talking about or not starting the clock ticking until a decision had been made.

T5. [901739] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): Given that Ministers are piloting the use of artificial intelligence in Departments to answer parliamentary questions, which Ministers will the Secretary of State wish to replace first?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): Until this moment I had not thought of drawing up a list, but as the hon. Lady will have heard us say on a number of occasions, artificial intelligence provides a remarkable opportunity to create supplementary capacity and capability for the civil service and the Government. I have been very pleased to pilot a new programme called "red box", devised by a fantastic young crack AI team, which summarises long documents and makes the work of my private office easier. However, it is enhancing capability, not replacing it.

T6. [901740] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister talked earlier about protecting our borders. I am sure he will know that Dover Port Health Authority has seized worrying amounts of contaminated meat over the last few months, but in just the last few days, we have learned that the Government are withdrawing the funds that make it possible for the authority to do that. Why are the Government ignoring the advice of experienced public health officials?

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr Steve Baker): There is absolutely no question of ignoring the advice of experts. Indeed, only yesterday I had relevant meetings to discuss adjacent matters. As I said in an earlier answer, meat is circulating—particularly pork and chicken—that is not fit under either EU or UK rules, and we will continue to take steps to ensure that our borders are protected.

T7. [901741] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Sir Brian Langstaff recommended in April 2023 that before the publication of his final report, interim payments should be made to parents who had lost children, and to children who had lost parents. Why is this Minister such a "computer says no" man?

John Glen: I respectfully reject that characterisation. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have spent £400 million of taxpayers' money since October 2022. The arrangements for the distribution of further compensation payments are obviously being considered at this point, and, as I said during the extensive exchange that opened this questions session, that work is continuing apace, so that I can produce a comprehensive response from the Government as soon as possible.

T8. [901742] **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): How does the Secretary of State expect the civil service to function effectively for the public if the Government go ahead with headcount cuts of up to 70,000, which aim to return civil service numbers to pre-pandemic and pre-Brexit levels, and which will mean a huge loss of expertise and knowledge? What discussions has he had with trade unions about these proposals?

John Glen: I met several union leaders a few weeks ago. On 2 October, the Chancellor announced that the civil service would be capped at the levels that were current at that time, which would save up to £1 billion against the trajectory that was then in place. As of September 2023, there were 496,150 civil servants. It is an important Government responsibility to ensure that we have the right number of civil servants performing effectively and efficiently in public service, and we will continue to work on that.[1]

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with charities back home in Northern Ireland, such as Beyond The Battlefield and SSAFA, about improving mental health support for veterans who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles? I have extended this invitation in the past, and I extend it again now: will the Minister join me in visiting Portavogie to see the wonderful work of Beyond The Battlefield, which is conducting a project there? We really want to see him there.

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind invitation. I would love to come, and I was in Northern Ireland a couple of weeks ago. Health is clearly devolved, but I made it very clear that I want the same standard in Northern Ireland that we have achieved with Op Courage in England: a single, dedicated mental healthcare pathway for veterans, with 19,000 referrals in its first year. Where were all these people going before that? It is an incredible story. I want to see that standard achieved in Northern Ireland, and we will keep working at it until we do.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend what work is being done to ensure that the Government give value for money for the taxpayer when it comes to the Government estate?

Alex Burghart: I am pleased to say that one of our major Government functions, the Government Property Agency, is constantly looking at how we can refresh the Government estate to make sure not just that our offices are fit for purpose and are wonderful working spaces for our excellent civil servants, but that we are not hanging on to outdated buildings that are expensive to run. We are very mindful of achieving value for money in this area.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Interim payments are, by their very nature, interim; they are paid before final payments. Perhaps the Minister might be able to help me to understand. He just said that works are going on at pace, so when will the interim payments, recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff in April 2023, to parents who lost children and children who lost parents be paid before the final payments are made?

John Glen: As soon as possible, and when the Government's position is clear.

1. *[Official Report, 11 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 2MC.] (Correction)*

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On the efficiency of Government Departments, I am sure that Ministers want report by inspectorates that are the responsibility of their Department to be produced in a timely manner. Is the Minister aware that the now sacked chief inspector of borders and immigration has produced 15 reports, which have been sitting on the Home Secretary's desk, in some cases for over a year? There is complete confusion about how they can be published in the absence of the inspector and his deputy. Will the Minister look into that, and give reassurances to the House that these reports will be published in a timely fashion?

John Glen: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter. I will look into it urgently and come back to him as soon as possible.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The experience of the last two years has taught us that energy security is now national security. The more we can generate our own renewables, the less reliant on tyrants we will be. Has the Secretary of State asked the National Security Council to report on the national and energy security implications of the Prime Minister's decision last year to scale back his Government's energy transition targets? If he has not, why not?

Oliver Dowden: We continue to monitor energy security, principally through the National Security Council resilience committee, which I chair. I say gently to the hon. Lady that if she is concerned about energy security, why does her party consistently vote against granting new licences for North sea oil and gas, which would enhance our energy security?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Why do this Government think it is right that Church of England bishops in the House of Lords can have greater say on legislation affecting Scotland than the Scottish Parliament, and when will there ever be meaningful reform to the bloated House of Lords?

Alex Burghart: As the hon. Gentleman will have heard me say in a Westminster Hall debate not so long ago, it remains a great pity that the SNP refuses to play in the House of Lords. The fact is that the people of Scotland rejected the idea of an independent Scotland some time ago, and it would have been to the benefit of his constituents and others around Scotland if his party had had the good sense to ask for people to be put in the upper House.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): On the contaminated blood scandal, why have the Government not named the experts?

John Glen: We have given details of the appointment of Sir Jonathan Montgomery, and a number of other individuals are working on clinical and other matters. It is really important that we get on with this work, and we will report back on their conclusions as soon as we can.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): We know that the Cabinet Office is often focused on making sure that procurement contracts go to small and medium-sized enterprises, but can my hon. Friend tell me what work is being done to make sure that female-led businesses get a chance at those contracts?

Alex Burghart: I think my right hon. Friend is referring to social value, which is obviously an important part of our procurement regime. Social value was discussed extensively during the passage of the Procurement Act 2023, and contracting authorities in local areas must pay regard to it.

Business of the House

10.30 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 4 March will include:

Monday 4 March—General debate on farming.

Tuesday 5 March—Second Reading of Automotive Vehicles Bill *[Lords]*, followed by motions relating to the shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill, the British Citizenship (Northern Ireland) Bill and the High Streets (Designation, Review and Improvement Plan) Bill.

Wednesday 6 March—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

Thursday 7 March—Continuation of the Budget debate.

Friday 8 March—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 March includes:

Monday 11 March—Continuation of the Budget debate.

Tuesday 12 March—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

Colleagues should also be aware that Thursday 14 March will be estimates day. At 5 pm on that day the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

Lucy Powell: I start by paying tribute to Ronnie Campbell and Sir Patrick Cormack. Ronnie was a larger than life character, proudly and staunchly representing his community and his roots. Although Sir Patrick was an MP before my time, I have read the glowing tributes which all describe him as incredibly kind.

I am also incredibly saddened by the news, just announced, that Dave Myers, one of the Hairy Bikers, has died. He was a hugely popular and much loved figure.

I was going to welcome the motion on the risk-based exclusion of Members that we were due to debate on Monday, as the Leader of the House announced last week, but it appears that she has pulled it. This decision will be met with dismay by Members, staff and unions who have worked on it for more than a year. Can she let us know when the motion will return? I note that some on the Conservative Benches had tabled amendments, which reports suggest is why the motion has been withdrawn. Will she confirm that she still supports the motion as agreed by the House of Commons Commission on which we both sit?

I welcome the new funding and protocols that have been announced to enhance MPs' security and defend our democracy. We have seen a huge rise in antisemitism, Islamophobia, hate and the intimidation of elected representatives, especially since Hamas's barbaric attack on Israel on 7 October. I put on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, and the security services for your leadership. I asked last week, as I have before, for a new cross-party taskforce to address these issues. Can the Leader of the House help to make sure that happens?

We have discussed these issues many times, but does the Leader of the House not agree that it is incumbent on all of us to be mindful of our language and conduct? When we see racism, antisemitism or Islamophobia in our own ranks, we must take action, however difficult the consequences, and we must be clear in calling it out. To that end, I hope she will take this opportunity to say what is very clear for all to see, that the comments of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) about the Mayor of London were racist and Islamophobic. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to uphold the highest standards of conduct towards one another, and that highly personalised and wrong-headed attacks by sections of the media, or by political parties, towards individual Members only fuel hatred, disdain and those who pose security threats? We must strive to do better.

In an age of social media, the spread of misinformation, disinformation and deep fakes will shape the general election in ways that we cannot imagine, so will the Leader of the House update us on regulation and action to tackle it? The Government watered down the Online Safety Act 2023 and took all of this out of scope, just when we needed it most.

Finally, ahead of next week's Budget, I want to turn to the economy. Last week, it became official: we are in recession. Most people did not need the Office for National Statistics to tell them that, because they had been struggling with its reality for a long time. Sitting beneath the headline figures was a record the Government do not want to admit: we have seen the biggest fall in living standards since records began—let us just let that sink in for a moment. To emphasise that, GDP per capita has fallen for seven quarters in a row—that means families up and down the country have much less money to spend, the pounds in their pockets worth less.

This total crisis of living standards has the Prime Minister's name written all over it. He was the Chancellor, and now as Prime Minister he has failed. He has failed to meet his own pledge to grow the economy, and he has failed each and every one of us.

To make matters worse, the Government seem unable to show any understanding or humility. They repeat that their plan is working and that they have turned a corner, but we have not. Alternatively, they blame others for their failure. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury seems not to understand the numbers at all. One Conservative Member blamed the weather and another blamed disabled people. When asked about our failing economy at yesterday's Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister blamed Labour's policies.

It is the Conservatives' 14 years of decisions that have led us here and left Britain uniquely exposed, with austerity; political and economic instability; energy insecurity; and the kamikaze Budget sending mortgages and interest rates soaring. After 14 years, people are worse off, taxes are higher, costs are higher and growth is stagnant, and there is nothing the Government can announce next week to change any of that.

Penny Mordaunt: First, let me add my voice to the many tributes that have been paid both to Lord Cormack and to Ronnie Campbell. They were public servants who were thoughtful and committed, both to Parliament and to many other organisations and institutions. I hope that those many tributes bring comfort to their loved ones. I also join in the tribute the hon. Lady paid to Dave Myers, one half of the Hairy Bikers. He brought so much joy to so many people across our country and elsewhere.

[Penny Mordaunt]

The hon. Lady asks me several questions, first about risk-based exclusion. I do not think she has quite processed the full extent of the consequences of what happened last week. The Government gave time to this debate and we want it debated. I am part of the Commission and I want it debated and resolved in this House. Given the current climate and the concerns that hon. Members have raised since the motion was tabled—there have been some serious questions, in particular from learned colleagues—there will be a better opportunity to debate this in the House, and I hope that will be soon.

I am not expecting the hon. Lady to give us any credit at all, as that is not her job. She did not welcome the figures on irregular migration that are out today, which show that our plan is working. She will know that the Budget, which I announced in the business, will be very soon, and I am sure we can all see the progress that has been made and that the Chancellor will set that out in due course.

As for what the hon. Lady says about intimidation, let me repeat what I said last week: this House will not, has not and must not bow to terrorism or intimidation. We are experiencing a new form of an old story. As well as those colleagues slain since 2016, there are others who were murdered and whose shields are on the walls of this Chamber, above the door. There are Members who sit on these Benches who can recall being issued with mirrors to look under their cars in the morning. We are facing a new form of that old threat. It failed then and it is going to fail now, but while we focus on ending that threat, we must not lose sight of the good in our country and what we can all do to help this situation.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). I know she will want to hear one word from him, but yesterday he provided us with 1,000 words. I read his piece in the *Express* and it is some distance from the view he expressed in the original interview. I think what he wrote in the *Express* is his genuine view. We might have to accept that those 1,000 words are the closest we will get to the one-word apology that others seek. The hon. Lady has understandably chosen to scold him; I would rather ask him to consider all the good he could do, whatever political hue he ends up being, in these particular times with the trust and following he has built up. She asks what action the Government have taken to combat these issues; I point her to the work of the defending democracy taskforce, the work I have done in this place on combatting conspiracy theories and the new systems we have set up.

The shadow Leader of the House is right that we also need to reflect on our own behaviour. I would ask her to consider on whose Benches Members sit who have suggested that we lynch a Government Minister, who have called hon. Members "scum" or who have said

> "I want to be in a situation where no Tory MP, no Tory MP, no coalition minister, can travel anywhere in the country, or show their face anywhere in public, without being challenged".

Which party's actions have made it more likely that an antisemite will be sworn into this House next week? Which party last week trashed the understanding and foundation of trust upon which this place needs to operate? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady rolls her eyes. I would ask her to consider what she could do to rectify that situation. There are many good people in the Labour party; there are many good people who have also been driven from it. Despite best attempts to knock it off the media agenda or pretend it is otherwise, the strong moral compass we want to see from our nation's political leaders, especially at times like this, is missing from the Labour party. That is sad and it is shameful.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following the comments made by the shadow Leader of the House about risk-based exclusion, I am glad that motion is not coming forward next week, as there should be more consideration. It is a matter of record that two major newspapers made sex-based accusations against me, but I was not investigated by the police or as a result referred. It is only arrest that makes a difference. It is absurd and naive to think that were someone to be suspended and get a proxy vote, their anonymity could in any sense be guaranteed in this country or not reported in other countries. This is a serious problem. I am not certain we have found exactly the right way of dealing with it.

Will the Government make a statement next week on revisionism and who is the lead designer of the national Holocaust memorial and proposed learning centre? One of the Government's nominees as chair of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation was quoted in the *Jewish News* yesterday saying that Ron Arad is the person responsible. Every Government comment, from 2016 onwards, has acknowledged quite rightly that the main designer is Sir David Adjaye OM—a name that cannot normally be mentioned because of problems I do not want to go into on the Floor of the House. Could Ministers refer Lord Pickles to the press notices that went out in the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation's name in 2016, 2018 and every year since, because we must get the facts right and not change them?

Penny Mordaunt: I reassure my hon. Friend that we are listening to the House. Risk-based exclusion and other such schemes are a matter for the House and all Members need to have confidence in those processes. He has successfully put on record his concerns about that aspect of the Holocaust memorial. I will ensure the Secretary of State has heard what he has said, and he can raise it directly with him on 4 March.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A lot has happened since the Leader of the House and I last faced each other, and I commend her for her intervention in last week's events. She acted, as she said, to defend the rights of minority parties. That was the right thing to do, but what a dismal reflection on Westminster that the rights of minority party MPs in this place now need protecting and defending. The whole House knows how we got here. At some point we will get to the bottom of what pressure there was, exactly what dealings were done behind Victorian screens, and what "simply urging the Speaker" actually meant. To be fair, some Labour figures were fessing up at the weekend, or perhaps gloating, about their tactics—all because the SNP wanted to debate an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

People might ask why I am not tackling the Leader of the House today on her Government's economic policies, Brexit or child poverty. We will return to our normal business questions exchanges of course, but at the core of our work as MPs is that all Members and parties must be treated fairly, and seen to be treated fairly. For as long as Scotland sends MPs here, we will expect and demand that. No one party can be allowed to change the rules by bullying. There is not a great deal that the Leader of the House and I agree on, but I know that on this we do. What use can she make of her offices to ensure that we never find ourselves in that sorry procedural mess again, and can she tell us when the replacement SNP Opposition day will be?

Finally, after the giant lobby of Parliament by campaigners yesterday, I must again raise the Government's repeated delays in delivering full and fair compensation to those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal. I know that the Leader of the House recognises the fully justified depth of anger about this. Can she tell us what progress has been made ahead of the Budget to set up the structures of the compensation scheme transparently and in consultation with victims and their families, so that it is ready to start allocating funds at the earliest opportunity?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I understand why people will have to wait for normal combat to be resumed between us. I disagree with one thing that she, and other hon. Members, have said: that this Chamber, and Westminster collectively, did not cover itself in glory last week. I think that the issue has been about the actions of particular individuals and what they have done. Many Members of this House did a good thing last week by standing up to protect the rights, the foundation and the rulebook that we operate on. With regard to those who were caught up in something else, many Members have recognised that that was the wrong thing to do, and that we need to address that. The Government will give the SNP more time to have the debates that it ought to have. I understand that you, Mr Speaker, have commissioned the Procedure Committee to look at the particular procedural issues that happened last week. I understand that the scope of that work is narrow, so it should be done swiftly. I hope that it will be concluded before the SNP has its next debate, so that it can have confidence in how that debate will run.

On the hon. Lady's final, very important point, we have just heard from the Paymaster General, who is leading on the issue of infected blood on behalf of the Government. She is right that I have very strong views about this, but they are shared by the Paymaster General and all those on the Government Benches. That is why we set up the inquiry, and why we set up the compensation study to run concurrently with it, so that we would not have to wait any longer before people got proper redress. I know that the Paymaster General is working on this very swiftly. He updates me on a regular basis, and we will keep the House informed.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): On the first anniversary of the coming into force of the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, I am very concerned to learn that child marriages are still taking place, and that those with safeguarding responsibilities are failing to prosecute. It is my understanding that the relevant authorities are failing to interpret the law correctly, particularly in relation to marriages taking place overseas. Can we have a statement on what further education is required as a matter of urgency, so that all those with safeguarding responsibilities have the necessary knowledge and skills to protect children?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work in this area. She has been an absolute force for good. We would not have brought forward that legislation without her great efforts. She is right that we want to ensure that people—particularly those with safeguarding responsibilities—are taking this issue seriously. She will also know that a private Member's Bill is looking at the responsibilities of statutory authorities in this regard. I will make sure that the Department has heard the hon. Lady's concerns on this matter, and I am sure that, given her reputation, they will be listened to.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for our meeting yesterday and for the business statement confirming the timing of the estimates debates for Thursday 14 March. Let me inform the House that applications for those debates must be with the Clerk of the Committee by lunch time on Monday, so we do not have much time to sort this out—so, that is this coming Monday, 4 March, at lunch time. The applications will be before the Committee on Tuesday afternoon at our normal meeting.

May I let the Leader of the House know that I have now received a letter from the Procedure Committee regarding the proposal to change the timings of debates in Westminster Hall? I am hopeful that she will have that imminently.

May I add my penn'orth in memory of my friend, Ronnie Campbell? I have been a Member of this House for only 14 years, but I knew Ronnie for more than 40 years. I will be at his funeral in Blyth tomorrow and will certainly pass on the best wishes of the Members of this House to his wife, Deirdre, and sons when I see them.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Member for delivering our messages at Ronnie's funeral tomorrow. I also thank him for the helpful advert for the work of his Committee. He will know that we are keen to ensure that the new innovation in the sitting hours of Westminster Hall can be brought into effect and he has my commitment to that. I will also ensure that we are giving him good notice on future timings for his Committee. I am very conscious, as we discussed yesterday, that debates have been moved for understandable reasons—for example the debate on coalmining communities was moved because of important matters relating to Northern Ireland—and we want to ensure that there is time for those matters to be heard.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for hosting a dinner for OnSide in your apartments this week. That made me think that it is high time that we had a debate in this House about the contribution that youth zones make to east Lancashire. The centre of that debate, Mr Speaker, will be not the Chorley youth zone, as fine as it is, but the brand-new youth zone that is about to be built in Darwen. The £3.3 million project to help all our young people is supported by this Government as part of our £120 million town deal to transform Darwen.

Penny Mordaunt: May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on another success that he has had with his wish list for his constituents? I congratulate everyone involved in that project. These are vital community facilities, and we all send our congratulations and good wishes for this latest project in this area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for an opportunity to raise this question on freedom of religion or belief. The all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, visited Tunisia last May to highlight some of the issues that are relevant to our all-party group. On Sunday past, a mob in Tunisia burned a synagogue in the city of Sfax. Thankfully no one was injured. Will the Leader of the House join me and others in denouncing this attack and calling for closer monitoring of the issues relating to freedom of religion or belief?

Penny Mordaunt: We again thank the hon. Gentleman for what he does every week, which is to shine a spotlight on the situations that are going on around the world that would not normally get this level of attention. It is good to hear from him slightly earlier in the session this week. As he knows, on each occasion, I follow up with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure that our people in-country realise the importance of these matters to us in this place, and I thank him again on behalf of us all for raising them.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): If freedom of the press means anything, it means the freedom to criticise and to oppose. That freedom is in danger if we become the first democracy in the world to allow a foreign Government to buy a national newspaper and media organisation. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House may be aware that the noble Baroness Stowell has tabled an amendment to the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill with cross-party support in the House of Lords to prevent that from happening. Will the Government support or at least not oppose that amendment in the House of Lords? Were it to come to the Commons, I certainly would support it, and I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to do the same. We must prize freedom of the press in this country, and that amendment is our opportunity to do so.

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Having a free press and a competitive media sector is a vital part of our democracy. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has an obligation to intervene in media transactions where there is a public interest to do so. As my right hon. Friend will understand—more than many—that is a statutory judicial process, so it would not be right for me to comment. On his general point, however, he is absolutely right, and there was audible support from across this Chamber for the position that he outlined.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): On 7 November last year, I wrote to the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, seeking a meeting with me and a cross-party group of local MPs to discuss an issue of concern expressed by our constituents. Following the reshuffle and having received no reply, in December I wrote again, to the new Secretary of State. We have still not had a response, let alone the meeting that we sought. With the NHS on its knees, I appreciate that the Health Secretary must have a full inbox, but does the Leader of the House agree that it is simply unacceptable that after almost four months, Members of this House are still waiting for a Minister to reply to our correspondence?

Penny Mordaunt: Guidelines are clear about the time-frame in which Departments need to respond to Members. As the hon. Lady knows, my office takes that very seriously. We are involved in training the parliamentary clerks in Departments to ensure that they understand the obligations. If she gives me further information, I will follow up on the matter of parliamentary correspondence. I do not know the specifics of the issue that concerns the hon. Lady and her colleagues, but she will know that many decisions are taken locally—I am sure, however, she has already spoken to her board and local commissioners. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what she has said, and she can raise it with her directly in oral questions on 5 March.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust operates the Queen's Hospital in my constituency. I praise the staff and the chief executive for all the work that they do to look after my constituents. However, will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement about the situation in the accident and emergency unit. Thirty per cent of patients are being seen within four hours, and yet the national average is 5%. That is unacceptable. Will she ask the Secretary of State to visit Queen's Hospital with me to look at solutions and to discuss how we can serve the constituents of Romford better when it comes to the local hospital and NHS services in the London Borough of Havering?

Penny Mordaunt: I join my hon. Friend in the praise that he heaps on his healthcare professionals, in particular at the Queen's Hospital in his constituency. He may be aware that the Secretary of State's predecessor did a piece of work to ensure that we were able to compare the performance of different trusts and different hospitals across the whole UK, so that we can identify where more assistance is needed or whether there are issues with performance and so forth. I will ensure that the Secretary of State hears what my hon. Friend has said today. Again, he may raise it directly with the Front-Bench team on 5 March at Question Time.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): For some time now, I have been in support of a safeguarded assisted dying law for mentally-competent terminally-ill adults with a life expectancy prognosis of six months. I was not always of that opinion—I have had to go on a journey—but have concluded that the evidence is overwhelming that that would be a step in the right direction, and public opinion is now very much in favour of a change in the law. I recognise that there are considerable concerns on the opposite side of the argument, but in the light of the news that the Isle of Man and Jersey are considering a change in the law, is it not time that we in this House have a fresh look at the matter, with a debate in Government time?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her work in that area. She will know that if such matters came to the Floor of the House, it would be on a free vote basis—they are matters of conscience. I very much understand the head of steam that is building behind both sides of the argument. It has been a little while since we have had a debate on that matter. She will know what options are open to her to secure a debate, be it an Adjournment debate or one secured through the Backbench Business Committee, but I will ensure that all relevant Departments have heard what she and other hon. Members have said.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My right hon. Friend will, like me, have constituents whose water is supplied by Southern Water. After two weeks of obfuscation, reassurance and denial by the company that there has been any pollution incident at Fullerton wastewater works in my constituency, we heard from the Environment Agency yesterday that there has been a significant pollution incident of a level that would be hazardous to human health. Will she help me by providing Government time for a debate about whether Southern Water remains a fit and proper company to be managing water resources in our region? She will know as well as I do that it is not simply wastewater that it cannot cope with; it is not any good at supplying drinking water either.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for leaving the House in no doubt about her frustration and disappointment about the situation with Southern Water. I have experienced similar feelings towards that company. What is particularly disappointing in this episode affecting her constituents is that although massive progress has been made in monitoring storm overflows—we have gone from just 6% being monitored to almost 100%—the quality of that monitoring is critical, and the assurances that she had been given about what was happening and about the type of water being expelled into a river have turned out not to be correct. There are questions for Southern Water and the Environment Agency. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has heard what she has said, and will ask his officials to get in contact with her office.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We need a fresh statement on the infected blood scandal. My constituent Sue Sparkes was in the House yesterday. She was widowed at the age of 31 when her husband, Les, passed away in 1991 having contracted hepatitis C and HIV from infected blood. The Leader of the House mentioned a "moral compass" in her statement. May I remind her that Members from across this House showed their moral compass when, for the only time in this Parliament, they defeated the Government on this issue? That is why the Government have made the statements that they have—but they are still not paying the full and fair compensation that has been called for by Sir Brian Langstaff. When will the Government make a statement on the compensation, and will the Budget indicate that it will happen immediately?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that question, and I thank all the directly affected people, and those supporting them and the various campaign groups, who took the time to visit Parliament yesterday. I think that we have done the right thing in gripping this issue through the inquiries that we have set up and the compensation study. The hon. Gentleman will know of my interest in this area. I assure him that I get regular updates from the Paymaster General, and I do not think it will be too long before he will be able to come to the House to make further announcements—he is making progress. This is the final stage of the process; it is the most difficult. I know that the Paymaster General is determined to deliver the right outcome for all those infected and affected by that appalling scandal.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The emotional aftermath and devastated lives that are left after violent knife crime have been highlighted in a recent, very powerful documentary titled "Grief", produced locally in the west midlands by the *Express and Star*. It is a really poignant reminder of the call for action and awareness, and features the brave stories of two grieving families—two sets of parents, including one from my constituency. I know that the Home Secretary takes this issue very seriously, but can my right hon. Friend provide us with an update on when legislation will be brought forward to deliver a ban on machetes and zombie-style knives?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work she is doing on this issue. I have witnessed that work at first hand, having visited her constituency and met with one set of those parents she mentions—I praise them for all the work they are doing to turn the tragedy that befell them into some positive action. As she has kindly mentioned, the Home Secretary is committed to this issue, and is continually looking at what more can be done. The particular statutory instrument to which my right hon. Friend refers, which was laid before Parliament on 25 January, is currently on remaining orders and is yet to be debated in both Houses, but I think that will happen extremely soon. As she knows, we are making progress on that.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): On 18 January, I raised the case of Pilsworth South landfill in my constituency, which has been giving off an awful smell due to the operator breaching its licence. I asked the Leader of the House whether we could have a debate in Government time about giving the Environment Agency more teeth in relation to matters like this, and I appreciate her writing to the Environment Secretary on my behalf. However, can we have a statement from the Secretary of State on potential prosecutions of operators that breach their licence, so that our constituents no longer suffer from this stench and we can stop the stink?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued work in this area—my office stands ready to help him on all fronts. As he knows, he can raise this matter directly with the Secretary of State on 14 March, but given that that date is a little way off, I will make sure that the Secretary of State hears what the hon. Gentleman has said today.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Last week, the Government-funded organisation Tell MAMA published its latest data on anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia incidents. That data showed that there had been 2,000-plus incidents in four months—an

[Rehman Chishti]

increase of over 300%. Between that time and now, there has been no statement from the Government on tackling Islamophobia. Last week, there was a statement from the Government on tackling antisemitism; can the Leader of the House clarify to me when the Government will make a statement on tackling Islamophobia, noting those latest data? I am sure she agrees with me, and with every Member of this House, that we should do everything we can to ensure that all our faith communities are treated fairly and equally.

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend's comments —that is a duty on us all. He may wish to know that I have also asked for a meeting with the Government's envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and the Minister responsible to look at what more we parliamentarians can do to ensure that all communities and faith groups feel properly supported in these times. I will make sure that the relevant Department hears what my hon. Friend has said today.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I had no intention of coming to ask the Leader of the House a question, but earlier she mentioned the exclusion of Members of Parliament. Just to be clear about the language, what we are talking about is people who have been arrested for sexual crimes being excluded from this estate. She said that we cannot have that debate, and that Members need to trust the process—well, staff also need to trust what happens here. She said that we cannot have the debate because of what happened last week. I have absolutely no idea how what happened last week has anything to do with keeping this building safe; could the Leader of the House elaborate on why what happened last week has got anything to do with something we have been fighting for for five years?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It is because this relies on the trust and confidence that Members have in other Members in this place, but also in the House authorities. The hon. Lady will know that I am part of the Commission. We have brought forward and tabled these proposals, but we also have a duty to listen to hon. and right hon. Members in this place, otherwise such motions will fail. I have to say that there is a very small set of circumstances—I cannot actually think of a set—where this would ever be used, because what would happen, if the House authorities were notified of any issues of concern, is that bail conditions would be applied to that individual, and therefore the process would not be triggered. We are talking about a set of circumstances where there would be some other kind of risk.

It is not an immediate emergency. It is important that we debate these things. It is particularly important to Mr Speaker, upon whom the responsibility for these issues currently falls. Clearly, a process is being proposed that would take that responsibility away from him. I am telling all hon. and right hon. Members that we need to debate these matters, taking seriously the concerns of our colleagues. Just coming to this place, and implying that Members on the Government Benches do not care about these issues is not helpful.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) referred to the issue of foreign state ownership and purchase, and the freedom of the press. I have to say that there have been plenty of times when I have certainly not liked what the press has written about me, or, indeed, about my party or other aspects. However, this does matter for the press—unlike for other industries, where I think it is perfectly valid for there to be ownership or part-ownership by foreign states, and in the past we have encouraged that, going both ways. I think it is vital, if the Government do not have the powers they think they need or are relying on some aspect of some other competition authority, that we put something in place to make sure that the freedom of the press is preserved forever. In particular, I am thinking right now of *The Telegraph* and *The Spectator*.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend makes her point very well, and I am pleased that she has got that on record. A free press, whether nationally or at local level, is a fundamental part of our democracy. If we lose that, we will lose a very great thing that our democracy leans upon. It should be protected. I think hon. and right hon. Members will continue to raise their concerns about this matter, and I will make sure that the Government have heard.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Marie took ill health retiral in 2010, only to later discover that she needed to wait until she was 66 for her state pension. During that time she received no benefit support, after losing employment and support allowance. She was not advised to apply for the personal independence payment, and she lost her home due to affordability issues. She has been let down by the Department for Work and Pensions at every turn, with an increased pension age without notification, incorrect advice on benefits, and no guidance on qualifying years, leaving her with a reduced state pension. What steps have the Government taken to make sure that the DWP gives everyone the correct advice and support they are entitled to, including national insurance contributions towards the state pension?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this question. Given that the Department's questions are not until 18 March, I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his particular concerns and asks his officials to contact the hon. Gentleman's office.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): My constituents have raised concerns with me about the number of potholes throughout Tamworth. Some are being filled in, which is positive news, but many remain unfilled, and there is a broader need for resurfacing works on roads with higher volumes of traffic and those impacted by heavy goods vehicles. What assessment have the Government made of the adequacy of the funding that has been provided to county councils to deal with our crumbling roads infrastructure?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that, in part because of the particularly bad weather we have recently had, there has been a considerable uplift in money given to local authorities to tackle precisely the types of issues that she raises. Although that money was

not strictly ringfenced, we want to be assured it has been spent on those things correctly, and all local authorities are required to place in the public domain, I think on 15 March, what they have done with that money and what repairs they have carried out. It is extremely important that that work is done. We want to ensure that it is being done and has been done, and I am sure the hon. Lady will be able to find out exactly what has been spent and on what.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Leader of the House will have heard my challenge to Cabinet Office Ministers earlier about the worrying uncertainty swirling around the inspectorate for migration, immigration and borders after the sacking of David Neal, and it is disappointing that we have both not had a statement from the Home Office given the urgency of the situation and failed to get the urgent question I applied for on behalf of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. The issue is not just the status of the 15 unpublished reports—some unpublished for a very long time—but uncertainty about the status of the inspectorate and whether it can carry on with its current work and reviews, let alone take up its scheduled reviews and address how they will be reported in future, until we have a new inspector, which could take at least six months. Will the Leader of the House urgently get clarification from the Home Office about the working of this very important inspectorate on a very topical issue?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. The Home Secretary will not be at the Dispatch Box for questions until 15 April. I will raise this matter with the Home Secretary on behalf of my hon. Friend and the Committee on which he serves and ask him to update the Committee and this House.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This weekend the first Romanian weekend school will open in my constituency in St Teresa's primary school. This will be the first Romanian supplemental school, adding to the weekend schools we have for the wide range of diasporas in and around my constituency. While I am sure my right hon. Friend will welcome this initiative, may we have a debate in Government time on how we can provide more opportunities for supplemental schools for the various diasporas in this country, given the challenges they face in trying to introduce these schools?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the question and all who have enabled this school to be stood up. I know he will want to get on record how important this is to diaspora communities. He is an experienced parliamentarian and will know how to apply for a debate and the various options open to him. I thank him for getting his praise for all involved on the record today.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on endangered species? Given the party of Disraeli and Churchill is now the mainstream of new-right fanatics and conspiracy theorists, I am particularly concerned about the lesser-spotted one nation Tory. My concern was reinforced last week when the former Prime Minister the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) told CPAC, the conservative political action conference, that her party was full of CINOs, which means Conservatives in name only. Who does the Leader of the House think she meant?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the characteristically amusing way in which he has raised an important question. He knows I have taken the matter of conspiracy theories very seriously as Leader of the House. We have stood up new services in the Library so that hon. Members can swiftly reassure their constituents on not just the facts of a particular matter but the origin of whatever they might have seen on social media, and very shortly, with the Speaker's help, we will be launching some training for Members on dealing with this issue. Those are the sorts of things we should all be focusing on.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that far from being a major cause of climate change, Welsh farmers, such as Richard Jones from Brynsiencyn, are the guardians and protectors of the Welsh countryside? Because of their dedication and hard work, Wales is as beautiful as it is and able to feed us.

Penny Mordaunt: May I thank my hon. Friend for getting that on record? The Welsh farming community have conducted themselves brilliantly in these difficult and uncertain times for their community and their futures. We know they do an amazing job, and they should be proud of that. Everyone in this place should be proud of that. The plans of Labour's Welsh Government are appalling and should be objected to in the strongest terms. The Welsh farming community have been doing just that. They have been standing up and fighting, and they deserve our support in doing so.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Today is Rare Disease Day, which is appropriate, given that it is 29 February. One in 17 people are affected by rare diseases or conditions, and they face common challenges, including delayed diagnosis, lack of treatment and poor co-ordination of care. This afternoon, we will be celebrating with our Rare Disease Day reception. It will be a chance to meet, discuss our concerns and exchange views, as well as to celebrate the work done by patient groups to bring this issue to the forefront. Can we have a debate in Government time on addressing the challenges faced by those with rare diseases?

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of us all, may I thank the hon. Lady for that helpful advert? This issue will affect many of our constituents, and she is right about the particular challenges with research funding, and the ability of patients to access specialist clinicians dealing with these issues is important. I am proud of this Government's record on our life science reforms, which have enabled experts from around the world, often in different discipline areas, to work together to get faster to solutions in these disease areas. I hope that many Members will be attending the event that the hon. Lady has advertised for us.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): According to a whistleblower allegedly within Openreach, the transition to overhead cabling has on too many occasions appeared to be proceeding without sufficient consultation with key stakeholders and, more importantly, local residents. Regrettably, in my constituency of Southport, it would

[Damien Moore]

appear that Openreach has sidestepped its own procedures for gaining community agreement, disrespecting the will of local residents. I call on the Leader of the House to request that the relevant Minister make a statement on these practices by Openreach. It is imperative that we ensure Openreach's strict adherence to its own policies and legal responsibilities, particularly if those were taken into account when it was awarded the contract. I also urge the Leader of the House to urge the Minister to put a pause on all activity by Openreach where it cannot be confirmed that it has adhered to its own policies and procedures.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has made some precise asks to protect his constituents and their interests. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what he has said. I will write on his behalf and ask that an official from the Department gets in touch with his office swiftly.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House has been helpful on the contaminated blood scandal. Can we have a statement from the Government on the issue that has arisen in the last few days, which is that we are not allowed to know who is in the expert group working with the Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) —at pace, I understand—to set out the compensation that will be payable? The written answer given to one Member of this House was that that was for reasons of their privacy. The Leader of the House will understand that there is a huge amount of distrust because of what has happened over the past 40 or 50 years with the scandal. Why will the Government not tell this House and the population at large who is advising them and giving them that expert advice?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this matter and all the work she is doing on behalf of those infected and affected by this terrible scandal. The Paymaster General has just been at the Dispatch Box. I did not hear all the things he said, but I will certainly ensure he is in touch with the right hon. Lady on these specific points. On other recent personnel concerns, I know he wants to ensure that trust and confidence are retained during this process, while being able to move things swiftly forward. One thing he must balance is precisely that. Everyone in this House wants the matter resolved swiftly. This final piece of work, which is the hardest piece in the whole process, needs to be got on with and done. I know that the Paymaster General does not want that slowed down, but the right hon. Lady is right that we need to ensure that people will have confidence in the outcome.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): We all know how important town centres are to our local communities and how they have been faced with the challenges of online retail and out-of-town shopping. Rugby town centre continues to have a strong independent sector with much loved retailers, and now the Conservative-led borough council is taking the initiative with an ambitious plan for regeneration including residential units and a food, drink and leisure economy. However, to achieve that goal, with all the benefits that will provide to my constituents, it will need support from both the public and private sectors. May we have a debate about how, working together, we can unlock regeneration schemes such as that in Rugby?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all the progress that he and his council are making on that. Members of Parliament can clearly help with creating the shared focus across sectors to enable regeneration to happen. I know that he is well placed to do that, and he knows that he can also raise this matter with the relevant Secretary of State on Monday 4 March.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On Friday, victims of rape and serious sexual assault in Scotland will be the first in the UK to have free access to court transcripts under a new pilot scheme. However, the UK Government are refusing to match that in England and Wales, and are only committing to a one-year pilot scheme in which free copies of sentencing remarks will be made available to victims of serious crime. That is not good enough and fails victims like my constituent Juliana Terlizzi, who was charged more than £7,000 to read the transcript of her rapist's trial. I tabled an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill that would have required the Government to provide free access to court transcripts in England and Wales, but they have not listened to our concerns. Will the Leader of the House provide a debate in Government time on the implementation of free access to court transcripts to help get victims like Juliana the justice they deserve?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for asking that important question. It is not just about cost; there is also sometimes difficulty and complexity in knowing how to go about accessing or even requesting particular transcripts. Given that the Lord Chancellor will not be in the House to answer questions until 26 March, I will write on the hon. Lady's behalf and ask him to update her.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Over the last week, some fairly serious concerns have been raised about the conduct of the Leader of the Opposition and his role in the events leading up to last Wednesday's deeply disappointing debacle. Might that conduct now form the basis of an investigation by the Committee of Privileges? Will the Leader of the House explain how that that would work?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising concerns, which I know are concerns for him and for other Members. The procedures regarding the Privileges Committee are there for all Members to see. The House must ask the Privileges Committee to carry out any work of this nature. It is incredibly important that any requests to do that follow the rules, and therefore are confidential—that confidentiality is incredibly important to that process—so the first that the House would hear about such work would be from the Office of the Speaker. The rules are there. Clerks of the House can also help hon. Members if they have further questions in this regard. I do hope that the House will be able to move on from what happened, but I do understand fully why people want the facts examined.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House share my concern that the long-running industrial action at the Pensions Regulator needs a

speedy response? The Public and Commercial Services Union has put forward a set of reasonable proposals, but it is disappointing that the chief executive, Nausicaa Delfas, will not even meet the union to discuss them. PCS members are taking their second day in the latest round of 12 days of strike action as part of a dispute now into its seventh month. I hope the Leader of the House agrees that we need to find time to have a debate on this dispute to ensure that it can be resolved and to prevent further damage to staff welfare and the organisation's reputation.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. She will know the options open to her to secure a debate on this matter. She will also be able to raise it directly with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 18 March.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for withdrawing the motion scheduled for Monday, in response to the amendments that I tabled. Will she review the whole situation of risk-based exclusion, taking into account last night's unanimous decision by the House of Lords to ensure that risk-based exclusion from the House of Lords is triggered only by someone having been charged with a sexual criminal offence that would lead to a sentence of imprisonment in excess of two years? We have one parliamentary estate, so would it not be ludicrous to have different exclusion rules for the House of Lords and the House of Commons?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. Although we might operate under different rules at each end of this Parliament, the principles should be the same. The House of Lords is very different from the House of Commons, so I am less concerned about our diverging in that respect. However, the principles and the outcome of the process need to be the same. Many Members—in particular learned Members—have raised concerns about some aspects of the scheme. I want the House of Commons Commission to bring the matter to the Floor of the House, even if it is not amended, when those matters and reassurances have been addressed. That is very important. People need to have trust and confidence in how that process will work.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), has been in the US peddling conspiracy theories, claiming that the "deep state" brought her down. She stood silently next to Steve Bannon as he called Tommy Robinson a hero—a man whose followers have repeatedly sent me rape and death threats for calling out his inappropriate behaviour in this House. Will the Leader of the House explain why the right hon. Member still has the Conservative Whip?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for affording us all the opportunity to condemn Tommy Robinson and all he stands for. She will know from my earlier answer that I take these matters of conspiracy theories, the erosion of trust and the sowing of fear among the general public very seriously. That is why I have given hon. Members new tools to combat these issues through the very good House of Commons Library. I will take it as a ringing endorsement of this Government's progress and the fact our plan is working that Opposition Members have been so obsessed this week with the former Prime Minister, and not the current one.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): New analysis shows that the Scottish Government's policies will lift 100,000 children out of relative poverty and 70,000 children out of absolute poverty in 2024-25—a direct result of action taken by the Scottish Government to eliminate the scourge in our society. The Child Poverty Action Group described the Scottish child payment as a "game changer" in driving down child poverty. Will the Leader of the House make a statement to recognise the importance of the Scottish child payment to combating child poverty? Would she like such a measure to be rolled out across England, so that the poorest children in England can also benefit from that vital support?

Penny Mordaunt: One of the strengths of the Union of the United Kingdom is that we can choose different ways of doing things, often achieving the same outcomes and certainly sharing our objectives. She will know this Government's record in this area: we have 1 million fewer workless households and, based on recent figures, we have lifted more than 500,000 children out of poverty. We all must work on these things, whatever particular systems cover our nations.[1]

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I would like to follow up on the word salad the Leader of the House gave in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on why the risk-based exclusion process has been pulled from the Order Paper. The Leader of the House talked about last week's events being part of the reason. Surely last week told us that, actually, the security and safety of people who work on the estate, not just Members, is really important and should be more of a priority? She also said in response to my hon. Friend's question that it is important we have a debate, so surely keeping the matter on the Order Paper, having that debate and ventilating the issues in the open would be the best way of reaching a resolution? I remind her that she promised it would be voted on by the end of last year. Is there a date now by which we will get to move on this?

Penny Mordaunt: I repeat my commitment to bringing the matter to the Floor of the House. I tabled it and I wanted it to be debated. I would just challenge what the hon. Gentleman said. Last week was not about the security of Members of this House. The hon. Gentleman is under a complete illusion if he thinks that that is the case. What happened last week was that the things we trust in our rule book in this place were upended for political advantage. I do not want to bring forward a debate that requires hon. Members to trust in systems we are putting in place when that trust is fractured. Let us work together to rebuild that trust. Let us address the legitimate concerns that our colleagues have raised and let us bring it back to be debated. I do not think that is a controversial view.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I have always opposed capital punishment on the principle that it is wrong to take a life, so it cannot be right for the state to take a life in revenge. Events have caused me to reconsider my position. May we have a debate on

1. *[Official Report, 11 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 1MC.] (Correction)*

[Andrew Bridgen]

crimes against humanity and the appropriate punishment for those who perpetrate, collude in and cover up atrocities and crimes so severe that the ultimate punishment may be required?

Penny Mordaunt: I think the hon. Gentleman's incredibly subtle question, and where he might be taking it, is not lost on anyone in this House. It is appropriate that the finale of this session, which has featured so heavily conspiracy theories, should fall to the hon. Gentleman. I would just caution him to reflect on his own behaviour and what he does on social media, and on the security measures that have had to be stepped up for hon. Members in the wake of some of his social media tweets and questions in this House. Whatever my disagreements with the hon. Gentleman, I will always stand ready to get answers from Departments and assist him in his work, but I am going to call out, on every occasion, when he does things that I think are a danger to our democracy, and to the safety and security of Members of this House.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Last week's data showing that the UK economy was in recession, with seven quarters of negative growth, and the fact that we have the worst-performing economy in the G7 are pretty damning. The situation in the west midlands is particularly concerning. Last November, PricewaterhouseCoopers published a report predicting that the west midlands would have the lowest growth of all regions in the UK. That is not a good look for the record of Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands. May we have a debate on this really important driver of the UK economy, the west midlands?

Penny Mordaunt: I look forward to the Budget debate and the Chancellor setting the record straight with regard to the west midlands. Mayor Andy Street has performed miracles: he has been an amazing community leader; he has galvanised all sectors; and he is regenerating parts of Birmingham and suburbs around it that have not had the attention and inward investment they need. There are problems in that area in the legacy of Birmingham City Council and its appalling maladministration, and with the Labour police and crime commissioner. I hope Andy Street will be able to have more influence over those areas in the coming months and years.

Ian Mearns: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Normally, points of order come after all the statements, but if the hon. Gentleman's point of order is pertinent to the business before the House, I will take it.

Ian Mearns: I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I owe the House an apology: in my earlier advertisement for the wares of the Backbench Business Committee, I suggested that the deadline for applications for estimates day debates was lunch time on Monday, but it is in fact close of play on Monday—when the House rises on Monday evening.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am so pleased when I hear a point of order that is a point of order. *[Laughter.]*

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): Write it in your diary.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will write: "Today I dealt with a point of order that was, in fact, a point of order." The hon. Gentleman rightly corrected what he had said before, and hopefully that means he will receive even more applications for Backbench Business debates. I thank him.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my question to the Leader of the House about the announcement of the winning designer of the holocaust memorial project, I referred to the year 2016, but I should have referred to 2017 or 2018. I am sorry to have to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Once again, this is getting very exciting. I have taken two genuine points of order, including that one from the Father of the House. I am grateful to him for correcting the record, and I understand the importance of the points that he has made.

Angiolini Inquiry Report

11.41 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the Angiolini inquiry.

Three years ago, Sarah Everard was abducted, raped and murdered by an off-duty serving police officer. It was a gut-wrenching betrayal, an abuse of power of the most egregious kind, and the country was shaken to its core. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), established an inquiry to examine the many failings arising from the Sarah Everard case, chaired by Lady Elish Angiolini KC. Part 1 focused on examining Wayne Couzens' career and previous behaviour, and a report dealing with its findings has been published today.

First and foremost, we should take time to think about Sarah Everard's family and loved ones at what must be an incredibly difficult time. I pay tribute to them all for the immense dignity that they have shown in the face of such an unbearable loss in such terrible circumstances.

Tragically, the report makes it clear that Couzens was completely unsuitable to serve as a police officer, and, worse still, that there were numerous occasions when that should, and could, have been recognised. Lady Elish identified significant and repeated problems in recruitment and vetting throughout Couzens' career, including the overlooking of his chaotic financial situation. This meant that he was able to serve in a range of privileged roles, for instance as a firearms officer. It is appalling that reports of indecent exposure by Couzens were not taken seriously enough by the police, and that officers were not adequately trained, equipped or motivated to investigate the allegations properly. Had fuller inquiries been made in 2015 and 2020, Couzens could and probably would have been removed from policing. Evidence of his preference for extreme and violent pornography, and of his alleged sexual offending, dates back nearly 20 years prior to Sarah Everard's murder. The inquiry found that Couzens was adept at hiding his grossly offensive behaviour from most of his colleagues, but that he shared his vile and misogynistic views on a WhatsApp group. The other members of that group are no longer serving officers, after a range of disciplinary processes. The fact that many of his alleged victims felt unable to report their experiences at the time speaks to the issue of confidence in policing among women.

I wish to place on the record my thanks to Lady Elish and her team for this report. It is a deeply distressing but incredibly important piece of work, and they have approached it with thoroughness, professionalism and sensitivity. We all owe thanks to those who came forward and gave brave testimony to the inquiry. Everyone who Couzens hurt is in my thoughts today.

The report makes 16 recommendations, including improving the police response to indecent exposure, reforming police recruitment and vetting practices, and addressing cultures in policing. The Government will now carefully consider the report and respond formally in due course, and I assure the House that our response will be prompt. We are taking action to address public confidence in the police, and there has already been progress in a number of areas that have been highlighted by the inquiry. Anyone who is not fit to wear the uniform, for whatever reason, must be removed from policing, and every effort must be made to ensure that similar people never join. That is why we are providing funding to the National Police Chiefs' Council to develop an automated system for flagging intelligence about officers much more quickly.

We are changing the rules to make it easier for forces to remove those who cannot hold the minimum level of clearance. Police chiefs are getting back the responsibility for chairing misconduct hearings, so that they can better uphold standards in the forces that they lead, and there will be a presumption of dismissal for any officer found to have committed gross misconduct. I can announce today that there will also be automatic suspensions of police officers charged with certain criminal offences, but the work must continue. Part 2 of the Angiolini inquiry is considering systemic issues in policing, such as vetting, recruitment and the culture, as well as the safety of women in public spaces. I will of course read the findings closely and with care.

Sarah Everard's murder started a national conversation about violence against women and girls, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham reopened a call for evidence that went on to receive 180,000 responses from members of the public, with many sharing their harrowing personal experiences. That evidence demonstrated the terrible truth: women and girls routinely feel unsafe. This is unacceptable and should anger us all, and the whole of society needs to treat change in this area as an urgent priority.

Tackling violence against women and girls has been a priority for me for a long time. It is now a priority set out in the strategic policing requirement, meaning that VAWG is rightly considered to be as serious a focus as tackling terrorism. Our tackling violence against women and girls strategy and tackling domestic abuse plan are backed up by significant investment. We are changing the law so that rapists will serve their full sentence behind bars, with no option of release at the two-thirds point, and anyone who commits a murder with a sexual or sadistic element will spend the rest of their days in prison.

Our safer streets fund and safety of women at night fund support a range of projects across England and Wales. The online StreetSafe tool enables the public to anonymously report areas where they feel unsafe and why. There is a new national operating model for the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences, which means that the police and prosecutors will work together more closely, building stronger cases that focus on the behaviour of the suspect, and that place victims at the heart of everything. We have also launched a nationwide behaviour change campaign called "Enough" to bring about an enduring shift in the attitudes and behaviours that underpin the abuse of women and girls.

Most police officers use their powers to serve the public bravely and well, but the impact can be devastating when they fall short. Society cannot function properly when trust in the police is eroded. I am unambiguous that police forces must keep improving and must command the confidence of the people they serve. It is imperative that police leadership, of whatever rank, plays its part in this endeavour.

Once again, I express my heartfelt sympathy to Sarah Everard's family and friends. I cannot begin to imagine the extent of their pain. Together, we must do everything

[James Cleverly]

possible to stop such agony being visited on others, to rebuild public trust, and to make sure that our streets and public places, as well as the private realm, are safe for women and girls. I commend this statement to the House.

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

11.51 am

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement.

Three years ago this Sunday, a young woman walking home was abducted and brutally killed by a serving police officer who she should have been able to trust to keep her safe. Today we think of Sarah Everard and her parents, family and friends, who have to live with the shattering consequences of what happened. This is also a day when many families who have lost sisters, daughters and mothers to violence are here in Parliament to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), read out the names of the women killed this year.

Today's damning report is about women's safety. It is for all the women across the country who worry about walking home alone, or who worry about their daughters' safety. It is also about trust and confidence in policing, and whether we have the standards in place to maintain confidence in individual officers. The work of the vast majority of police officers who work immensely hard and with integrity to keep communities safe is undermined when standards fail. I thank Lady Elish Angiolini for her inquiry and this comprehensive first report. I also thank those who came forward to give evidence.

The report exposes a catalogue of appalling failures in police vetting and misconduct processes, and in the investigation of indecent exposure and sexual offences. Wayne Couzens should never have been a police officer. He should have been stopped, and he could have been stopped, from being a police officer. It is truly appalling. His history of alleged sexual offending stretches back so many years, yet the opportunities to investigate were repeatedly missed. Most disturbing of all, Lady Angiolini says that there is

"nothing to stop another Couzens operating in plain sight."

Although I agree with most of what the Home Secretary says, I have to be blunt about this: his response is too weak—too little, too late. The lack of urgency is unfathomable to me. The Government have been repeatedly warned about failures around vetting and misconduct. Independent inspectorate reports in 2012, 2019, 2022 and 2023 all highlighted serious failures in vetting procedures, which is why, two years ago, I called for mandatory national vetting standards. Forces are working hard, but there are no mandatory standards for all forces. All the Government have done is bring in a code of practice two and a half years after Sarah Everard's murder, and it is not strong enough. Frankly, it is not even clear that Wayne Couzens, or officers such as David Carrick and Cliff Mitchell—both now convicted—would definitely have failed the vetting standards and the code of practice had they been in force at the time. The Home Secretary has to go further, and that has to be driven by the Home Office.

As for the misconduct changes that the Home Secretary referred to, most of them are not even in place yet. Again, this is three years after Sarah Everard was murdered. Will he commit today to a new mandatory vetting framework, underpinned by legislation, that all forces must abide by, under which any evidence about past domestic abuse or sexual offending will be pursued, and that will not simply take into account convictions? We will support him in that. At a minimum, will he accept recommendation 6, which is about a

"Review of indecent exposure allegations and other sexual offences recorded against serving police officers"?

At a minimum, surely he can accept that today.

The automatic suspensions that the Home Secretary announced do not go far enough. Are we to suspend people for criminal offences only once they have been charged? Once the police launch an investigation into domestic abuse or sexual offences by a serving police officer, that officer should be automatically suspended. Again, we have called for that repeatedly. The Home Secretary is not going far enough. As for the response on women's safety more widely, that, too, is frankly too week.

I welcome many of the policies the Home Secretary referred to and that the Government have introduced over the past few years—most of them are things we called for—but, again, this goes nowhere near far enough. On indecent exposure, we know about the awful murder of Libby Squire in 2019 and the failure to take indecent exposure seriously enough. Libby's mother, Lisa Squire, and the Home Affairs Committee Chair have been campaigning for stronger action on indecent exposure for years now. Again, surely the Home Secretary can accept at least the first three recommendations of Lady Elish's report, which are on stronger police training and guidance on, and a stronger approach to, investigating indecent exposure.

When it comes to women's safety, the reality is that the number of prosecutions for domestic abuse has halved; rape prosecutions are still taking years; early action and intervention just does not happen. There is a shocking drift on women's safety and in what the Home Secretary has said today. I urge him to: support Labour's call for new vetting rules, and for specialist rape and sexual offences units in every force; support Raneem's law, so that the police respond with urgency to domestic abuse and save lives; and listen to Lisa Squire, the mother of Libby Squire. We say that this report should be a watershed, but we said that Sarah Everard's murder three years ago should have been a watershed, and far too little has changed. How long must we go on saying the same things?

The first women's safety march was on the streets of Leeds nearly 50 years ago, and we are saying the same things about our daughters' safety today. I am sick and tired of nothing changing. I am sick and tired of women and girls who face abuse and violence not getting support, while perpetrators get away with it. Enough is enough. Let us have some urgency in the Home Secretary's response. We cannot stand for this any more.

James Cleverly: The right hon. Lady makes a number of points about the findings in the report, and about the issues raised because of Sarah Everard's brutal murder. I have continued the work of my predecessors, including that initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for

Witham (Priti Patel), to make sure that not just the Department, but police forces around the country and other organisations, statutory and non-statutory, that deal with the safety of women, are focused relentlessly on this issue. We have made it clear that there is still much work to do, and, as I committed to do, we will respond promptly to the findings of this report.

I understand the frustration that not enough has happened; things have not moved fast enough, and cultural change still needs to be driven through, including on leadership. I have made clear to police leaders, both in forces around the country and at the College of Policing, my expectation of leadership. This is not just about process and procedure, but about these matters being amplified and supported by leadership, and about a real commitment to driving through change in forces. I will continue to ensure that that happens.

I do not think it is right for the right hon. Lady to say that nothing has changed. That would not be an accurate reflection of the situation from the time to which she makes reference. There have been a number of improvements. My first visit as Home Secretary was to Holborn police station to look at the team working there. There have been improvements, although I concede that they have not been universally applied. The differential performance among forces is not good enough. I have discussed what can happen to ensure the least well performing forces match the performance of the best forces.

There remains a huge amount of work to be done. We are not waiting for the outcome of the second inquiry before we take action. We will look at changes to the recruitment and vetting processes, which have been highlighted, but in her inquiry Dame Elish shows that there were plenty of occasions when the current system flagged problems that were not properly responded to by the force. Those are not procedural problems but a culture problem. We will look at what processes and procedures need to change, but I will not wait for the second report before doing so. I will continue to push for cultural change through society and policing, to ensure that where issues are flagged, as they were, they are taken seriously and investigated properly to ensure that such a situation will hopefully never happen again.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I join everybody in the House in paying tribute to Sarah Everard's family. Having spent time with them, I hope the report will at least give them some sense of the facts and circumstances around what happened to their beautiful daughter, as they requested.

I thank Dame Elish Angiolini for her incredible work. This report is only part one; parts two and three will follow. The report has no surprises when we think about what has been said thus far about policing since Sarah's appalling abduction and murder. Zoë Billingham, His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services and others have highlighted many institutional, cultural and practical failures.

Will the Home Secretary give his own view on what can happen next? This is a clear call for action for all police forces around the country to raise the bar on consistent vetting and action. There is no place for criminal or corrupt conduct in policing. We police by consent in our country but that bond has been broken with the public, as the report shows. With reports two and three due to come out, will the Home Secretary give a commitment that, as those reviews are undertaken and as he engages with Dame Elish Angiolini, he will act swiftly where issues are identified and not wait for the publication of further reports? Will he also act swiftly on putting forward the recommendations in part one of the report?

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for initiating the report and appointing Dame Elish. Details in the report were new to many people and were painful to read, but much of what is highlighted was already known. We have not waited for the report to start driving change. I have had conversations with police leadership about my expectations for their focus on the policing of the safety of women and girls and their attitude towards women and girls. Processes and structures are important; we will review and improve them. However, the best processes and structures in the world cannot replace focus and leadership. It is incredibly important that leadership at every rank in policing takes that seriously. This is a conversation that I have had with police leaders and the College of Policing to ensure that the attitudes highlighted in the report change. Without that shift in attitudes, all the processes in the world will not repair what needs to be repaired. That is a conversation that I will repeat.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am grateful for advance sight of the statement, and to Dame Elish Angiolini for the careful and thorough way she has worked through this task, and the thoughtful way she talked through her findings online earlier. I, too, am thinking of Sarah Everard and her family today, as well as the family of Emma Caldwell, who have experienced such a protracted, awful ordeal.

Fundamentally, our police forces must both keep us safe and have our confidence that they will do so. Of course, most police officers do an excellent job, but trust has been hugely damaged by issues being raised—including, as we have heard, indecent exposure—but not acted on. We have heard that Wayne Couzens should never have been a police officer. The Home Secretary spoke about vetting. I put it to him that we need to hear more about both process and culture. It cannot be one before the other; both must be dealt with immediately. I would also like to hear more about how those currently in the force who show tell-tale signs, as Couzens did, will be dealt with.

What does the Home Secretary mean by "automated systems", and how will they work? Will additional funding be made available to tackle institutional misogyny within the Met, and will Barnett consequentials be available so that the Scottish Government can similarly look at the threat of violence against women and girls, across society and within the police force?

Good policing will not end the epidemic of male-inflicted violence against women, but it should mean that men who abuse women are held to account. I wonder whether the Home Secretary is aware of the relatively small proportion of police officers investigated for domestic abuse, sexual assault, rape and abuse of position who were suspended over the last two years, and what steps he is taking to deal with that. Will the Home Secretary

[Kirsten Oswald]

talk further about those who have raised concerns about domestic abuse by police officers, and how the specific actions that are needed will be taken? This is quite devastating for women's confidence in policing. I wonder whether he is considering a statutory inquiry into institutional misogyny within the Metropolitan police.

Finally, he said at the beginning of his statement that the report and his Government's actions have brought to light the concerns that women have. I have to say to him that we have had these concerns forever. This is not a new situation, but there is now an opportunity to do more about it. I am keen to hear about how that might pan out.

James Cleverly: On the hon. Lady's final point, I want to make it clear what I meant. I was not suggesting that the report had brought to my attention, or that of the Department, a problem that is severe and long-standing. When I was at City Hall in the London Assembly, I contributed to the London violence against women and girls strategy, back in 2008-09, so I have been involved in this area and been passionate about it for the entire time I have been in elected office.

What Sarah Everard's murder highlighted more generally to the public was something that I know women have known for a very long time: that the public realm is not safe enough; that their concerns are often not taken seriously enough; that there has been a dismissive attitude to non-contact sexual crimes; and that it takes far too long to bring domestic abusers to justice, too few of them are brought to justice, and women do not feel safe during the process. That has been raised by many people in the House. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who has made it clear that far, far more needs to be done, which many women already instinctively know.

That is the point that I am making about these tragic circumstances; we need to bring a greater and wider attention to this—a whole society attention. This is an issue about women and girls, but it is not an issue for women and girls. It has to be a whole society issue. I remain absolutely committed to ensuring that the specific recommendations of the report are responded to promptly, but, as my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), said, we are not waiting for the report to come out to take action; we have already taken action and we have already increased funding.

With regard to the Barnett consequentials, I will have to leave it to others to talk through the implications of that within the wider funding envelope of our support to Scotland as an integral part of the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): This comprehensive report reveals a truly appalling catalogue of what ultimately turned out to be fatal errors, incompetence and complacency, which were epitomised by a culture in parts of the Met police—it is important to say "parts"—where vile behaviour and deeply abusive language, as we would recognise it to be, constituted banter. Mark Rowley, when he came in, offered in response to open up more than 1,000 cases of previous scandal and conduct investigations to see whether they had been conducted properly. When the Home Affairs Committee went to see the standards committee at the Met, we were told that this would take some time and that we would see more of these cases coming out. Can the Home Secretary give us a progress report on what more instances we are likely to see in the public domain?

Can we also hear more about an issue that we have raised previously, which is where those reviews of standards are undertaken by other members of the police force. Surely there is a case for bringing in greater independence by using other agencies and institutions, such as the military, to help with these investigations, as they would approach this from a different standpoint, ensuring that it is not just a case of the police marking their own homework.

James Cleverly: The review that was initiated by my predecessor and worked through by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner is important. The commissioner has demonstrated an admirable commitment to reform. Having had conversations directly with him about this, I know that he takes these issues incredibly seriously. He wants to ensure that the Metropolitan police not only serve the capital and everybody in it, but are seen to serve them and that there is confidence in that.

I will of course consider my hon. Friend's final point. I sat on the Metropolitan Police Authority's professional standards committee from 2008, when I was first elected, until 2012. I saw the professionalism and alacrity with which the professional standards department of the Metropolitan police set about its work. There is a real anger directed at unprofessional officers by good officers. In my experience, the professional standards team takes its work incredibly seriously. The team wants to root out bad officers. Through the Criminal Justice Bill, we are giving chief constables more power to root out bad officers quickly, and I have committed to supporting them when they do so.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome today's statement. I hope that we will get a full response to the report from the Home Secretary very quickly. May I also associate myself with the comments of the Home Secretary and other right hon. and hon. Members today? Our thoughts are with the family and friends of Sarah Everard.

I wish to ask the Home Secretary again about this issue of indecent exposure, which is highlighted in the report and which he has talked about a little. In my constituency, we had the horrific case of Libby Squire, who was raped and murdered by a man who had been stalking women and roaming the streets of Hull for 18 months prior to murdering her. He had been exposing himself and committing acts of voyeurism. People did not report his actions, because they did not think that the police would take them seriously. Libby's mum, Lisa Squire, has been campaigning on this for the past few years. She has recently given evidence at a hearing of the Home Affairs Committee. I wondered whether the Home Secretary would meet her, because it would be interesting to know his view. What more can be done now to encourage people—women in particular—to come forward when such things happen to them? I would

also say that almost every woman I know has had this happen to them at some stage in their life. This problem is endemic.

James Cleverly: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for raising this point. I will of course seek to find an opportunity to meet the Squire family about this matter.

There needs to be a cycle of increased confidence. I hate some of the phraseology that has been applied, and I choose never to apply it about this issue, because there is the implication that these matters are less serious. But the sad truth is that, when we see reports of serious sexual violence, we can look back through the case history and often see plenty of examples of criminality leading up to that. Therefore we do absolutely need to take this seriously. Women who have been the victims of these kind of crimes—this kind of behaviour—need to feel confident about reporting them and they need to feel confident that their reports will be taken seriously. The more they see the police taking action, the more confident they will be in coming forward. Therefore, we need to develop a virtuous circle. We are not there yet; indeed, we know that we are a long way from that. We have seen this happen in the Couzens case. He was known to have committed these crimes, and that should have triggered a much more robust response. But it did not, and we must address why that was the case. We have to ensure that leadership and policing understand that, collectively, this House and the Home Office expect them to take this matter more seriously and send the signal that these crimes are not trivial and should not be ignored.

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

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I would like to associate myself with the remarks of others—my thoughts are also with the Everard family.

This report tells us that the environment did nothing—nothing—to discourage Couzens' misogynistic view of women. We know that not every flasher becomes a rapist, but we also know that every rapist starts somewhere. I respectfully say to my right hon. Friend that, of course, there have been good changes with regard to criminal justice and longer sentences for the most violent and the most serious offences, but that is too late. We have to intervene in the offending journey.

Last week, my Committee heard from Deputy Assistant Commissioner Stuart Cundy, a man who has taken on a really difficult job, overturning those stones in the Metropolitan police and turning up at 1,600 instances of officers with at least one allegation of a sexual offence or domestic violence—1,600. Can my right hon. Friend give us an assurance today that he will give more power to Stuart Cundy's elbow, so that we get rid of these individuals from our police service?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. When I talk about that cycle of confidence, women need to see that when these crimes are reported, they are investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice. Only then will they feel confident in coming forward. These are serious offences; they are not trivial. She is right to say that not everyone who is a flasher, not everyone who has made unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances to women, goes on to become a rapist or a murderer. None the less, the more people who are dissuaded from that behaviour because of swift and professional criminal justice, the more people we can prevent from getting to those later stages. That is why this is so important. That is why that cultural change needs to be driven through the whole system. A number of the Angiolini recommendations are for Departments other than the Home Office and for public bodies outside Government—all of us have to take this incredibly seriously. This is a whole of society approach, and that will remain the fundamental philosophy that I use to underpin the work of the Home Office in this area.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I associate myself with the comments for the Everard family and with Lady Elish Angiolini. Her report today is a continuation of her reports that have highlighted failures in our criminal justice system.

In the Home Secretary's statement, I noticed mention of funding for the National Police Chiefs' Council for the flagging of police officers in the vetting system. My own experience in the police service is that IT system improvements take a long time and are complex, so I suppose my first question for him is: what timescales do we have in mind for those improvements? Secondly, what engagement is happening with Police Scotland, because police officers transfer to forces in and outwith the UK? Finally, if today a serving police officer were found in a concerning situation that requires input into the intelligence system and they do not identify themselves as a police officer, are we confident that they would be dealt with accordingly?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady makes a number of points about the implementation of the changes that we are making. I cannot give precise timescales at the moment, because this piece of work is ongoing and recently initiated, but my desire is for these things to happen as quickly as possible. She is absolutely right that IT and systems changes are not instant, and I am impatient to get improvement, which is why I keep saying that we are not waiting for these things to go forward. They are amplifiers and accelerators of what should be a fundamental change that we are looking to drive through immediately. The earliest conversations that I had when appointed as Home Secretary were on this issue with the College of Policing and with Lady Elish herself. One of those first meetings I had on my appointment was with Lady Elish about this report and the work that we could do to get ahead of the findings that she has put forward.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. He will be clear that the overwhelming number of Metropolitan police officers are brave individuals who frequently put their life on the line to protect us all. That is key: such individuals want to see the bad apples rooted out and, indeed, never come into the police service in the first place. However, there are two aspects to the problems of the Metropolitan police: they are the one force in the country that failed to meet their recruitment targets in the past year; and the Mayor has yet to provide the funding from his budget to enable the cultural change that we need to see in the Metropolitan police. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have to ensure that standards do not slip

[Bob Blackman]

in recruitment—they should be enforced—and that the funding needs to be provided to change the culture of the Metropolitan police, as we would all like to see?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the fact that London's police and crime commissioner is the Mayor of London. He therefore has a duty to ensure that the police force over which he has political control changes, and changes in the way that has been highlighted through the inquiry and in the part 1 findings of the inquiry.

My hon. Friend is also absolutely right that even though many of the forces across the country are at the largest they have ever been in terms of numbers, that is sadly not true of the Metropolitan police, but there absolutely must be no sacrifice of quality of vetting in order to hit the recruitment targets that we have made it clear we expect the Metropolitan police to hit. We want the Metropolitan police to be a well recruited force, and the funding has been put on the table—it has not been fully utilised by the Mayor, but the funding has been put on the table—to enable the Met to be that. The force needs to be populated with good, professional officers. That is the bar, the minimum standard we expect. We expect all leadership, uniformed and political, to abide by that philosophy.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I put it on the record that my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), in whose constituency Sarah Everard lived and from where she was abducted, then murdered, is on an overseas visit with the Joint Committee on Human Rights and is very sorry not to be in the Chamber for this important statement.

Sarah Everard's abduction and murder had a profound impact on women across south London. Like so many young people, she had moved to London for work and made her home in our diverse community in Lambeth. She was one of us. But both before this appalling murder and afterwards, residents in south London and further afield who expressed concerns about police behaviour that was misogynistic, racist or homophobic were told repeatedly that this was just "a few bad apples", an offensive phrase that diminishes and denies people's experience and belies what have been shown to be structural, cultural and widespread problems in policing.

Will the Secretary of State, in the light of the report's findings, apologise to everyone whose experiences of unacceptable behaviour by police officers has been diminished and denied in that way? Had they been listened to when they reported their experiences, action could have been taken that might have prevented Sarah's appalling and tragic murder from taking place.

James Cleverly: As I said, from my first day in elected office, I have tried to drive cultural change and an increase in professionalism, first in the Metropolitan police and, in this job, in policing more widely. I will continue to do that for all the time that I have the power and authority to do so. There needs to be—there must be—fundamental change. We must create an environment where women and girls feel confident in, not fearful of policing. That will remain my focus. I assure the hon. Lady and the House that I remain committed to that.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I pay tribute to Lady Elish Angiolini for her thoughtful and considered report. The Home Affairs Committee took significant evidence on this issue, and her findings chime with what we heard about police standards and the culture within policing. It is worth saying that the vast majority of police officers join with good intentions, and they serve their communities well and with honour, and they serve the public well, but that core of rotten behaviour that she so well addresses in this report does exist. That is what we have to address, because at the heart of this issue is trust in policing.

We need to get back to a place where women trust police officers and where they trust that when they report things, those reports will be listened to. Does my right hon. Friend have confidence not just in what the Metropolitan police are doing, but in what forces around the country are doing—I have Cumbrian women who are concerned about their walks home at night—to look at the people in their forces and ensure that they root out bad behaviour and get the culture right?

James Cleverly: As I said in my response to the shadow Home Secretary, the simple truth is that there is no consistency across the country. Some forces deal with these issues better than others. We want to ensure that we increase the focus on such issues right across the country. The strategic policing requirement that I put forward is part of driving that attitudinal change right across the country. I demand that all police forces treat this as a priority issue, taking it as seriously as their work on counter-terrorism policing, for example, and that they learn from best practice, which is why I have spoken extensively with the College of Policing about the issue. Every woman everywhere in the country should have confidence in their police force.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I would like to send my love to Sarah Everard and to the families of the 340 women in this country who have been killed since the day she was killed.

The Home Secretary said that the strategic policing requirement is designed to make this issue as important as terrorism, but which police force in the country with a counter-terrorism unit has the same number of officers in that unit as it does specialists in violence against women and girls? Why did his Department spend £50 million last year on 6,700 Prevent referrals to prevent people from ending up in terrorism, but £18 million on 898,000 police reports of domestic abuse? We have 6,000 on one side and nearly 1 million on the other; the Home Office spends £18 million on DV perpetrators and £50 million diverting terrorism perpetrators, and says, "We are taking it just as seriously."

To say, "We are doing everything possible in flagging intelligence" is just not true. Currently, if someone is found by a family court in this country—a British court—to have raped their wife, raped one of their children or abused their children, no police force in the country would be entitled to that information when doing their vetting. Will the Home Secretary commit to ensuring that, if someone who wants to become a police officer or a social worker has been found by a British court to have committed rape or child abuse, that information will all be made completely and utterly available?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point about ensuring that offences are taken into consideration in vetting. That is part of the set of reforms that we will look at driving through. She makes a point about numbers of officers and budgets; I am not convinced that that is necessarily the most useful metric of the seriousness with which we take things. As I say, the strategic policing requirement makes clear my expectations. Ultimately, we continue to increase the financial support for the policing of these issues. I will continue, as I have committed to the House, to ensure that police officers of all ranks take this seriously, because without attitudinal change and a fundamental shift in philosophy, increased funding and changed processes —both of which are incredibly important; I absolutely agree with her on that—will not have the effect that she and I both desire.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement. Like many, I was shocked by the murder of Sarah Everard three years ago. I praise the dignity of her family. I worry for women walking home at night. I lost trust in the police then.

To follow on from the challenge by the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), surely if an investigation into a police officer is launched after allegations of domestic abuse or sexual assault, that officer should be suspended straightaway.

James Cleverly: I have worked with professional standards officers. Something like that, which might superficially seem obvious, is often more complicated. We have put forward changes in the thresholds that trigger a suspension. Of course, we expect investigating officers to move swiftly, as I said at the Dispatch Box on Second Reading of the Criminal Justice Bill. We want officers who are innocent to be vindicated quickly, and we want officers who are not to be removed from the force. That remains the philosophy that underpins our work on this.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement. Like many others, I pay tribute to the families of Sarah Everard and the many other women who have lost their lives to violence by men. I think about the events back in March 2021 and take people back to the vigil that was organised on Clapham common, which is covered by my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), who is not able to be here. Women wanted to come together to show solidarity. We all remember the scenes of Patsy Stevenson being handcuffed on the ground by two police officers.

The Home Secretary has spoken about women having the confidence to come forward and report. He also mentioned the Metropolitan Police Authority, of which he was one of the founding members. I served as a London Assembly member and sat on the police and crime committee, which saw reports about Met police officers' actions. Does he not agree that for those women to come forward, they need confidence in the police, and that requires suspending at the first hurdle any police officers who have acted inappropriately—no ifs, no buts?

James Cleverly: I respect the hon. Lady's experience on this issue. She will have heard the response that I gave to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith). There cannot be universality in this; responses have to be based on the facts of individual cases. Successful challenges would be highly likely if suspension decisions were not based on the individual circumstances of each case. However, we have made it clear that the threshold has historically been far too high. We have reviewed that threshold and made it quicker and easier for officers to be suspended. That goes hand in hand with the changes we are making, through the Criminal Justice Bill, to ensure that the disciplinary procedure operates more quickly so that officers who are found to have behaved appropriately are returned to duty quickly, and those who are found to have behaved inappropriately are sanctioned quickly. That is incredibly important.

The policing of the vigil for Sarah Everard was awful —it was awful. It took what was already an incredibly painful set of circumstances and made them worse. I have spoken to police officers who recognise that. I will continue to speak about leadership, because that is not a process point; it is a leadership point. It is about driving attitudinal change and a willingness to accept criticism from people who have felt victimised for far too long and are demanding a change in the attitude of police around the country. The response to those incredibly legitimate concerns, at a point of incredible sadness and tragedy, amplified what were already tragic circumstances. I will do everything I can to ensure that situations like that are never—never—repeated.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I, too, pay tribute to the family of Sarah Everard. In Newcastle and across the country, her vile murder led to an outpouring of grief and horror, but it did not, as the Home Secretary said, start a conversation about violence against women—*[Interruption.]* That is what he said. Rather, it showed that the voices, the pain and the fears of women were being ignored. He says that he takes violence against women seriously; his language and his actions need to reflect that. Will he speak specifically about recommendation 11 on information sharing between forces so that predators like Couzens cannot move from force to force? This is not an issue for the Met alone.

James Cleverly: As I said in response to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), my point about starting a national conversation is that there are people who should have been thinking about this matter but were not. The terrible circumstances of the murder of Sarah Everard triggered a conversation within the Home Office and in policing. My own experience long predated those terrible events.

We must recognise, as a number of Members from across the House have said, that something changed when Sarah was murdered. We must absolutely ensure that those terrible circumstances, which the inquiry demands that we see, are utilised to drive fundamental change. I commit to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) that I will continue to drive that change and prioritise violence against women and girls. It is a key priority, as I have communicated over and over again since the day I was appointed Home Secretary.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the report, but it beggars belief—it is shocking beyond comprehension—that we can have

[Andrew Gwynne]

serving police officers in this country who have been convicted of multiple counts of rape, kidnap, breaches of non-molestation orders and other serious offences. In his replies, the Home Secretary has said a number of times that this is not just an issue for women and girls. I would argue that it should not be an issue for women and girls: this is actually a man's problem. We need to really address male attitudes towards women and girls. There can be no place for misogyny, violence, warped views or predatory behaviour. This is a problem of certain sections of the male population, so what more are the Government doing to tackle those warped views of women and girls by men?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman is right. As I say, this is an issue that affects the lives of women, but it should not be thought of as a woman's issue—he is absolutely right that it is male perpetrators who need to change. I have always said that I do not want women to have to change their behaviour; I do not want women to have to be in segregated train carriages, or to not be able to go out at night. We should be talking about not curtailing the behaviour of women, but a fundamental change in male behaviour.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) raised a point that I failed to answer when replying to her, so I will take the opportunity to do so now, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. Information sharing between forces is absolutely key. We have seen that Couzens went from Kent to the Civil Nuclear Constabulary before coming to the Metropolitan police. While there were failures at various points, his vetting failure in Kent should have been flagged in other areas, particularly as he went on to very serious pieces of work with the Civil Nuclear Constabulary and then as a firearms officer in the Met. That vetting failure should have triggered much firmer action, and information sharing is a part of that.

I finish by repeating my point: the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) is absolutely right that this is about changing male behaviour, not women's behaviour.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Like others, my thoughts today are with Sarah Everard's family on what must be a very difficult day for them.

Lady Angiolini's report is damning, but one of the saddest things about it is that many of the things she mentions—reports not being taken seriously, officers not being properly trained, and failures of culture within police forces—simply reinforce the fears that many of us have for the safety of ourselves and our daughters on our streets. I welcome what the Secretary of State has said about the need for societal change and changes in men's behaviour. Does he agree that a vital step in making those changes would be recognising misogyny as a hate crime, and moving forward to ensure that women feel better protected by the law?

James Cleverly: What will drive raised confidence is women seeing that their issues are taken seriously during investigations, and improving the speed with which the police respond to those investigations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) made the point that non-contact sexual offences need to be taken seriously so that interventions can happen much earlier, before greater harm is perpetrated.

I know that there have been calls for misogyny to be made a hate crime. While I understand those calls, I am yet to be convinced that that would necessarily drive the change that we seek to drive. There are other direct things that we should do, and indeed are doing, to drive that change. We have increased the penalties for sexually related criminality, as I said in my statement; we are ensuring that rapists are not released at the two-thirds point; and we are ensuring that where convictions involve sadism and suchlike, people serve whole-life tariffs. We are making clear through the penalties for those crimes that we take them incredibly seriously, but it has to be ongoing work.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the response that the Home Secretary has just given to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), I suspect that his words will come as news to the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark). I just do not understand: we passed a law in this place last June, the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, which was designed explicitly to recognise where women are targeted on our streets and give them additional protections. The suffragettes taught us "Deeds not Words". That Act was not even mentioned by the Home Secretary; I am not surprised, since he is not the only one who does not value it.

As a London MP, I have written to the Met commissioner about this issue. The Met is refusing to recognise the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act. It says that it does not see that Act as part of tackling violence against women or tackling misogyny, as the Home Secretary seems not to. In doing so, it does not understand that women being targeted on our streets is misogyny, because it is happening to them. That is why they have no confidence. If the Home Secretary wants to rebuild that confidence, will he ask the Met to abide by the laws that this place has passed to protect women, and will he get on and implement that piece of legislation? All he needs to do is sign the statutory instrument. That is one good thing that could come out of today: if the Home Secretary recognises that women do not feel safe on our streets and that it is not their problem to fix, maybe he, as the man in charge, will do something about it.

James Cleverly: I recognise the frustration that the hon. Lady expresses, and I can only restate my personal commitment. With regard to the Metropolitan police's implementation of decisions made by this House, she should recognise that that is a decision for the political head of policing in London, the Labour Mayor of London. I am more than happy to take this matter up with him, if she has not already done so.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Dame Angiolini's finding that there is nothing to stop another Wayne Couzens operating in plain sight worries me, because he had been operating in plain sight since 2002. The Home Secretary has used many words today, which he will be held to: "systemic issues in policing", "trust in policing", "attitudinal change is needed", "change is needed". Actions speak louder than words, Home Secretary. The police vetting, standards and misconduct systems need

to be looked at now, so will he meet me to discuss the Police (Declaration) Bill, which I introduced as a ten-minute rule Bill only a few weeks ago, and how a register of memberships of secret societies should be publicly available? We need to rebuild trust in our police.

James Cleverly: I will ensure that either I or one of the Ministers in the Department gets the details of the points that the hon. Lady has brought forward.

I am more than happy to be held accountable for the words I have said at the Dispatch Box and the words I have said throughout my political career on this issue, because I am not going to lose focus on it. I can assure the hon. Lady and the House of that. As I have said, for the whole time that I have authority and jurisdiction over these areas, I will maintain this issue as a priority and demand that others—whether in uniform or out of uniform, operational police officers or those in the political leadership of police forces—take it as seriously as it should be taken. It is totally unacceptable that women and girls are not able to live their lives fully in our society because of fear, not only of criminality but of a lack of response from policing when these issues are brought to light.

Security of Elected Representatives

12.49 pm

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the security of elected representatives.

This House brings together our nation. People from every part of the United Kingdom and from every background are represented here to debate, to argue, to challenge and to find the best course for our country to take. That is the way it should be, because this House does not belong to any one community or interest group; it belongs to every citizen from every corner of the kingdom. The decisions we take affect not just the lives of our friends, our neighbours and our community, but every community, and every community's voice—even those we disagree with—must be properly represented. That principle is at the heart of who we are as a country and as a democracy. Our democracy works only if those who elect us are free to choose the individual they wish, and if that individual—the one they have chosen—has the freedom to say what they think.

In recent days, we have seen those principles waver, and the strain of rising community tensions is beginning to show. Instead of debate and accountability, we have seen intimidation and threats. Members of this House have told me that they feel they have to vote a certain way not because it is the right thing for their communities or even because the majority in their community wishes it, but because a few—a threatening few—have made their voices heard, and made them fear for their safety and the safety of their families. Even this House—the House that has persevered through fire and through war—has been pressured into changing the way we debate. We all understand why. The assassinations of our friends Jo Cox and Sir David Amess have affected us all. We know that there are extremists out there, and the truth is clear: the danger is real. We also know that bending to the threat of violence and intimidation is wrong. It does not just betray those who sent us; it encourages those who, through us, are bullying them.

Last Wednesday, demonstrators threatened to force Parliament to "lock its doors". What these thugs were actually asking us to do was to put our constituents second, and to bow to those who were shouting loudest. That is more than a threat to us. It is a threat to the very democratic principles and values that define who we are as a country. Let me be absolutely clear: they must fail. If we were to stumble or to succumb to these pressures, we would not just see this House diminished; our communities across the country would suffer. Some things are more important than any of us as individuals.

The pressures have always existed, but since the 7 October attacks on Israel, they have spiked, along with a dramatic rise in antisemitism, accompanied by demonstrations that have caused profound distress and fear in the Jewish community and beyond. We are seeing a darkness return to our streets.

British Muslims also face threats. Islamist extremists call other Muslims apostates unless they are willing to destroy the society that has given everyone, including the many expressions of Islam practised here today, the freedom to worship as they choose. Far-right extremists are joining them in claiming that Islam has no place in Britain. Both claim that Britain is a divided nation, not a United Kingdom. Both are wrong.

[Tom Tugendhat]

This Government reject that agenda of isolation and fear. We will ensure that all voices in our democracy are heard. We are ensuring that those who have been elected to serve their community are able to do so without fear. That is why we are committing an additional £31 million to protect the democratic process and our elected representatives. This funding will primarily support MPs, councillors, police and crime commissioners and Mayors. The Operation Bridger network, which already provides police support to MPs, will be expanded so that all elected representatives and candidates have a dedicated, named police officer to contact on security matters, where needed. Forces around the country will be able to draw on a new fund to deliver additional patrols, so they will be better able to respond to heightened community tensions. Working closely with Parliament and the police, we will provide access to private security for Members who face the highest risk.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Policing Minister and I met senior policing leaders to discuss these issues. Together, the Home Office, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the College of Policing, with input from the Crown Prosecution Service, have agreed a new defending democracy policing protocol. It contains seven key commitments to implement minimum standards of policing at events, to prevent intimidatory protest at homes, and to ensure protests at party offices, town halls, Parliaments or other democratic venues do not inhibit the democratic process. PCCs and chief constables have been asked to report back on the implementation of these measures by April.

Before I finish, may I pay tribute to our law enforcement and intelligence agencies, which keep us safe at all times? This additional funding will help them support us in undertaking our democratic duty.

I take the safety and security of all Members of this House extremely seriously, as I know do you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker. The truth is that there are some things that transcend political dividing lines. There are principles that are so fundamental—so sacred, even—that we must all of us guard them against all threats, regardless of party allegiance. Defending our democracy is at the core of who we are as a nation. It is the living expression of the concepts of freedom of thought and freedom of speech. As we legislate and debate, as we argue and criticise, we must be robust. We must continue to test ideas and each other to serve the British people best. We must challenge each other, and remember that this is not just about us. We are only the temporary guardians of liberties that we have inherited. Today, it is our turn to defend them. This is our watch, and it is for us to rise above the fray and to say, with total clarity, that we will not be cowed, we will not be silenced and we will not be bullied. The people we are privileged to represent deserve nothing less. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.58 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it. I join him in expressing our gratitude to all those who work to keep us safe. Our democracy is strong, but we can never stand for threats or attempts to intimidate. We cannot and will not allow a minority to pose security threats, or allow racial hatred to ever go unchallenged or to undermine our democracy.

Let me say to the Minister at the outset that we welcome the £31 million of additional funding. We recognise the extremely difficult situation faced by Members of this House, with all of us the target of intimidation and threats of violence, especially women. We must not forget that that targeting also extends to local councillors, Mayors, police and crime commissioners, Members of a devolved Parliament and an Assembly, and of course candidates. Nobody in this House needs any reminding of the terrible price we have paid in recent years and the loss of much-loved colleagues. We must ensure that this additional resource is focused in the right place and at the right time, and that long-term arrangements are in place to provide those who step forward to serve as elected representatives and their families with the reassurance they deserve to do their vital work without fear or favour.

Those arrangements must also ensure that others are not dissuaded from stepping forward to serve, because the threat is undermining the core principles of our representative democracy. Our country must return to a state of affairs where the only fear that politicians ever feel is from the ballot box. Although we absolutely respect the fundamental freedom to legitimate peaceful protest—it is a core democratic right—if that freedom is used to intimidate, harass or harm MPs and other representatives, including outside their home, safeguards must be put in place to protect them and our wider democratic system.

Such protective measures are now essential, but we also need to look at the underlying causes. What is it about our society that has changed that allows some to think that they can intimidate and threaten MPs and other elected representatives with impunity? What are the roots of this poison? It is hard not to see a connection between the increasingly polarised and acrimonious debate that has flourished online, particularly on social media, and the greater threat of physical harm in the real world. We also need to focus on the deeper roots of division that fuel this danger, not least by exercising good judgment in what we say. Words have consequences.

I would be grateful if the Minister answered a few questions. Is the £31 million a one-off uplift, or will it be made available on a recurring basis? How does that relate to Scotland and Northern Ireland? In this general election year, all Members standing for re-election will become candidates again for the short campaign. Can he give an assurance that all who need additional protection will continue to get it? Will he also give an assurance that work is under way to ensure that Operation Bridger is configured and resourced to provide appropriate support locally, not least to our councillors?

Recent protests, alongside threats to and intimidation of politicians, have also raised the issue of what is defined as hateful extremism. The Government have not yet brought forward a definition, but that would be helpful in countering threats and intimidation. Can the Minister say when the Government or the Levelling Up Secretary will bring forward a definition, and outline when the Government will bring forward an updated counter-extremism strategy?

The defending democracy taskforce set up by the Security Minister in November 2022 is an important operational mechanism for co-ordinating activity across Government to protect and bolster our democratic system and institutions. Given the proximity to the general election, perhaps now is the time to look at how we can bring this work together on a cross-party basis. We all have a shared interest in ensuring that elections can be contested in a way that not just defends but strengthens our democracy.

Protecting our democracy and those who serve as elected representatives is mission critical. We must ensure that all who step forward to serve as democratically elected politicians are properly protected, and that the sovereignty of our democratic processes are not undermined. We on this side of the House will work with the Minister and the Government to do everything we can to make sure that is the case.

Tom Tugendhat: May I say how pleased I am to be working with my very good friend the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who I have known for a lot longer than either of us has been in this place? The questions he asks are important, and the tone in which he approaches this subject is even more so, and I am hugely grateful for the spirit of co-operation with which he has approached not just today's statement but the work he has put in before today, and indeed with which the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) approached it before him.

Turning to the questions, the £31 million is this year's allocation, but there are consequences that will flow into other years. I will not give the hon. Gentleman a figure because that is variable; as he will appreciate, we are almost through the current financial year, and the consequences will depend on what is drawn down and what is required.

The hon. Gentleman's question about Scotland and Northern Ireland is of course entirely valid. Let me be clear: the security of the democratic process in the United Kingdom is not a devolved matter; it is down to this Government, and it is my responsibility and this Government's responsibility to make sure that elections in the United Kingdom are free and fair. Of course, we must have a huge amount of co-operation with other Parliaments and Governments inside the United Kingdom; with, in some cases, returning officers and councils; and with Ministers in Holyrood—and Stormont, now that it has, thank God, returned to operating. This area is a sovereign responsibility, for the simple reason that it is about the national security of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point about parliamentary candidates. He is right that when the election is called, there will be no more MPs, and any rights and privileges that we enjoy as Members of this House will immediately cease. The Government are looking at ways of maintaining the security requirements necessary to ensure that those who wish to stand as candidates again can do so, free from fear and from the threat of violence.

The hon. Gentleman's question about counter-extremism is important, and I would like first to pay tribute to William Shawcross for his work on updating the Prevent review, and to Robin Simcox, whose work on the counter-extremism strategy has been so important. This is about countering extremism in many different forms. I mentioned that we must be clear that Islamist violence and threats are primarily a threat to the Muslim community in the United Kingdom. The number of friends of mine in the Muslim community whom some have tried to silence, because my friends' version of Islam does not tie in with that of thugs and loudmouths who claim to speak on behalf of others, is remarkable. We must champion all voices in this country, and that includes all Muslim voices—there isn't a single one; there are many. As for the definition, there is an existing definition, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, and work is ongoing to see how that could or should be updated. I am afraid that I do not have an update for him now, but I will certainly bring one forward as soon as I have it.

As for the cross-party nature of the defending democracy taskforce, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I am looking at it now, although I think he will be the first to admit that the work has been very cross-party to date.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It has been an honour to listen both to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and my right hon. Friend the Minister. I stand with three shields behind me: one for Airey Neave, assassinated in 1979; one for Robert Bradford, killed in his constituency surgery; and one for Ian Gow, who was blown up a week after the IRA killed Sister Catherine Dunne, a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy, by mistake, and they thought, rightly, that by killing Ian Gow they would wipe that atrocity off the news. There are also other shields behind the Speaker's Chair.

On average, one MP is killed every seven years. We are not the only ones exposed to risk; there is also the psychiatric social worker, the emergency blue-light responder, people fishing at sea, those working in a permanent way on the railways, and the like—so we should not think that we are the only people who need to have our safety looked at.

I hope the police will understand that those who need the most protection should get the most protection, and those of us who are not at much risk should not get too much money or attention given to us. There should be a risk-based analysis, so more is given to those who often speak up bravely, or those who, often because they are women or from ethnic minorities, get more attention from the thugs and extremists than is given to someone like me. Our constituents will understand, too, that candidates standing for election with us, who get the same attention as us, should get the same kind of protection as us.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the Father of the House for his kind words. He is absolutely right. I remember hearing as a child about the murder of Airey Neave, and it marked me then, and it marks me now, that somebody with such a record of service to our country during the second world war, when he escaped from Colditz, and who shaped one of our great political parties, had their life ended by the brutality and violence of a small group of murderous individuals whose agenda was not even shared by the majority in their own community, let alone the majority in the country. That

[Tom Tugendhat]

is one of the most striking examples of anti-democratic forces in our country winning; they silenced a hero who had served our country for many decades. I appreciate very much my hon. Friend's comments.

I hope right hon. and hon. Members will forgive me, but I will not go into the details of for whom and how security allocations will be made. If Members require a private briefing on how that is achieved, I am sure that I can arrange something, but the reality is that we will focus on those most at risk, to ensure that those who have credible threats against them are supported. My hon. Friend the Father of the House highlighted sad cases. A colleague of ours who has a seat in this House—I hope she will be returned at the next election—has to wear a stab vest to constituency surgeries. She is threatened by a nationalist movement in her seat. Supporters of hers have been silenced by threats of violence and intimidation. She rightly raised with me this morning the issue of hustings; her opponents will call her any number of names if she fails to attend them. The reality is that the threats against her are credible and real. We are working with the police to make sure that they are mitigated, so that she can carry out her responsibilities, not just to herself, but to constituents who may or may not wish to send her here. We must give them the chance to choose, and not allow a few threatening individuals to prevent her electors having that choice.

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

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. When David Amess was murdered, one of the hardest things I have ever had to do was explain it to my children before they saw it on the news, or before one of their friends spoke to them about it. They were too young when Jo Cox was murdered for me to have that conversation with them. It is the reality of life that this sits on our shoulders as MPs. Last time I had to give a statement to the police about somebody's behaviour, I asked to do it at the police station, rather than my house, so that my children would not be aware that I was giving a statement to the police.

The Minister talks about the importance of democratic representation, and it is important. So are the measures that he has put in place, but it is also important to realise that some people do not stand for Parliament because of the fear. They do not even get to the point of being candidates, because they are so scared about the risk, not just of serious threats or death, but of the abuse that people receive as a result of being involved in the democratic processes.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. One is about the assessment of the number and severity of threats to MPs from far-right extremists, versus Islamic extremists. One of my colleagues asked me to raise that with him. If the Minister has any information on the numbers, that would be helpful. I welcome the focus on candidates and councillors, and I appreciate his comments on policing of this issue being reserved, but if he expects Police Scotland to carry out some of this work, there needs to be funding for that. How he intends to ensure that there is—whether through the Scottish Parliament or not—is clearly for him, but can he give some reassurance that the forces expected to carry out that work will be funded appropriately, either from the centre or from the devolved Parliaments?

Tom Tugendhat: May I likewise thank the hon. Lady for the approach that she and many Members of her party have taken? She is right about Police Scotland funding. Any extra requirements, and the Op Bridger network, which applies, as she knows, across the whole United Kingdom, will be funded centrally to ensure that Members of this House get the same support. Police Scotland will have access to the same funding as other forces across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right about candidates. The message has to be clear from us. We have seen a level of threats of violence towards Members of this House and elected individuals, including various Mayors, across the United Kingdom in recent years, but this job is still a huge privilege. We need to put it clearly: many of us realise the privilege of serving our constituents, and having our voices heard here and, as a result, around the world. That is a huge privilege and a rare honour for anyone to achieve, and it is worth striving for. It is one of the best ways that any of us, whatever our opinions, can serve our communities and help to make this country and, I hope, our world a better place. It is true that there are threats, and we are organising, as the hon. Lady recognises, extremely carefully to mitigate and reduce them, so that anybody can stand for election free from fear. I urge people who feel that they have something to offer our country to put themselves forward, to test their ideas in debate and at election, and to come and serve our country here on the green Benches.

On the hon. Lady's question about balance, if she will forgive me, I will not go into the details, but I can assure her that I am not particularly bothered whether someone's fascism comes from some weird form of nationalist extremism, or religious extremism, or political extremism of any kind—I don't really care. If you threaten Members of this House, threaten democracy and threaten the British people, we will go after you. We will get you, and you will be detained.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is about defending democracy, but I am very concerned when we start talking about risk. The shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) spoke about having to have the right protections in the right place at the right time. We know that women, people of colour and LGBTQ Members will be at most risk, but none of us could have predicted that a man who was most famous for campaigning to make Southend a city, and Jo Cox, who spoke in her maiden speech about our having more in common, would be the individuals targeted. I urge some caution, particularly when it comes to hustings and to the involvement of weird conspiracy theorists in politics who openly incite division, whether out on the street, in our constituency surgeries or in this House. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] We need to make sure that we have protections against them as well. There is the question.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend has made her point extremely clear, and it is one I would support.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I echo the comments of the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes)? I do not think this is a partisan issue, and it is important to recognise that in the culture we now have, it is not about the issues either. The Minister talked about recent events, but many of us have been living with this problem for years, particularly my colleagues who are women of colour.

May I ask the Minister two specific questions, which I ask as somebody who does not want to live in a gilded cage? I want to go out and debate with people. I enjoy robust discussion, as he knows. I enjoy talking to my constituents, and I do not want to be asked to have a travel plan to go to my local park or my local pub or to be cut off from the people I am privileged to serve. At the moment, the approach we are taking suggests that it is all about the individual. I was told by the police that because I was a Back Bencher, my family were not covered, yet my family have been persistently targeted by people trying to intimidate me, from both left and right. Can he clarify whether there will be an understanding in the protection offered about our families in the analysis of risk? Many of the people being put off are not people who look like the people here.

Secondly, the Minister knows I am concerned about 527 groups—the organisations that often promote violence and hatred and incite campaigning which are not registered as charities and perhaps not abiding by the laws on imprints that many of us would recognise, yet increasingly part of British politics. Many of us have been warning for several years about these organisations. Will he now take that threat seriously, because it is undermining democracy?

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the hon. Lady. May I be clear that her family, if threatened, are covered? There is no question about that. The programme is based on the threats faced, not what position the hon. Lady may or may not hold in her own party; that is not one of the considerations.

May I also be clear that this £31 million is additional? It does not replace or undermine the work already ongoing in various ways. The hon. Lady will understand that all of us—every citizen of the United Kingdom—are covered by security infrastructure that includes everything from cyber-protection to intelligence agencies and staff who are helping us to stay safe. Many of the actions taken will come from warnings or investigations that have nothing to do with the area that I have just covered. What I was just talking about was the additional security requirements for protecting our democracy from today's threats. As to her point about 527 groups, I am aware of that—she has raised it with me—and I take it very seriously.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. He has made it clear that this is not only about security and policing and that we need to look for new ways to tackle what is fuelling anti-democratic abuse, which many hon. and right hon. Members are facing in their day-to-day work. Too often, that culture is developing online. Will he consider my call for a Committee of this House to monitor the effectiveness of the Online Safety Act 2023 and to make recommendations to Government on ways that we can tackle this issue and many others that start online? Surely we need to tackle that cultural change as well as the important issues that he has raised.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend has raised many interesting points about the Online Safety Act over recent months, and indeed years. As it has just passed and is only beginning to come into force, I hope she will forgive me for not making any commitments immediately. However, her points are certainly important, and I will look at them.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. If I heard correctly, he said that the Government have not quite got a definition of anti-Muslim hate. I wonder if that could urgently be rectified. The post of independent adviser on Islamophobia has been vacant for over a year, but the Government are in desperate need of one.

I thank hon. Members for acknowledging the hate crime against women of colour. May I just mention my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), who has had an obscene amount of hate levelled at her, and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), the first hijab-wearing MP? The abuse they have faced is terrible.

MI5 and the Intelligence and Security Committee have stated that extreme right-wing terrorism is sadly here to stay, with the threat fuelled in part by racism. MI5 has said that teenagers as young as 13 are joining in extremist activity, often online. Last week, the Minister in the other place revealed that the Government are

"not intending to publish a hate crime strategy"—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 21 February 2024; Vol. 836, c. 599.]

despite the last one being four years out of date. With the Community Security Trust report stating that there has been a rise in antisemitic abuse and a 300% rise in Islamophobia, why are the Government abandoning their work on hate crime?

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the hon. Lady for the question. We are not abandoning our work on hate crime. May I just cover some of those issues in order?

First, I was talking about a definition of extremism, not of anti-Muslim hate, in response to the question from the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). The Government are absolutely clear that racism in all its forms, including anti-Muslim hatred, is absolutely wrong, and there is no question about that. The only area of discussion has to be about how we deal with it, not whether we recognise it. We do recognise it.

As the hon. Lady recognises, hate crime in this country is sadly rising, and there are individuals who have faced the force of that from various different areas. Very sadly, many in the Muslim community, as she is aware, feel that hatred not from outside the community but from within it—from those who are trying to preach an extremist message of Islam that is not accepted within the Muslim community, let alone in other parts of the country.

We must be absolutely clear that this country protects someone's status for who they are and not for what they happen to believe. There is freedom of belief and freedom of religious expression, which also means the freedom not to believe or to believe differently from one's family or community. Those things are also protected.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am grateful for the support that I have had from Police Scotland, and it is a matter of

[David Mundell]

considerable regret to me that officers have had to attend my recent surgeries, as well as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). I am conscious that the last time I spoke in Parliament on policing issues was to highlight the lack of police in the south of Scotland, where they operate with minimum numbers. My concern is that the police attending demonstrations and the events I am involved in are displaced from attending and supporting the constituents for whom I am here to speak. I fully agree with everything the Minister said, but will he assure us that the deployment of resources to protect us and protect democracy does not displace resources from protecting our constituents, the very people we are here to serve?

Tom Tugendhat: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. It will surprise nobody in the House that he quite correctly raised the fact that we must not put ourselves above our constituents. That is not what the statement is about. We are making sure that our constituents' voices are defended and that their values, their expressions and the choices they make are able to stand. That is all we are doing. He is absolutely right that we would not take away from the protection of our wider society to protect those elected to serve it—what we are doing is part of the same thing.

As my right hon. Friend knows, we are also increasing police numbers. Sadly, in Scotland, that has not yet followed.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the letter he sent to Members. I have been grateful to get clarity from the Dispatch Box in relation to myself as a Scottish MP. It would be nice to get a letter sent to all Scottish MPs that appreciates the complexity, because the seven points of the defending democracy protocol continually mention England and Wales, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing. I am sure that all the required engagement and connections are in place, but such a letter would give us an increased degree of confidence.

My questions are on two things. The Minister said he was looking at what can be provided during the election period, when we are no longer MPs. From a risk assessment perspective, my ask is that social media monitoring continues—I hope that would be one of the more cost-effective measures—so that we can see risks that we were not expecting.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), I do not want to live in a gilded cage either. I also associate myself with the remarks made by the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer): we need to ensure that we are not preventing MPs from being close to their constituents while tackling the root problems. I would be grateful for the Minister giving us an update on that.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the hon. Lady for the feedback on that letter. I will ensure that that clarity is given. This statement absolutely applies to whole of the United Kingdom, as I have said, but I will ensure that I clarify that. Social media monitoring will not end at the election. Indeed, it is provided not just by the House, but, as the hon. Lady knows, by other elements of the Government. As to the wider challenges, this is an area where we are continuing to work. I would appreciate—this is an unusual and perhaps reckless thing to say at the Dispatch Box—feedback from all Members on the effect they see of these policies operating in their constituencies.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): If the security services are advising that this £30 million is needed, I welcome that if it keeps our Members safe. The Minister has referred to the national demonstrations. May I say, as someone who has had to learn lessons over the years about the nature of statements I have made, that we must be careful about how we use words in relation to those demonstrations? I have been on virtually every one of them, and, just as the police reported to the Home Affairs Committee, they have been overwhelmingly peaceful. The people I have walked with are members of the Jewish community. Where signs—they have been appalling—have been identified, the police, working with the stewards of those demonstrations, have dealt with them effectively and, yes, prosecuted people. I am pleased with that. We must be careful in our language, because I would not want distorted language to lead to conclusions such as that we should restrict the right to protests. We should be proud of the people of our country because, as a result of their concerns about human suffering, they have come out on to the streets in such large numbers to urge that that suffering is ended.

Tom Tugendhat: I am enormously proud of the British people. I have always been proud to be British and I will remain so until the day I die. This is the most remarkable country. My grandfather came here just over 100 years ago as a student. His family followed, fleeing the persecution and murder that sadly engulfed Europe for those horrific years of fascism. This country has given protection, security and safety not just to me but to millions like me. Not only has it enabled us to prosper and thrive, but it has afforded me the huge honour of representing the community that I love, and has allowed me to speak on behalf of His Majesty as his Minister here at the Dispatch Box. This is an amazing country, and I am deeply proud to serve it.

Let me touch on some of those protests. I was very measured in my language, and I was careful in the way that I put it because many good people protest on every side of every debate. There are always people who rightly raise concerns about aspects of foreign policy over which we may or may not have influence. Many of us have raised personal concerns about the horrific treatment of over 100 hostages who are still held, even now, in tunnels by a terrorist group who murdered their families in a surprise attack 120 or 150 days ago. Many of us have showed our horror at that. Others, sadly, have chosen to march with some who have shown signs of hate and racism. Others have chosen to stay silent when they have seen those signs. Others, completely by chance, find themselves photographed in front of signs of the deepest, most hateful antisemitism that we have seen on our streets since the Cable Street marches of almost a century ago. Is it not a strange quirk of fate how the same people are accidentally photographed in front of the same signs on a regular basis? What poor, poor luck they must have.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement which, rightly, looks at the security of elected representatives. He referred to hustings; in practice, how does he feel that would work? Thinking back to my election in 2019, there were nine hustings in my constituency alone. I managed to go to eight; I was nearly keeling over by the ninth. They will be happening right across the country, and rightly so, because our constituents must be able to come to us and ask what our policies are.

I also want to mention the staff members who support us. None of us would do our jobs as elected representatives —including councillors, elected Mayors and MPs—without the support of our staff. Will there be any support for staff members?

Tom Tugendhat: I am sure that no one in this House would judge the hon. Lady for missing one hustings out of nine. We are all in the process of training and strengthening up to get ready for whatever comes. She is absolutely right about staff members. Many of them will be affected in different ways. She will understand that I will not prescribe a single policy for hustings or for staff members because her seat—wonderful as it is—is not the same as mine or those of other hon. Members. Everyone's seat is different and everyone's staff work in differently ways, quite rightly, to serve their communities. It would not be right for me to prescribe that. However, the funding is available to the police—for her, it is the Metropolitan police—in order to support her in whatever way is most appropriate. It will require some judgment and perhaps some wider information and additional support. If changes are required, I would be grateful if she could let me know.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I served on the House of Commons Commission for three years, with you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that the security of Members of Parliament is essential for this House. Last week, precedent and convention were turned on their head, because concerns were expressed about the safety of some Members. There was a real sense that because we did that, mob rule has somehow prevailed. If that is the case, it will only encourage those who seek to disrupt our proceedings. Can the Minister assure me and the rest of the House that, although security of Members is essential and paramount, we will never again change the democratic practices of this House to satisfy the concerns and demands of a mob?

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. They remind me of those famous words of Speaker Lenthall: "I have neither eyes to see nor voice to speak, save that as given to me by this House", in answer to King Charles—an earlier, less beloved sovereign of this Kingdom. When he spoke, he was rightly rejecting all force except that of the sovereignty of the British people, who have chosen their representation here, to have any voice in this place. In rejecting that outside force, he was rejecting the King. Now, thank God, we have a wonderful King whose voice is only munificence and light. We need to reject the mob. It is an outside power and it is unacceptable that it should have a voice in here. That silences the legitimate voice of our constituents and our country, and it must never be tolerated.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I have not spoken about my own personal security before, and I hope it will become apparent to the Minister why I need to do so today. I have been subject to serious threats, including death threats. I have been offered police support and protection. At one stage, we had to ensure that our teenage daughter was physically escorted to and from sixth form college, and she was not allowed off campus at break times. I have one live police investigation into harassment, one pending Crown court case into death threats, and I have physical security at my house, some of which I really did not want.

The security of MPs and their families is a serious matter, and it is not appropriate for it to become a political football. The Minister will therefore understand, I hope, my gut-wrenching anxiety and dismay when Tameside Conservative Councillor Liam Billington sought to politicise the physical measures at my house. Indeed, that was amplified by his Tory party chairman on social media. That is not acceptable. I hope that it does not happen to any other Member of this House.

Tom Tugendhat: Let me be very clear. Security for a Member, whether at home, police protection or whatever it happens to be, is not a luxury or a benefit. It is a burden and an intrusion into their personal life that is essential for the conduct of our democracy in our country. It is not something that any of us would choose—I certainly would not. It is deeply disturbing that anyone's children should be targeted or threatened, and I hope the whole House will be clear and speak as one that no one should ever be criticised for having security and protection. I am sure that others outside will have heard that.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): MPs must be safe to express their views. As we have heard from hon. Members on both sides, they face real threats, intimidation and abuse. That must be condemned at all times. But at a time of heightened tension, the Prime Minister's talk of mob rule and some of the Minister's comments today in relation to legitimate, peaceful protests, dangerously distort those events for political reasons, and detract from real risks. This morning, the Met's former chief superintendent, Dal Babu, made similar comments when he challenged unhelpful language, saying that there is a level of frustration, but we are in a democracy and the overwhelming majority of people at protests are peaceful. Do we not have a duty, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, to speak very carefully, address real concerns and not abuse events in that way? We must protect MPs, but we must also ensure that the public's right to peaceful protest is protected.

Tom Tugendhat: I am slightly surprised by the hon. Lady's comments. My prime duty to this House, and to those who elected me to serve them here, is to be honest. There is no point in lying to them or deceiving you, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is absolutely no point in spreading untruths, leading to an outcome that would not serve us well. All I have done today is speak truthfully about the nature of the protests we have seen and repeat the words of some of those who organised those protests: that they would have us lock our doors, that they would close this Parliament, that they would silence our voices and that they would end our democratic processes. That is what they are advocating. If she does not like the truth, maybe she should stop supporting them.

Backbench Business

International Women's Day: Language in Politics

1.41 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of language in politics in light of International Women's Day; agrees that the respectful use of language is an important feature of a strong and inclusive democracy; and calls on all parliamentary candidates to pledge that respectful language will be used at all times in the upcoming General Election campaigning period.

I would like to start the debate, on behalf of members of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, by saying thank you. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, which we should never take for granted given the pressure to hold debates in the Chamber, and I thank the Fawcett Society, which provides the secretariat to the APPG. Like all APPGs, ours is open to all Members and is cross-party. There is more that unites us than divides us when it comes to women in politics and particularly to women who stand for elected office.

Let us start the debate to mark International Women's Day, which I have to remember is a national holiday around Europe, by celebrating the women who make our communities great. Like everybody else I have a long list I could recite, but I would just like to highlight Dr Avideah Nejad, a consultant gynaecologist at Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, who took the time last Friday, along with Dr Dominic Kelly, to speak to students at my local sixth-form college about our brand new hospital and the work she does to inspire another generation of young people to take up medicine. We need more people like that in our communities.

The APPG want this debate to be more than a celebration. We want to continue our work to ensure that the amazing women on these Benches and in our communities see elected office as a way they can contribute to the future of our country. Women are now more likely than their male counterparts to come out of the best universities with the best degrees. They make up the majority of solicitors and the majority of students studying medicine, so why has the House of Commons not seen the same leaps as other sectors when it comes to attracting women into our midst? There are still two men elected to this place for every one woman. There are many reasons for that and I remind colleagues of the excellent research the APPG launched in September, but today's debate invites us to focus on one element.

At the moment, as we heard in the statements today, too many women reject the idea of standing for election because of the abuse they face, in particular the abusive language used on social media. Abuse affects all of us, but it is disproportionately aimed at women and is more likely to put women off from standing for election. That is not to say that abusive language is acceptable to anyone. There is far more that online media platforms could and should be doing to stop online bullying and abuse among all their users, but the evidence is that it disproportionately negatively impacts women. That poses a huge risk to the retention of women in this place and, in turn, to democratic representation.

Over nine in 10 women MPs who took part in the research reported that online abuse or harassment negatively impacts how they feel about being an MP, compared with seven in 10 men—still not a great figure. Similarly, all the black and minoritised MPs who took part in the survey reported that they were negatively impacted by online abuse. The nature of the abuse was described as misogynistic and racist, with it taking a considerable toll not only on them but their families.

Lots has been done to recognise the problem. I pay particular tribute to Mr Speaker and his team in Parliament for the work they do in monitoring and acting on online abuse against Members, and ensuring increased levels of support are in place, as we heard in the statement by the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) a few moments ago, so that MPs have support to live their day-to-day lives as they want to, and not in an isolated ivory tower. Abusive and threatening language is spilling over into real-life behaviour. This is something I and others raised in the debates on the Online Safety Bill.

Politicians are not delicate flowers, but there can be few people who would be unaffected by having two work colleagues murdered in the last eight years. David and Jo were just going about their work as constituency MPs. We have seen the shift to protesters feeling a legitimate right to camp outside MPs' homes, and maybe not just outside, and to attempt to intimidate MPs through their children, partners, husbands or wives—something I have experienced myself. The additional security is essential, but it will not solve the problem. We have to challenge and change the culture of online abuse, and the online abuse that is now spilling offline, too.

Free speech and its protection is often cited as a reason why we should not be regulating the online environment. Free speech is a crucial part of our democracy. The passing of the Online Safety Act 2023 into law demonstrates that the Government understand there is a line to tread between free speech and protections. But free speech is not the only thing we must safeguard. Speaking freely is just as important. Too many women in particular fear organised attacks if they speak up and speak freely on the issues that matter to them. In research, three quarters of women MPs said they do not speak up on certain issues because of the abusive environment online. The same goes for men; the numbers who are impacted are much smaller—around half—but that is still something we should be concerned about. The ability of this place to speak freely is being curtailed.

There is another aspect to this. Parliamentary privilege and the parliamentary language we use in this place means we have an obligation to choose our words carefully. People who watch our debates note that every time. But are we as careful outside the Chamber? Is political campaigning being shaped to fit the medium of social media: polarised, binary, simplistic, and chasing the algorithm first and foremost at the expense of nuanced debate? There are serious implications for our democracy if we allow our politics to be shaped by—I am afraid—a mob mentality that can thrive in the online world. The Online Safety Act can only be the start. I reiterate my call, which I mentioned in earlier proceedings, for a Select Committee for online safety to keep the issue under constant review.

In advance of the debate, I received a note from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who is contacted by thousands of members of the public every

year with their views on parliamentary standards. The language we choose to use matters in maintaining a culture of respect in political debate. Robust debate is not the same as personal intimidation and abuse. Is referring to your opponent as "scum" part of free speech and a robust debate, or is it abusive political campaigning? We all need to think carefully about that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The right hon. Lady has mentioned online platforms and a form of responsibility, but does she believe that Parliament itself should take more responsibility for the barriers that women are facing, or citing as their reasons for not entering Parliament, and for the language that we use here? What might that responsibility look like?

Dame Maria Miller: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and for her support for the all-party parliamentary group. Trying to make this a place that people want to come to should be a cross-party effort, along with tackling social media abuse and not only holding online platforms to account, but ensuring that they take down abusive images and messages inciting violence against Members of Parliament. That should be done much more quickly than it has been in the experience of many Members. There is so much more, over and above social media, that we need to change if we want more women to be willing to come here. Although half the population of our country is female, very few women want to stand for election, for reasons including some that I have mentioned.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This debate is important for a number of reasons. The language that we use in everyday life can be very careless, and is becoming increasingly so in this place. I wonder whether the right hon. Lady worries, as I do, about the fact that during the current Parliament in particular there has been more focus on parliamentarians' behaviour, and while some of it has to be called out, there have been occasions when an issue has been raised and then—if I may use a football phrase—Members have tackled the player rather than the ball: it has been about the person rather than the issue. Should we not be much more aware of not just the language that we use but how we direct that language? Should we not maintain a direction towards issues rather than people?

Dame Maria Miller: The hon. Lady is entirely right. In fact, I had included that analogy in my speech, but I took it out for the sake of time. I see that you are looking at me intently, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I know that a great many Members want to take part in the debate.

As the hon. Lady says, there is a discussion to be had about language versus behaviour. We have tools such as a code of conduct and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, but not all of them enable us to examine everything we do as Members of Parliament. Perhaps it is time for us to look at the language that Members use outside as well as inside the Chamber.

It is our job to identify problems and then find the solutions. As well as calling again for the monitoring of the effectiveness of the online safety laws, today I am pleased to be launching, along with colleagues in the all-party parliamentary group, a women in Parliament pledge, which all MPs and candidates can support, to take a zero-tolerance approach to misogyny, including racist misogyny, and all other forms of hate and discrimination in campaigning and in conduct. Back Benchers are taking this initiative to drive a change in culture, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will sign up to it. Our APPG is also calling on the Electoral Commission to make a public statement that homes are not a campaign destination, and calling on social media platforms to take immediate action on reported hate and misogynistic content and malinformation, misinformation and disinformation.

We, as elected Members, must act to defend our democracy and our democratic values. To mark International Women's Day in 2024 we can show that we, too, accept our personal responsibility to lead that positive culture change—online and offline—in the words that we choose and the way in which we campaign, and I call on Back Benchers, Ministers and party leaders to join us. It is the responsibility of us all to safeguard our democracy, and the best way we can do that is by ensuring that we have a representative Parliament, welcoming everyone to be part of a respectful debate.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Perhaps I should explain how we need to proceed this afternoon. About 20 Back Benchers all together wish to speak in this afternoon's two debates, and about an hour of the available time will be taken up by the Front-Bench speakers in the next debate. I therefore urge Members to try to speak for six or seven minutes, which will guarantee fairness.

1.53 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I rise, as I do at this time of the year, to remember the women killed by men in the last year. This is the ninth year that I have read out the names of women murdered by men. I did it originally in partnership with Karen Ingala Smith, because we were desperate to highlight the patterns of these killings; the epidemic of men's violence against women and girls has not abated.

I pay credit to Karen, who scours the pages of local papers trying to find the details in each case. I think that, in the last nine years, this act of memorial has raised the profile of killed women. Today we are more likely to see such cases reported in the national media, and over the years the country has grown more activist in this space. The Femicide Census has been born—where the results of Karen's diligent volunteering, alongside that of Clarrie O'Callaghan, have turned into a growing resource for academics, journalists and policymakers. Karen and Clarrie deserve all the praise in the world for holding the line, never faltering wearily on the path, to give these women and their stories the elevation that they deserve.

I, however, have grown weary of this task. While it is an honour to do it, and every year when I meet the families—many of whom are with us today—I am reminded of why I do it, I am weary and tired of this list. The first year I did it, I felt overwhelmed, and then I grew used to it; but now I have grown so sad that every year there are the same cases of systems failures, prison recalls not followed up, and children's services and family court

[Jess Phillips]

decisions leaving women at risk, and of the fact that not every single police force in our country has a specific women's safety unit, let alone the fact that none of them does.

I am tired of the sticking plasters, of flee funds instead of welfare reforms that would stop victims ending up destitute in the first place. I am sick of this review of some harm or other, and that review of sexual exploitation, being placed on a shelf and never driven forward. I am tired of hearing, on this one day each year, Ministers announcing a little bit of this or a little bit of that. I am tired of the fact that women's safety matters so much less in this place than small boats. I am tired of fighting for systemic change and being given table scraps. Never again do I want to hear a politician say that lessons will be learned from abject failure, because it is not true. This list is no longer just a testament to these women's lives; it is a testament to our collective failure. At least half the names I am about to read out are of women who could have been saved.

Here is this year's list: Alesia Nazarova; Beryl Purdy; Holly Bramley; Susan Turner; Bernadette Rosario; Sara Bateman; an unnamed woman; Lucy Dee; Maia Dee; Rina Dee; Elise Mason; Marelle Sturrock; Suma Begum; Johanita Kossiwa Dogbey; Maya Devi; Suzanne Henry; Georgina Dowey; Holly Sanchez; Hayley Burke; Katie Higton; Kelly Pitt; Christine Sargent; Danielle Davidson; Stephanie Hodgkinson; Sandra Harriott; Fiona Robinson; Debra Cantrell; Emily Sanderson; Michelle Hodgkinson; Chloe Mitchell; Chloe Bashford; Tejaswini Kontham; Grace O'Malley-Kumar; Monika Wlodarczyk; Kinga Roskinska; Natasha Morais; Felicia Cadore; Nelly Akomah; Sarah Henshaw; Elizabeth Richings; Lynette Nash; Elizabeth Watson; Carol Baxter; Fiona Holm; Colette Law; Rose Jobson; Ann Blackwood; Hazel Huggins; Sharon Gordon; Claire Orrey; Christine Emmerson; Kelli Bothwell; Liwam Bereket; Chintzia McIntyre; Amy-Rose Wilson; Gabriela Kosilko; Claire Knights; Nhi Muoi Wai; Carrie Slater; Susanne Galvin; Helen Clarke; Ruth Hufton; Elianne Andam; Charlene Mills; Alison Dodds; Deborah Boulter; Celia Geyer; Mandy Barnett; Denise Steeves; Mehak Sharma; Caroline Gore; Sian Hammond; Michele Faiers; Christie Eugene; Perseverance Ncube; Sharon Butler; Dawn Robertson; Victoria Greenwood; Salam Alshara; Kiesha Donaghy; Alison Bowen; Taiwo Abodunde; Milica Zilic; Lianne Gordon; Kamaljeet Mahey; Glenna Siviter; Kacey Clarke; Keotshepile Isaacs; Tia Simmonds; Maya Bracken; Alison McLaughlin; Tara Kershaw; Kanticha Sukpengpanao; Claudia Kambanza; Michele Romano; Claire Leveque; Sam Varley; and an unnamed woman, who was 40 years old, from Beaconsfield.

As has now become customary, the families of women killed by men's abuse who would not have appeared on this list, or who died before I started the custom of the listing, have begun to get in touch with me to ask for those women's names to be read. I want to remember Melissa Mathieson, murdered in 2014, who was housed in allegedly supportive accommodation for people with autism together with a man who was a known risk to women; she had complained about him, but was not protected against him. We remember Melissa, and know that it brings shame on this House that, across the country, we are turning a blind eye to safety issues around women in state-funded accommodation. There will be another Melissa in dangerous accommodation as we speak. We must not mourn; we must act.

We also remember Eileen Mary Thomson, who died in 2017. At the age of 70, she was killed by her husband in a sheltered housing complex.

I was approached by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who asked me to remember Rita Roberts, whose family—his constituents—were recently told of her murder in Belgium 32 years ago, in 1992. Her body had gone unidentified until last year. We remember Rita Roberts and cases like hers, which is why every year we include on the list women whose names we do not know. They matter.

All of these women mattered. They need to matter much more to politics, and I urge the Government again, as I have done for years, to have a strategy for reducing femicide. Warm words, with no political priority, will never make this list shorter.

2.3 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Every year, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), reads out that list. I do not think that I have ever had to follow her directly, and it is not an easy job to do. We are here to celebrate as well as commemorate, and as International Women's Day is coming up next week, it is important that we reflect on what improvements there have been, but also on the failures.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) has brought forward a motion about the language of politics and the language that we use. I apologise if, following that horrendous list, the language that I use is a bit flippant. I want to celebrate some of the achievements. I look at the fantastic, joyful experience we had last summer with the "Barbie" movie—a film directed by a woman. It was the biggest ever debut, and it was a wonderful celebration of all that is frivolous and pink, but had an important underlying message. But what did we learn? That the Oscar nominations would go to a man.

Over the last 12 months, my Select Committee has worked with some incredible women who have come to the Committee and told their stories. I particularly reflect on Vicky Pattison and Naga Munchetty, who came and spoke so emotionally and importantly about the experiences they had gone through with adenomyosis and a particular type of premenstrual tension that had caused Vicki to go, in her own words, "really quite mad". I remember the language of politics immediately after they left. I remember the email I got from a man—surprisingly—who told me that he was not interested in hearing from my "celebrity mates". I pointed out to him that they are not celebrities; one woman is a broadcast journalist and the other, Vicky Pattison, is a very successful broadcaster in her own right. I send a message to Vicky today: you are not just the woman from "Geordie Shore". He criticised the fact that we had them in front of the Committee and not other, "serious" women. That afternoon, I sent him an email asking whether he had sent the same email to the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), who had had George Osborne in front of her Committee. Did Mr Osborne count as a celebrity friend? The man admitted that he did not.

I would like to reflect on women's achievements in sport, particularly the achievements of the Lionesses, who did such an incredible job to get to the final of the

World cup. I would like to celebrate Spain—I really would—but a man spoilt that for us, didn't he? I look at that individual, who made sure that the story of female triumph in sport was, once more, all about the bad behaviour of men. I will not name him.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke said that we need a world where women not only have free speech, but can speak freely. I reflect on the sports commentators who came in front of my Committee and said that when they make identical comments to those of male commentators, they are attacked on social media for being stupid or for being female, yet the men get away with their comments with no remark whatsoever. I commend my right hon. Friend for her pledge, and for the APPG's work to make sure that, in the coming general election, we are careful with our language and think about the words we use. It really ought not to be necessary. I would like to think that I can get through this entire election campaign without being racist, sexist or homophobic—it really is not that high a bar to have set. Let us see what actually happens.

Sticking with sport, I would like to reflect on Mary Earps—Mary Queen of Saves—but all we got to talk about was her shirt, not her brilliant prowess on the field in making all those saves that got England to the final. We had to talk about the fact that Nike did not think that her shirt was important enough to have bothered to print one. Of course, when she won sports personality of the year, *The Sun* was the first one out there to talk not about her brilliant prowess, but about the fact that we could see her knickers through her dress.

I would like to talk about Taylor Swift, who was *Time* magazine's "person of the year" for a second time, and who has a monthly reach of 100 million people on Spotify. It is an absolutely incredible achievement. We cannot talk about Taylor Swift without also having to talk about Kanye West and his efforts to silence her, criticise her and, indeed, use her in his music.

I would like to talk about Claudia Goldin, the solo female winner of the Nobel prize for economics—the first time there has been a solo female winner. Of course, she was studying the obstacles that women face in obtaining equal pay, because we are still there. We are still struggling to obtain equal pay and to see the gender pension gap shrink.

On today of all days, when we have heard about horrific abuse and the measures that have had to be put in place to protect Members of this place, what has been really striking is that colleagues have spoken not about the abuse they face, but about the abuse their family faces. Our families feel it. I know that the abuse is bad on social media, despite "block", "mute" and "delete" being my best friends. My daughter will send me a text message that just says, "Are you okay?". That is how I know that it is bad out there.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is so important to remember all those who are affected alongside a Member of Parliament. That includes our staff, doesn't it?

Caroline Nokes: It absolutely includes our staff. My staff are criticised for working for me, when all they have done is apply for a job that they thought might be quite interesting and rewarding, and that might give them an opportunity to contribute.

There are many challenges, and we have to use our role in this place to do better. I always say that we can all do better. It is important to emphasise that none of us is perfect, and we should always strive to improve and be the very best Members of Parliament we can be.

Journalists the world over ask me whether the job of a Member of Parliament is worth doing, whether I feel safe and whether I would recommend it to any young woman, and I leave them with these important words: do it, because it is the best job in the world. The job means that you can make a difference for your community, and it means that our democracy is not dominated by white, 45-year-old men. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), my constituency neighbour. He is not 45.

2.10 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I also thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing today's debate. It is always an honour to be here to mark International Women's Day.

Today's debate calls for respectful language to be used in this place and in the upcoming general election, as the public look to us for leadership and example. It is crucial that we respect each other and those who elected us to be their representative.

I reflect on my nine years of serving the people of Swansea East in Parliament, and I am confident that I have built mutually respectful relationships both across the House and throughout the communities that I work with. Like many colleagues, I have had my fair share of abuse, particularly online. It saddens me that it is generally nothing to do with my politics or the causes that I champion; it is always because of my gender or my appearance—my hair colour, my choice of outfits, my size, or my glasses.

Just this week, following a debate in Westminster Hall, I was subject to some very interesting abuse from people who purport to disagree with my stance on an issue. However, their comments on X, formerly known as Twitter, had little to do with what I said. To give a flavour:

"I wouldn't let that thing decide what boxer shorts I was wearing in the morning."

That says more about them than me, I think.

"It is of my opinion that you are obese. See a doctor immediately. Bring in affordability checks for all the"

stuff—I have used another word instead of theirs—

"you must eat to make you that fat."

Another wrote:

"F these blue hair fat ugly freaks."

And another:

"Shouldn't this buffoon be serving jelly and custard to five year olds or on lolly pop duty?"

As a former dinner lady, I do not find that at all insulting.

That is just a snapshot of the disrespectful, misogynistic rhetoric that these bullies—that is what they are—feel that they are entitled to post, just because we are MPs. I agree that the language we use in this place is important, but there is a bigger issue that needs to be addressed.

Members would be disappointed if I did not talk about the menopause. Earlier this month, Avanti showcased its menopause toolkit for staff. It contained, among other things: a fan "for hot sweats"; tissues for "if you're feeling a bit emotional"; a paperclip "to help you

[Carolyn Harris]

keep it all together"; a jelly baby "in case you feel like biting someone's head off"; and a pencil "to write down things you might forget." That is hardly the kind of language we should use about anyone, let alone women who are perimenopausal or menopausal. It is insulting, and it belittles symptoms that are so debilitating for many. I am sure it was done with the best intention and was perhaps meant to bring a bit of humour to the situation, but the choice of language is so important. I know from the communications I have received that it was deeply offensive, not only to a lot of women but to men, too. People working for the company were disappointed that this was Avanti's response.

Wera Hobhouse: We are hearing terrible things in this discussion about banter. People say things are just banter, but banter can be very offensive. We should not be intimidated by people who say that we cannot take banter. It is important that people realise that some banter is offensive.

Carolyn Harris: I agree. Before I was elected, my husband always told me that I would need to have a thick skin. Well, it has gone past having a thick skin. At the end of the day, I am a human being. People would not speak to a person on the street like that, so why should I or anyone else have to experience it online? It is not banter; it is degrading.

My mission is to ensure that our conversations and the language we use normalises the menopause in communities locally, nationally and even globally. I have had some exciting opportunities to do this, but none more exciting than the opportunity I had last week to join a team of wonderful friends and colleagues, with good knowledge and expertise, in going to Eastwood Park women's prison in the constituency of the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall). Menopause has over 40 symptoms, ranging from anxiety and brain fog to urinary tract infection and vaginal dryness. Many women struggle to navigate this time of their life, and they suffer as a result. Imagine not being able to pop out for fresh air during a hot flush; having night sweats while sleeping on a plastic mattress; or suffering crippling anxiety while locked up alone. That is the reality for women in prison. The difference I saw in the women between the Monday and the Friday was mind-blowing. We delivered a message that made a difference. I am hugely grateful to Davina McCall, Hazel Hayden and the Bristol menopause clinic, Kate Rowe-Ham, Lavina Mehta, Michelle Griffith Robinson and Kate Muir, who came with me to do this work. I am even more grateful to Eastwood Park's governor, Zoë Short, and her team—Abbie Garrett and Alison Rivers—not only for trusting us to share the message with the women, but for being so proactive in supporting them.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady is making a terrific point. She reminds me of something I read by Mariella Frostrup in *The Times* this week, referencing the Equality and Human Rights Commission's guidance on the workplace treatment of women with menopause. The guidance said that it should be treated as a disability. Does the hon. Lady share my frustration that that completely misunderstands and denigrates what the menopause is?

Carolyn Harris: I totally agree. The menopause is not a disability and should not be regarded as such, but any focus on it—and the EHRC brought focus to the menopause—makes a huge difference to the messaging, how women feel and how employers take notice of what they should be doing.

I will cut my remarks short, as I have taken up more than enough time. As we look to the general election, can we reflect on how we speak, and the choices we make when we address others? Respect earns respect in this place, in our communities, in the country and beyond.

2.17 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing this important debate on language in politics, which gives us an opportunity to mark International Women's Day.

As the 431st female Member of Parliament, the first female MP for my Aldridge-Brownhills constituency and the first female Conservative Chief Whip, I start by stressing the importance of increasing female participation in politics. Sadly, women face many barriers to entering a career in politics. One of those barriers is the often unpleasant and abusive language to which they are subjected. This is totally unacceptable and it cannot, and must not, be tolerated. We have to work constantly to change that.

This is a cross-party debate and, to set the scene for my speech, I start with this quote:

"elect me for what I am and not for what I was born."—[*Official Report*, 27 April 1992; Vol. 207, c. 15.]

Those are the notable words of the late Betty Boothroyd when she became the first female Speaker of the House of Commons. Her initial entry into politics was not easy. It took her five attempts to be elected as an MP, which is something with which many of us will be familiar. It took me three attempts to make it to Parliament.

Historically, the House of Commons has often been seen as a man's world. It has often been compared to a private gentlemen's club, and it was only with the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 after world war one, underpinned by the suffragette movement, that women were allowed to stand as candidates and be elected as MPs. As we know, the first sitting female MP was Nancy Astor, who was elected as a Conservative MP in 1919. Since then, we have undoubtedly made progress, and by the 1960s no one doubted that women should be part of the political process. Yet here we are in February 2024 with 226 female MPs in the House of Commons, which is 35% of all MPs—that is hardly reflective of our country. The Conservative party currently has 88 female MPs. Although that is a triumphant leap from the days when Nancy Astor was the sole female MP, it is still only 25% of all Conservative MPs.

With women clearly under-represented in Parliament, we have to ask the question: why? One decisive factor as to why many women choose not to enter politics at all is its aggressive and intimidating nature. Sadly, Parliament and politics all too often remain overwhelmingly masculine in culture, language and space. Even after 100 years in politics, many female politicians continue to suffer from bullying, harassment, misogyny and sexism, both in this place and beyond. To see that, we can just take a look at the toxic nature of Prime Minister's questions some

weeks, where women have been known to be called "stupid woman" and have even been told to "Calm down, dear", in an insulting and often patronising tone. Surprisingly, when we look in the guidance on "Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons", we see that although it contains a section titled "Parliamentary language", there is not a single mention of sexist language being inappropriate. I know that Mr Speaker is doing a huge amount of work to change the culture and behaviour in this place, but perhaps that is something else we could seek to look at a little further.

This language issue extends beyond the Chamber and to all forms of communications and settings, be it social media, mobile phones, tweets or WhatsApp messages. This abusive language has to be unacceptable, and I urge all Members of Parliament, on both sides, to report it and call it out. Many female MPs have been subjected to hate messages on their Twitter posts—we have heard some examples of that this afternoon—and, sadly, some have even received death threats. That is why I very much welcome the Home Secretary's announcement of a £31 million package to counter threats to MPs' security, which includes cyber-security advice and a dedicated named police contact. That is fundamental to protecting and upholding our democracy. As the Home Secretary recently said, no MP should have to accept threats or harassment as "part of the job". That applies to all MPs, but it applies to female MPs in particular.

Some people may perceive politics to be centred around assertiveness and power, but I believe that it is slightly different; empathy, compassion and our respect must also be at the very core of it too. We see that just by looking at the role of women in the peace and security agenda. I believe that if we all remembered why we entered politics in the first place, which is to strive to make a positive change for society, we would all be treated with more respect. Most importantly, more women would be encouraged to enter politics.

Like everyone else here today, I hope that in the near future not just 50% of all MPs will be women, but that at least 50% of all MPs will be female. When my party has an organisation called "Men2Win", I know we will have succeeded. Fairly representing our population is where we need to get to; we need everyone to be treated with dignity and respect at all times. I still pinch myself when I come into this place. I remember how I felt the first day I sat on the green Benches. It was then, and still is, the biggest privilege and honour of my life to be a Member of Parliament and to serve the community that elected me, Aldridge-Brownhills.

2.24 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). I always say that we will know we have reached true equality in this place when we have as many rubbish women as we do rubbish men. *[Laughter.]*

The Home Office Minister should be ashamed of how he attacked an Opposition Member of Parliament during the previous statement. I hope that she raises a point of order, because we are talking about the language in this place and we should all be setting an example. We saw at the weekend the language used by the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) and the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I just remind the hon. Lady that if she is referring to Members, I hope she has notified them that she intended to do so.

Dawn Butler: I have not notified them, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have just been so angry about this. I will withdraw naming them. I thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for calling out the language used by those on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) is no longer in her place. When she read out her list, it was heartbreaking, and when we saw the family members stand, it broke all of our hearts. The media are failing women and, as legislators, we are too, because that list should be getting shorter every year and it is not getting shorter.

In the short time I have today, I wish to mention three things that we can do as legislators to help stop the killing and abuse of women. I wish to thank Level Up and *Glamour* magazine for their tireless campaigning in this area. I also thank the Minister for Women, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), for the productive discussions we have had on language changes to the Independent Press Standards Organisation code. It is important that we have cross-party discussions on that, because we are talking about the safety of women. It is a shame that those changes have not happened yet. I feel that the Minister understands their importance, but I sometimes think there is a barrier stopping her from making them happen. I do not know who or what the barrier is, but I feel that she understands the importance of the changes. The second thing we need to do is put in place 10 days' paid domestic violence leave. The third thing we need to do is ensure funding for refuges.

Let me start by discussing the IPSO code. The way the press reports is often inaccurate and undignified, and prioritises sensationalist headlines over responsible reporting. That approach needs to be replaced with responsible reporting that tackles the root of domestic abuse and the dynamics of power and control. We need to end victim blaming. By doing that, we will save lives. We need to improve and strengthen clause 4 of the code. As Level Up has said, clause 4 deals with:

"Intrusion into grief or shock".

The clause states:

"In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. These provisions should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings."

Level Up says:

"Given the academic research on the negative impact of romantic framings and the known damage caused to victims' families, Level Up recommends the Editors' Code Committee introduce a subclause to the effect of:

'In cases where a person has been killed by a partner or former partner, care should be taken not to use language which could frame the killing as an act of 'love', or which could be construed to blame the victim for their death.'"

That amendment needs to be made to the code with urgent effect. We cannot say that this is voluntary; it has to be enshrined in the code.

One in four women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. I am sure that all the women in the Chamber today have suffered some kind of domestic

[Dawn Butler]

abuse or unwanted attention in their lifetime. Every three days a woman is killed by a partner or ex-partner. None of those deaths have come out of the blue. Criminologists have established that when a woman is murdered by a partner, it marks the end of a sustained period of coercive control. Abuse does not end when the relationship ends. In fact, the time when women are most vulnerable is when they leave a relationship. The moment someone leaves an abusive relationship is the moment of greatest risk. I urge the Minister to urge the Government to look into a domestic abuse policy requiring employers to provide up to 10 days' paid leave, as enacted in the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. By granting victims paid leave, those 10 days will save lives. As legislators, there is no greater honour than passing legislation that saves lives.

To conclude, the third of my asks is for extra money for refuges. The Women's Aid "Domestic Abuse Report 2024" states that £189 million should be ringfenced for women's refuge services. Almost 50% of organisations have said that they are operating without funding, so they are saving lives but they are not being paid for it. Some 79% of people using refuges use food banks and 62.5% of survivors are unable to leave their abusers because they cannot afford to.

Level Up has an acronym: AIDA. A is for accountability: murder is not a loss of control, but the responsibility of the perpetrator. I is for image: centre images of victims, not perpetrators, and do not place their images side by side; and use official photos that have been provided by the police or the family, not social media. D is for dignity: a victim's children, family and friends will read the coverage many times. They will be in grief and shock. Avoid sensationalising language, invasive or graphic details. Dead women cannot protect their families. Finally, A is for accuracy: name the crime for what it is—fatal domestic abuse, not a horror or a tragedy perpetrated by a monster or unknown evil. Use statistics from the Office for National Statistics for context on how many other women have been killed. Gender-based violence is a national and not a personal problem. It is not an isolated incident and many women are being killed each year.

2.32 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I place it on the record how disappointed I am that not a single man is speaking in the debate today. We all have a role to play to empower, inspire and enthuse the next generation of women, and to face down, and ultimately defeat and silence, toxic misogyny and abuse. That should not be the responsibility of only the women in this place.

Specific moments deserve attention. We must celebrate when important glass ceilings are smashed. I stand here as a very proud first female MP elected to represent the people of Pontypridd. My party has driven a coach and horses through the idea that to be a parliamentarian means one has to be a white, privately educated, independently wealthy man. Young women can look to our parliamentary party and see people that look and sound just like them.

Yet there is still not enough progress. Just being here in Parliament is not enough. Equality is not about being 50% of everything; it is about winning hearts and minds. It is the drip, drip of education and the embedding of a culture in which women are genuinely valued, respected and championed. I am talking about a world in which online and real-world misogynists are rejected outright because young people and others see them for what they are. That culture, education and example is often set by influencers and in society by the words used in this House and beyond by Members of Parliament, and others elected or appointed to public service. Those words matter.

Sometimes those words are subtly, even unconsciously, biased. They seem harmless and no doubt the intention is not always sinister. However, those words feed a narrative that has played out for many years across society. Today, it is playing out daily in both broadcast media and in fringe spaces online. People are rapidly being radicalised thanks to self-affirming filter bubbles amid a culture that is openly targeting women. As Hope Not Hate has pointed out, feminists, left-wing women and women of colour are a common focus.

Ironically, it might be easy for some to roll their eyes at my words. When a woman uses the word "radicalisation" in the context of feminism that is often dismissed and ignored, and at worse she is labelled "a mad feminist". But what starts in fringe spaces does not end there. It leeches on to larger social platforms and then moves into everyday discourse, as radicalised individuals feel more comfortable expressing their hatred in real terms.

What starts with throwing a drink over a woman can become, and has become, a murderous attack. Such attacks can be, have been and are the consequences of language, which is why we need to tackle the widespread harm. That is important and, as shadow tech Minister, I fought hard to ensure Ofcom will have a code of practice for tech companies focused on violence against women and girls. In addition, those calling us "love" need to think more carefully about their contribution to the problem.

To take this idea further, we have what the global pop sensation Taylor Swift called "a different vocabulary" for men and women. She said:

> "A man does something, it's strategic. A woman does the same thing, it's calculated."

We do not have to look far for other ways in which that coded differentiation plays out. How many times in this place have hon. Members spoken passionately, only to have been characterised as "emotional" or even "hysterical"? How many times have we been patronised or told to "watch our tone"? The deputy leader of our party, the shadow Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), has been repeatedly objectified and targeted in mainstream media for her appearance or conduct, described by what she is wearing rather than what she is saying, faced with failed attempts to undermine her authority. Sadly, she is not alone. How often was that the case for Lord Prescott, for example? Why have Ministers, Back-Bench Members and others in this place have felt perfectly comfortable personally disrespecting me in text messages, conversations or speeches, reducing my value to that of my appearance, effectively devaluing important conversations on policy?

Particular words can cause particular harm to particular groups. When a former Member of this House—a former Prime Minister, no less—compared Muslim women wearing the burqa with letterboxes, not only was it mocking, cruel and Islamophobic, it led to a rise in attacks on Muslim women, according to Tell Mama.

Jewish Women's Aid told me, as shadow Minister for Domestic Violence, that the omission of words, the failure to believe, and the accusations levelled at Israeli women that they were lying about the brutal rapes and sexual violence which took place on 7 October have served to undermine confidence in the services offered by Jewish Women's Aid to women in this country. Once again, words had an impact.

As I have said, I have had words used to try and intimidate or threaten me. I know colleagues have had similar experiences. These words undermine and threaten our democracy. When women in Parliament are under threat, our democracy suffers. When young women see these threats, it deters them from standing. So let the call go from this Chamber today that we will not be silenced—we will not shut up.

Thankfully, words can also be used for good. Above the entrance to St Stephen's is an installation that includes a representation of the various Acts of Parliament that have paved the way for women. History shows that words have the potential to change the world for good, and if we want an example, we do not have far to look. Inside the cupboard at the back of the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft, on this very parliamentary estate, words mark the efforts of Emily Wilding Davison to ensure women had the right to vote. They serve as a true reminder of the potential for good and for change.

I am heartened by the fact that in the face of all the hatred and disgusting words I have had sent to me over the last four years, I have been lucky to have constituents, colleagues and members of the public share words of kindness. Supportive words have flooded in from allies, friends and family. I am sure we all can agree that those are the only words that matter.

2.37 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my good friend. my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and her powerful and passionate speech.

I am delighted to speak in this important debate as we approach International Women's Day 2024. I do so as a daughter, mother and sister, the first woman to represent Newport West in Parliament, and a champion of the role women play in all and every part of our national life. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), for her opening remarks and for ensuring we could all be here today. I acknowledge and pay tribute to the speeches of all those colleagues who have spoken before me. The focus of the debate is important. We gather in the shadow of the plaque to our late friend, Jo Cox. We should all be a bit kinder, do a bit more and go a bit further in making our political discourse healthier, safer and more decent.

More than 100 years have passed since the first women won the right to vote and in 2028, we will mark the centenary of the equal franchise Act, the most basic but important Bill that gave equal voting rights to women and men. Since then, and particularly over the last 20 years, women's representation in our politics has been transformed, and we have seen the positive impact that women in elected office can make. I pay particular tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Mother of the House. She has made it her life's work to empower women, to get many more of us here. As she leaves these Benches at this year's general election, I thank her for all that she has done for more than 40 years as a Member of this House. I know that I speak for many others in doing so. I also thank some of the wonderful women on the Labour Benches who are standing down at the next election. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), my indefatigable right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Dame Margaret Beckett), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) will all be missed by Labour Members, and I believe by Conservative Members too.

I acknowledge the strong women I work with to serve the people of Newport West: Jayne Bryant, our local Member of the Senedd, who is a very good colleague, and the leader of Newport City Council, Councillor Jane Mudd, who is standing to be the first woman police and crime commissioner in Gwent in May. I also acknowledge the women members of Newport City Council, and of course my very good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). With our United Kingdom in mind, I send my best wishes to Michelle O'Neill, the new First Minister of Northern Ireland, and to Emma Little-Pengelly, the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. It is not a surprise that two women are leading the way in getting the Northern Ireland institutions back on track. I know that we all wish them every success.

We all know that the presence of women MPs in the rooms, chambers, corridors and dining halls of power where decisions are made has undoubtedly transformed our laws and policies. Yet while women have been leading the charge on these significant reforms, they have also faced significant challenges, as the Fawcett Society noted in its brilliant briefing, especially black and minority ethnic women, disabled women and women with long-term health conditions. We need more women in elected office, but we will not get more women to put themselves forward if they know that they will be constantly attacked on the basis that they are a woman, a black or minority ethnic woman, or a disabled woman. We all have a responsibility to use temperate and respectful language, and must all regulate the language that we use and ensure that we do not use language that would incite hate, harm people or simply engage in the age-old race to the bottom.

How this place represents itself to the people will have an impact on the engagement of women, and the public more broadly, in politics. The last few weeks have shown that some people in this place have little regard for the impact that their words have on people outside in the real world, and we must not forget that. We can start by getting our own house in order. It is important to ensure that those working in this place, as in any other workplace, can do so without fearing for their safety, free from abuse and harassment, and that the overall culture is welcoming of people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs. That cannot be a difficult thing for each of us to work towards every day. We expect it of people in our constituencies, so we should lead by example.

The abuse that we get online merely adds to the deep-seated issues in Parliament regarding bullying, harassment and sexual abuse. I know that they are being addressed with urgency by Mr Speaker, but we must keep going.

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend mentions some of the issues being tackled by Mr Speaker, but they are also being tackled by you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are also standing down at the next election. We should also pay tribute to you for leading the way for women in our own party, and across the House.

Ruth Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that positive and opportune intervention. I did not want to embarrass you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I thank you for your calm nature last week when you took on the issues that arose. The calm and peaceful way in which you dealt with it all was an inspiration to us all.

Online abuse affects when women in public office speak and what they speak about. Online abuse, particularly abuse that is misogynistic and racist, has a detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of women in public life, particularly ethnic women MPs, reflecting on the emotional toll that it takes on them, their families and their staff. It is deeply unfortunate that online abuse spills out into reality, causing real concerns about physical safety, with such abuse often including threats of violence. Even though women make up over half of the United Kingdom's population, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said, we make up only 35% of the House of Commons. There is so much more to do.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): We are talking about the importance of language in debate, but does she agree that we also need to start thinking about images, especially with changing technology? Several Members present were with me last night at a debate about deepfakes and artificial intelligence, hosted on the Committee corridor by *Glamour* and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. It strikes me that a lot of the themes of today's debate around the use of language, and how off-putting it can be, can also be applied to stuff that is generated very realistically and very quickly. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should not forget that while we debate language, and women in politics?

Ruth Jones: I absolutely agree. Being a luddite, I may not be as familiar as lots of other people in the Chamber with AI and other online issues, but deepfakes are deeply troubling. I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that really important issue.

I acknowledge that the Conservative party has had three women leaders. Although the last two did not last very long, the Conservatives have done more than we have, and in due course I hope that Labour will elect its first woman leader. In August 2022, just 36% of the 19,212 elected councillors across the UK were women. Fewer than 5% of councils have achieved gender parity, so the need to empower and support women is clear to all of us. The issue will not be solved overnight, but we need to start making progress. It will not be addressed by one party, but by all of us working together, and it will not work unless every man in this place, and in our country, recognises the role that they have to play too.

2.46 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing the debate, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is no longer in her place. I think that we can all agree that it was very hard to listen to the names that she mentioned. I will cite just two of them. One was Johanita Dogbey, who was my constituent. She was killed on 1 May last year in broad daylight. Following on from the earlier statement by the Home Secretary on police resourcing and the need to ensure that the police respond to things locally, what was really tragic and sad about that killing was that apparently the gentleman responsible made an attempt two days earlier in the local area—so could that death have been prevented? Nothing will ever prepare us for having to sit with a grieving family who have lost a child. As we know, no parent should have to bury their child. Every so often, I still remember the embrace that I gave to Johanita's mum, and the pain that she felt—she asked me why her daughter was taken.

I also wanted to mention Elianne Andam, one of the other names that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley mentioned. Again, that senseless killing shocked so many people. People will remember that on 27 September, at 8.30 in the morning, a young 15-year-old was tragically stabbed in her school uniform, on her way to school in Croydon. Again, I think about when my hon. Friends the Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and I attended the vigil in Croydon a week after, and we embraced Elianne's mum, Dorcas. We felt that raw pain of yet another woman's life being taken and asked ourselves, "Why? Why has this been allowed to happen again?" It is for all those women that we, as female politicians—and also male politicians—need to do better in addressing how we conduct ourselves; we cannot let those deaths be in vain.

Today, we are debating a motion on language and politics. It is right that we do so, because language does matter. The words that we use really matter. As politicians, we all have a responsibility to conduct ourselves in a manner that ensures that we can all be treated with dignity and respect; yes, there can be passion and even sometimes a bit of anger when we are trying to get our points across, but—going back to the statement and to some of the earlier speeches—if we as parliamentarians are not conducting ourselves in that way, we should not wonder why our constituents and the general public then fuel that abuse and hate towards us. We have to be respectful towards each other.

It is important that we do not put off further women from standing for election. I am proud that, in 2019, I was part of the most diverse intake ever. A small group of 26 of us were elected for Labour for the first time in 2019, yet we were majority female—19 of us. Of those 19, 10 of us were BME women, including the first hijab-wearing MP. We should be celebrating that, but if the language coming out from politics and from politicians is not respectful, we will not see those types of women standing for election. It is important that we look at that. All parties, including my own, have a duty to consider how we treat female politicians—not just when they are candidates, but after they are elected. It is about that duty of care and ensuring that we are providing a support network for our colleagues, and looking at how the House authorities can help us.

Delivering women's equality in this place is vital if we are to have a healthy democracy. It is important that all parties consider how best to ensure that more women

can come into politics, but we have to be honest about some of the barriers that are still in place. For a number of those women, campaigning, and time off for public duties, can be expensive. A number of these women bear the burden of caring responsibilities, and it is important that we look at what support is in place.

As we approach International Women's Day, we should work together to redouble our efforts to support women who are thinking about standing for election, and those who are already here to make sure that our politics—not just the language that we use, but the actions that we take—continues to be strong and inclusive for everyone.

2.51 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am pleased to follow all these excellent speeches. It has been a worthwhile debate, and I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for bringing it here today.

Debating the language that is used in politics is important, particularly as we approach an election. As we have heard, we cannot debate that without speaking about the reality of the impact of the language that is used about us and to us. The language in the political sphere has a profound impact on women in politics now and on those who may or may not want to jump into what is sometimes just a swamp. That sounds a bit dramatic, but it is not really. Although it is the biggest privilege to represent our communities—I am sure we all feel that very sincerely—the challenge is the discourse, including in here, the language and the abuse. To hear her talking, I think the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) the Member for Swansea must be using my social media. Unfortunately, we all also recognise the targeted harassment and security concerns that go along with some of this.

Important research by the Fawcett Society points out that the safety and security of elected representatives, and the issues around that, are highly gendered. The fact is that we are not representative. Women make up more than half the population, but only 34% of MPs. We need to do better there. I applaud the new Scottish Government Cabinet. It has been gender balanced for many years now, but the new Cabinet is, I think, 70% female. That is a significant and important step. It is welcome to see all these capable women taking their places.

It is telling that the debate today follows on from statements on the security of elected representatives and on the Angiolini inquiry into the circumstances around the murder of Sarah Everard. Although I have been glad to participate in the last few International Women's Day debates, there is an undercurrent, which was brought into stark focus again today by the Angiolini inquiry report. We need to reflect on the awful reality of where the normalisation of behaviours, and the amplification of language and attitudes, can lead to. My very deep sympathies are with the family of Sarah Everard. They are also with the family of Emma Caldwell, whose killer was sentenced yesterday to 36 years' imprisonment for her murder in 2005. Their ordeal has been so awful. They have waited so long for answers, but those answers, while very important, will not bring their much-loved Emma back. Emma was reportedly someone with many friends, who, despite having a very difficult time in life, was appreciated, valued and loved. I appreciate any and all headlines that manage something that should not be so difficult: when talking about Emma, to use her name and not just describe her as "sex worker"—Sky News, you must do better. I do hope that Emma's very brave family can now find peace.

Every hon. Member who has spoken today has, unsurprisingly, noted the impact of online abuse on their participation in democracy. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke eloquently pointed out that robust debate is not the same as abuse. We could be here all day—probably all week or more—if we started down the road of giving examples that are far from even pretending to be debate. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) was right to say that what starts in fringe spaces does not end there.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) spoke well about language. There is our language here—I am thinking of the recent remarks by the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), not made in this Chamber, but the context was that of an MP speaking. That was a powerful and unfortunate example of the power of language. What we say and how we say it does not just reflect on or influence us, but enables people—men, mainly—to abuse women, including not only politicians, but other women who have the audacity to have opinions and to want to express them. That is regrettable, because of the likely impact of turning women off politics and the democratic process. Glimmer of light and all that, though: I was at the St Ninian's High School careers fair a couple of weeks ago, and the number of powerful, articulate and smart young women interested in careers in democracy, politics, research and so on was heart-warming. I wish them all every success.

There is space to welcome some positives, but I will touch on some other women we need to mention before I close, not least the women in the middle east. We know about the awful and disproportionate impact on women, and that is horribly clear as we watch with horror what is unfolding there: the Israeli women caught up in the Hamas terror attack, the hostages and their families—it is impossible to imagine how they are coping; and the women in Gaza dealing with unimaginable things—with the death, destruction, privations that we cannot begin to imagine, and childbirth without hospitals or medical facilities, these women are suffering beyond belief.

I would like to end on a more upbeat note and to speak about the women of East Renfrewshire who do so much good. I do not have time to speak about many of these brilliant women, but I would like mention the women in my office team, Carolyn, Nix, Freya, Katie and Sampurna, who all deliver every day for our community—I am fortunate to work with them—and my East Renfrewshire councillor colleagues, Councillors Angela Convery, Caroline Bamforth and Annette Ireland, who are all women of substance and hugely committed to improving their communities.

I must also mention two special women commemorated just last week at the 20th anniversary event of the Auchenback Resource Centre. They are memorialised on lovely benches that sit outside the front of the centre. I think that the House would want to join me in reflecting on the great work that Rita Connelly and Irene Simpson did for the people of Auchenback and on how much of a difference those powerful women made to the people who lived in their area. That is a

[Kirsten Oswald]

useful point at which to conclude. We all understand that this is a challenging time, but we must ensure that as well as pointing out the difficulties and challenges, we celebrate powerful women like these, who make a real difference.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, I remind Members again that if they are going to refer to other Members, they should notify them. Criticism of other hon. Members should only be on a substantive motion.

2.58 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing this important debate. I thank everyone who has participated in it. The issue of language in politics is vital in relation to International Women's Day. It is possible to celebrate this important occasion, as we rightly do every year, while acknowledging the wider issues for women in politics and in society.

Many Members have already reflected on the frankly caustic nature of political campaigning. As the shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, I too have sadly become accustomed to what I can only describe as an often toxic discourse, including on equalities issues. Complex and sensitive matters get boiled down to simplistic, overly oppositional narratives, such that substance is overshadowed or even completely disregarded. Well, I want that to change. I want the issues that we debate in this House always to be centred on the facts of the matter and the merits of policy. The debate is important because the language that parliamentarians use has an impact on the world outside this place. We Members all have a responsibility to use respectful language while we debate. Members are of course rightly passionate about issues, but passion cannot justify intemperance of the nature that we have seen too often lately. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) was right to refer to the words of the late Jo Cox, who so powerfully reminded us all of what we have in common, despite any points of division. As the representatives of our constituents, we need to take responsibility for the words we use.

Dame Maria Miller: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Will she join me in regretting ever hearing a Member of this House refer to their opponent as "scum"?

Anneliese Dodds: I think it absolutely right, when any Member makes a mistake, as was the case in that instance, that they apologise. That was unacceptable, and it is right that the Member concerned apologised. I would like all Members to apologise when they use divisive language, whether it is of the type that the right hon. Lady just described, or racist or sexist language of all types. It does us no favours when the House tries to tiptoe around these matters, as we have seen over recent days and previously. We need to face up to them, because language matters, words matter, and the language and words used by Members matter, so I appeal to all sides of the House to ensure that the language that we use is respectful. We are not at war with each other, and the language we use should reflect politics as a battle of ideas, not insults.

Dawn Butler: Is my hon. Friend as disappointed as I am about the failure of some Members of Parliament to call out Islamophobia?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I have been very disappointed by that, as I would have been about any case of prejudiced or racist language that does not consider what a Member or politician has said or done but instead suggests that their appearance, faith, ethnicity or gender is what should be focused on. We surely need to move beyond that as Members of this House.

We also need to move beyond that in the online world, about which we have heard a number of powerful speeches. We need a more powerful regime than that in the Online Safety Act 2023. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) set out powerfully why change is needed there and how it can be achieved. I think that everyone in the Chamber was disgusted to hear the misogynistic abuse that has been directed towards one of the most formidable campaigners in the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) also set out clearly the need to prevent abuse from becoming the norm in online political debate and discussion.

Of course, in ensuring that the language we use does not prevent women's participation in our politics, we also need to ensure, as we look towards International Women's Day next week, that our politics delivers on the representation of women more broadly, and on the issues of concern to women. It is possible to achieve parity between men and women on these green Benches; it is possible to have a gender-balanced parliamentary party and a gender-balanced shadow Cabinet and Front-Bench team. My party has achieved that, and I hope that other parties will seek to achieve it in future, because, sadly, we are far from that. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) mentions leadership from a sedentary position, quite rightly. I believe that leadership was mentioned earlier in the debate, but he was not there for it. The debate has shown that women's leadership is alive and kicking on all sides of the House, and I am very pleased to see that, but we need more action. That is why we believe that we should enact section 106 of the Equality Act 2010—so that all political parties publish data on the diversity of their candidates, including how many women they have standing for office.

Perhaps because the motion before us today focuses particularly on the issue of language, there has been less reference to incredible women in our society, but we did have a focus on some of them. We heard from the right hon. Member for Basingstoke about those involved in medicine, particularly gynaecology, and from the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) about the absolute legend who is Mary Earps, who has inspired so many girls and women in sport. Those advances should not be forgotten, but neither should the need for more action to deliver greater women's equality in society. Unfortunately, we are moving backwards in some areas—we have heard about a number of them this afternoon. Reference has been made to the gender pay gap; at the current rate, it will take 41 years to completely close that gap. I do not know how many Members in the Chamber today expect to still be in the House in 2064. I hope everyone has a

long and healthy career ahead, but that is surely too long for women to wait to get the equal pay we desperately need.

Of course, we have also discussed the appalling epidemic of violence against women and girls in our country. This debate follows the discussion about part 1 of the Angiolini review of the truly appalling events leading up to the murder of Sarah Everard. As she has done eight times previously, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), read out the names of the many women who have been murdered, and of course spoke about unnamed women as well. We heard some appalling examples from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who spoke about her constituents. There is surely a very clear need for action when we see, for example, that only 1.5% of recorded rapes lead to a charge, and that rates of prosecution for domestic violence are falling, and also the kind of press treatment of victims that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) set out so clearly.

We also see the desperate need for action on women's health—we have not had time to discuss that issue today—and action for women in the workplace. We need to deliver that change. There is a need for legislative alterations, and as we have heard today, there is a need for a change in the tenor of debate, so that we are always promoting women in our politics and they are never put off it because of divisive language.

3.7 pm

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing this important debate, and all hon. Members for their contributions. The use of language, particularly in politics, is such an important topic. Members have shared very personal experiences, including the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), and the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has been criticised for her hair colouring. My criticism is that my hair looks like it was borrowed from my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), so I share her frustration at that abuse.

Why does this abuse matter? My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) put it very eloquently: it stops women from speaking freely, not just women in this place but women in our communities. At the moment, we have very toxic debates around issues such as biological sex, with people losing their jobs and facing prosecution just for wanting to have an honest debate. I am pleased that Members on all sides of the House have said this afternoon that it is important to have a sophisticated level of debate on very sensitive issues, but also about the general level of abuse that women face up and down this country. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, what is classed as banter by some people is very much abuse for others.

The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) always campaigns very hard on the issue of how abuse of women is reported in the media. We have met to discuss this, and I am frustrated that progress has been slow. I can assure her that I have met ministerial colleagues, but also the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and I will follow up after this debate. It is really important that when women are murdered in our communities, it is not reported as a crime of passion. It has to be reported as it is: it is murder and abuse. That language makes a difference to how those crimes are then treated.

It is true—this was the focus of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke set out—that the situation has an effect on our democratic accountability and who stands for election. We want more women, and more women from the real world, standing for election. However, the Fawcett Society found that 93% of women MPs said that online abuse or harassment has had a negative effect on how they act as Members of Parliament. It stops talented women coming forward for all parties, and we are losing good hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) is one example of a woman leaving this place. We heard earlier in this parliamentary term from Rosie Cooper that the reason she stood down early was the abuse and threats she received. We have lost good Members such as her, which is very sad for Parliament.

We are potentially in an election year, so it is as important as ever that our language is measured—in this place, and in our political parties. Every single political party can play a role, and nobody standing for election should suffer intimidation for holding or aspiring to hold elective office. We have introduced measures to try to make the experience fairer. Since 2022, anyone who intimidates a candidate, campaigner or elected representative can be barred from elective office for five years. It is great that we are passing legislation like that in this place, but it needs to be enforced, because abuse is too often seen as something that just goes with the job. No one—not my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), nor my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood)—should have their office burned or people protesting outside their home simply for representing their constituents.

The debate reflects the wider debate in society about violence against women and girls. Sadly, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), had to read out her list again this year, and one of the women she mentioned was my constituent Chloe Bashford, who was murdered in horrific circumstances in Newhaven. The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) commented on two tragic deaths in her constituency of women who were also on that list. We have made significant progress, having published the tackling violence against women and girls strategy and the tackling domestic abuse plan, but that is not going fast enough. We all have a role to play, not just the Government; it is the role of all agencies, from the police to the courts, to absolutely make sure that femicide is taken seriously and dealt with when people come forward to give evidence and share their stories.

Our Domestic Abuse Act became law in 2021. That legislation is making a difference. Abusers are no longer allowed to directly cross-examine their victims in the family and civil courts, and victims have better access to special measures in courtrooms. However, conviction rates are still too low. We also supported the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, and the hon. Member for Bath brought in the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023, which addresses harassment in the workplace. That is for everyone, but we know that women are affected by that in more ways than most.

[Maria Caulfield]

The final piece I want to address is the role of the media, given the upcoming election. It is really important that debates and votes in this place are reflected fairly. One example is the sewage vote, which was an attempt to end the use of sewage outflows in this country. We Conservative Members voted to dismantle our sewage system and have a long-term plan to end sewage discharges, but that was often portrayed in the media as voting against stopping any restrictions on sewage, which has resulted in multiple death threats and abuse for Conservative Members. When journalists ask why MPs are abused so much, I would say that journalists' language, and the way that they portray what happens in this place, is as important.

Caroline Nokes: I will not get the Minister to say this, but I will say it for her. Can we also look at those who write Commons sketches? I am particularly thinking of Quentin Letts, who is a bit prone to going after people like me for being too pony club posh, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) for having pink nail varnish. The list is endless, and it is never about what we say, but about what we look like.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. We need to remind each other that we all have a role to play—not just MPs but wider society. The fundamental issue is that if female MPs are being targeted and harassed, that will be reflected for women up and down this country; if it is seen as okay to target elected representatives for what they look like or what they say or how they vote, that will be reflected in wider society. There is a democratic system in this country: if people are not happy with who represents them, they go to the ballot box and they decide. What is not acceptable is for Members of Parliament, local councillors, police and crime commissioners, Members of the Senedd, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and others, even down to school governors, who are taking difficult decisions, which would have been taken long before if they were easy, to be intimidated in how they vote. If that is tolerated, violence against women and girls will be tolerated, perpetuated and accepted too.

I thank everyone for such a positive debate. We have got to speak up, we have got to stand up and we have got to take part and not let the haters win.

3.15 pm

Dame Maria Miller: First, I should point out that I think every debate should end with two Marias.

I thank all Members who have spoken for their contributions today. Words matter, and the words we use matter even more because they are often repeated by people outside. That point has been clearly made by a number of Members today and I thank them for doing so. I thank everybody for their contributions and remind everybody that next Friday is International Women's Day. It is an opportunity to remember all the women in our lives, and I will be remembering my daughter, Georgia, who is the most formidable daughter anyone could ever have.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered the use of language in politics in light of International Women's Day; agrees that the respectful use of language is an important feature of a strong and inclusive democracy; and calls on all parliamentary candidates to pledge that respectful language will be used at all times in the upcoming General Election campaigning period.

Welsh Affairs

3.17 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

It is good to see you back in the Chair for the annual debate on Welsh affairs, Mr Deputy Speaker. We call it the St David's day debate, although this year it falls just prior to St David's day. I wish all Members a very happy St David's day for tomorrow—Dydd Gŵyl Dewi Hapus.

Let me start my remarks, however, on a slightly discordant note. It is a bit disappointing that yet again the debate on Welsh affairs, the annual St David's day debate, is being squeezed in the timetable. Two very important debates were scheduled for this afternoon and anybody present in the Chamber for the previous debate will have heard the serious remarks and speeches made in it, but may I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to give us some guidance during the course of the debate on how we can get back to a situation where we protect the time for Welsh Members to have their one day a year to raise matters of importance for their constituents? There is a feeling among many of us that the smaller nations of the United Kingdom are not being served in this institution at the moment.

Putting that aside, it is good to have this debate again and, as the Member of Parliament for Preseli Pembrokeshire, I am extremely honoured to represent the city of St Davids. We have argued before during these debates about whether David was born in Ceredigion or in Pembrokeshire, but the fundamental point for those of us from Pembrokeshire is that this 6th century monk who founded the bishopric is hugely importance to us culturally, socially and economically in continuing to attract visitors from all over the country and indeed the world to the city of St Davids.

A few weeks ago I was honoured to attend the cathedral for the enthronement ceremony of the 130th bishop of St Davids, Bishop Dorrien, who represents just the latest in a continuous line of bishops going all the way back into the mists of the dark ages to the time of David himself. That is remarkable and marks out our corner of west Wales as somewhere very special indeed. I am sure that all Members who represent Wales in the House, particularly those with constituencies in the diocese, will wish Bishop Dorrien all the best.

It is a massive privilege for me to have been Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee in this Parliament. Given that this will be the last St David's day debate of this Parliament, I put on record my huge thanks to my fellow members on the Committee, who are a joy to work with. I learn so much from them, and I thank them for the hard work they have put in to the Committee's work over the past four years. I also thank the Clerk of the Committee, Alison Groves, and the previous Clerks we have had, starting with Adam Evans, Anwen Rees and Sarah Ioannou, all of whom are incredibly intelligent and diligent and have made my job as Chairman so much easier.

I was conscious, when I became Chairman of the Committee, that I was following in massive footsteps—the shoes no less of the current Secretary of State for Wales, who was not only an outstanding Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, but a popular one. I knew I had big shoes to fill, but I started off with three objectives that I outlined to the Clerks team when I became Chair. Those were to see whether as a Committee we could: show relevance; improve our visibility; and, through that, improve our impact as a Committee not only on Government decisions, but more broadly on national life in Wales. In how we have gone about our work as a Committee over the past four years, we have tried to stay true to that. Although those things are difficult to measure, we feel we have put a lot of worthwhile effort into the Committee, and many of the inquiries we have investigated have borne fruit.

We have looked at some big picture issues, such as the future of broadcasting in Wales. At a time of enormous change in the global broadcasting industry, we have looked at the particular risks for Welsh public service broadcasters, which are the bedrock of Welsh broadcasting success, and the role of Welsh language broadcasting in our national life. We hope that the Government continue to take note of the recommendations we made on that subject.

We have also looked at some specific, sometimes quite technical issues, such as grid capacity in Wales. That was a technical issue for us to grapple with, but it is of such importance for unlocking all the opportunities and potential for renewable energy in Wales and for ensuring that our constituents see the benefit from the energy revolution through such things as the rolling out of electric vehicles and charging points. We have also tried to be reactive as and when new information and data have come to light on issues of public importance. We have tried to respond quickly.

Water quality and the scandal of sewage pollution in Wales is one issue that we have focused on. We have held not just one, but two sessions with the bosses of the water companies in Wales, Natural Resources Wales and Ofwat. We held the second session because we were not satisfied with some of the answers we got in the first, and because of new information that came to light that appeared to suggest that Welsh Water knew it was pumping illegally large volumes of sewage into waters in Wales.

One of my priorities in leading the Committee has been to try to get the Committee out and about in Wales. Some of the most meaningful meetings we have had as a Committee have not necessarily been with people on the parliamentary estate or upstairs in a Committee Room, but in Wales. I think, for example, of meeting A-level students at Gower College and talking to them about their aspirations, how they consume media, and in particular the role of social media in their lives. So little of what they consume through these new digital channels has any Welsh-specific content and we discussed the implications that might have for the future.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Purely for the record, and as a fellow of Gower College Swansea, can I ask the right hon. Gentleman to include the full title for *Hansard*?

Stephen Crabb: The full title—

Carolyn Harris: Gower College Swansea.

Stephen Crabb: Gower College Swansea—the hon. Lady has made her point with her usual force and eloquence.

[Stephen Crabb]

I think as well of the meeting we had with apprentices at the magnificent Airbus factory in Broughton. The Airbus apprenticeship scheme must be the most impressive, and probably the most competitively applied for apprenticeship, anywhere in the country. What we saw there was really impressive.

I also think about the meeting we had a few weeks ago at His Majesty's Prison Cardiff, where we spent the morning, which finished up with a sit down session with a group of prisoners who opened up to us in the most remarkable way. They talked about their upbringing, struggles with relationships and addictions, past failures and mistakes, and their hopes for the future. What really struck a chord with me was how they talked about feeling respected by the staff at the prison and feeling that they could give respect back. There was hardly a dry eye in the room at the end of that session, which was probably the most powerful and moving thing I have done as a Member of Parliament in the past 18 years.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The right hon. Member is giving a really interesting introduction. I am glad that he mentioned the work done by prison staff, because their work is so critical. He must agree that we have an anomaly in the justice system in Wales whereby so many of the critical support services for prisoners coming out of prison are run by the Welsh Government. That situation is not reflected anywhere else in the England and Wales legal system, and, sooner or later, that must come to a close, because it is insufficient.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before Mr Crabb comes back in with a response, I will let people know that there will be an unofficial five-minute limit. I also very much take on board what Mr Crabb had to say about ensuring a decent amount of time to discuss Welsh affairs in future.

Stephen Crabb: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I do not agree with the right hon. Lady. We have been taking evidence on exactly that issue and we have come across extremely professional people working in those public services and the prisons to ensure that the jagged edge of devolution, if you like, does not create disadvantages for Welsh prisoners. We will continue to look at that during our current inquiry.

Let me move on—briskly, if I can. I have been very encouraged by the engagement we have had with UK Ministers. I thank the Secretary of State and his predecessors for the 10 public evidence sessions they have had with us over the last four years. It is also worth noting that we have had the First Minister of Wales in front of us four times, and we have had 10 other sessions with other Welsh Government Ministers. I believe that that level of engagement with the Welsh Government is unprecedented, and I hope it will continue, whoever leads the Welsh Affairs Committee in the next Parliament.

The Committee has also been able to question the chief executives of some of the devolved bodies, including: Transport for Wales over deterioration in rail performance in Wales; the chief executive of Natural Resources Wales about water quality; and, as we did yesterday, the chief executive of the Development Bank of Wales, which is of course responsible to the Welsh Government.

I have also tried to change how the Committee works as a team. One thing I have done is exploit the Standing Orders that allow guesting. I am pleased that we have had Welsh Members of Parliament who are not members of the Committee plugging in and taking part in individual inquiries where they have a specific interest. Notably, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) has done so for the broadcasting inquiry and my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) has done so when we have been looking at the defence industry in Wales. I have also sought to involve some of the Chairs of the Senedd Committees. I was pleased that Delyth Jewell joined us for the broadcasting inquiry, and Llyr Gruffydd joined us when we were questioning the chief executive of Transport for Wales.

We will have a challenge in the next Parliament, as we will have significantly fewer Members of Parliament from Wales, which—I say this with great sadness—will inevitably mean a weaker Welsh voice in this institution. Both in absolute and relative terms, Welsh representation will be smaller in the next Parliament. In terms of ensuring that the Welsh Affairs Committee can continue to build on the good work we have done—I have a great interest in this—I think we will have to change how the Committee works. The Welsh Grand Committee is effectively moribund, and nobody is mourning its slow death, but the Welsh Affairs Committee has proved its worth.

I would like to us to move to a situation where all Welsh Back Benchers have the opportunity to participate in different inquiries, depending on their interests and availability. I have written to the Leader of the House and the Chair of the Liaison Committee about that issue. A lot more work is to be done to get progress on that. I would like Members who hope to be back in the next Parliament to bear that in mind as we think about how to ensure that Welsh representatives make their presence count here at Westminster.

My final note is about Senedd reform, because that is the other side of the democratic coin in Wales. The Welsh Government plan to expand the Senedd quite significantly, with 36 additional Members, and different figures have been put on the cost. My big concern is about how they intend to elect those Members. I have questioned the First Minister about the fact that there will be multiple Members for the same constituency. The First Minister did not think it presented such a problem, and suggested that one of the strengths of the new system will be that someone who might want to take an issue to a Conservative Member of the Senedd could do that, or they could take it to Plaid Cymru Member, because that might reflect their political preference. That is a fundamental shift from how we go about our business as Members of Parliament in our constituencies. I do not care whether someone voted, how they voted, or whether they put up a sign for me or did everything they could to get me out of office. I will represent that person to the very best of my ability.

I fear that with a "plurality of representation"—to use the First Minister's words—in these new supersized constituencies, we will end up with a fuzzier, more diluted sense of democracy in Wales at a time when both in Westminster and in Cardiff we need Welsh politicians to be much more effective and show value to all our constituents and get the change that we want in Wales, as it desperately needs. I will bring my remarks to a close here, and I look forward to hearing what other Members have to say.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As I said, please try to keep speeches to about five minutes, so that everyone has the chance to speak.

3.31 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing this debate—one that I look forward to every year. Even though this year we are here off the back of three defeats so far in the men's Six Nations, the potential of a young squad under the leadership of Warren Gatland is very exciting. My glass continues to be half full. I am also looking forward to watching the women's Six Nations and to seeing them run out on to the Principality pitch.

Our national joy of rugby must have a mention, but I spoke about rugby in the last two debates so I will not make hon. Members suffer it again. Instead, I will sing the praises of my wonderful constituency. I make no apologies about stating that I represent the most beautiful constituency in Wales. [Hon. Members: "No!"] I know that other Members may argue for their patches, but that only goes to show that we are very lucky to call Wales home.

As hon. Members all know, the Gower peninsula was the first designated area of outstanding natural beauty, not just in Wales but across the whole of the UK. Over the recess I paid a visit to The View Rhossili, an aptly named hospitality business overlooking the remarkable Rhossili bay, to discuss the issues of hospitality in Wales, especially VAT. Rhossili bay is often included in lists of the best beaches in the world. There is no question for me that it belongs with the likes of Bondi and Venice beaches. My favourite walk is the one to Worms Head. It is only four miles from the car park, but it is an amazing walk with every type of terrain. I pay tribute to the Coastwatch volunteers at the end, as Princess Anne did only a few weeks ago in the constituency. The work of the volunteers there to keep our people safe when walking out to the Worm is second to none.

Other parts of Gower are renowned for other reasons. Last week I paid a visit to Selwyn's Seafoods, which harvests cockles and laverbread collected from Penclawdd. The cockle industry has been part of the life of Penclawdd since at least the Roman period, with cockles sourced there sold worldwide. History is so important for the Gower families, who have travelled widely to sell their cockles. It really warms the cockles of your heart, to coin a phrase.

I would like to take a moment or two to recognise the boundary changes, which the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire mentioned. They will affect me: should I be successful at the next election, I would lose my constituents in Clydach. I would like to thank them for their commitment to me and for their support. In October last year, I was lucky enough to be at the opening of the restored Clydach lock. I pay tribute to the work of the Canal & River Trust and especially to Councillor Gordon Walker, who handed me an axe with which to open the lock. No damage done, Members will be pleased to know, but it was one of the highlights of my seven years in this place.

The Gower constituency may be losing Clydach, but it will gain Cockett, Dunvant and the rest of Killay, Mayals, and the newer ward of Waunarlwydd, so I thought I might include a few fun facts. I will have to cut them short, but the Cockett ward includes Fforestfach, which used to be home of not one but two greyhound racing stadiums. On Dunvant and Killay, Dunvant is most famous as the home of the Dunvant male voice choir, the oldest continuously singing choir in Wales, founded in 1895. After campaigning for years, the Mayals ward is now home to Mumbles Skatepark, a fantastic addition to the Mumbles seafront. Finally, Waunarlwydd—or "one eyelid" to the locals—is a ward that split out of Cockett. I had the pleasure of playing women's rugby there for a little bit and I have many, many good friends as a result—I had to get rugby in one more time.

It is a testing time in Wales at the moment, and Tata Steel jobs are having an impact on people in my constituency, but I am always there to support them. It is also a testing time in agricultural communities across Europe, not just in Wales: this is not a singular particular issue. We have to work together cross-party and with our farming communities, and encourage all constituents who want to make their voice heard to respond to the consultation with the Welsh Government before it closes on 7 March.

I look forward to hearing the rest of today's speeches. I speak better French and Italian than I do Welsh, but I will dust off my famous phrase and say, "Dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus, pawb."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I stood for the council in Cockett once. Clearly, I did not get elected, but you are going to enjoy Cockett.

3.37 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing the debate and mildly support his criticism of its attenuated nature; it is really not acceptable.

Last Saturday, I had the great pleasure of hosting the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), as he visited the town of Ruthin in my constituency. Ruthin is—I apologise to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi)—arguably the finest, most beautiful small town in the whole of Wales. It is benefiting from a levelling-up award of some £11 million. The Secretary of State was very impressed with the levelling-up proposals for Ruthin and he received a warm welcome.

That was in contrast with what happened two days previously, also in my constituency, when the Welsh Government's First Minister decided to cancel a visit to Colwyn Bay, having received a warm welcome of a rather different nature from farmers in Rhyl the previous day. The farmers were protesting about the Welsh Government's sustainable farming scheme, which they consider detrimental to their interests. I fully share their view. The Welsh Government's proposals, which as we have heard are currently subject to a consultation, would require farmers to set aside 10% of their land for tree planting and another 10% for wildlife habitats to qualify for subsidy payments. The Welsh Government say that the aim of the scheme is

"to secure food production systems, keep farmers farming the land, safeguard the environment, and address the urgent call of the climate and nature emergency."

[Mr David Jones]

It is hard to see how reducing the productive land available to each farmer by 20% will either "safeguard food production systems" or "keep farmers farming the land", and it is impossible to see how any measures introduced by the Welsh Government, in almost any context, will make any appreciable difference to the climate emergency.

The Welsh Government's plans, quite simply, will damage agriculture in Wales, and that is not just my view. It was also the conclusion of the Welsh Government's own impact assessment, which predicted that the policies would result in

"a 10.8% reduction in Welsh livestock numbers; an 11% cut in labour on Welsh farms; and a £125.3 million hit to output from the sector and a loss of £199 million to farm business incomes."

Given that their own impact assessment has predicted such dreadful consequences, it is almost impossible to understand why the Welsh Government think it is a good idea to plough on, so to speak, with what is clearly a catastrophic policy.

There is no doubt that climate change is a reality, which needs to be addressed and, indeed, is being addressed very effectively by the Westminster Government. However, when deciding whether the Welsh Government's proposals are sensible or proportionate, we should take into account the fact that Welsh greenhouse gas emissions are already very low indeed. In 2021, the United Kingdom contributed only 0.77% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Of those emissions, Wales was responsible for just 7.5%, and the Welsh agricultural sector was responsible for only 15% of those Welsh emissions. Welsh agricultural greenhouse gas emissions therefore constitute just 0.008866% of the global total. Nigel Lawson famously observed that to govern is to choose. It is clear that the Welsh Government have deliberately chosen to penalise Welsh agriculture, damage Welsh farming incomes and decimate the ranks of those employed in the rural economy in order to achieve a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions that will, in global terms, be wholly insignificant.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): May I suggest, very respectfully, that rather than winding up the rhetoric, the right hon. Gentleman should encourage his constituents to respond to the consultation? There is still a whole week to go.

Mr Jones: I can assure the hon. Lady that my constituents have responded to the consultation, both on paper and physically. Several of them were in Cardiff yesterday, objecting to this ludicrous proposal.

If large numbers of Welsh farmers are forced off their land, which the Welsh Government's own impact assessment predicts that they will be, the consequence will be increased rural depopulation. Welsh culture will be undermined, the Welsh language weakened, and it will be another nail in the coffin of the Welsh rural way of life—but that, it would appear, is entirely acceptable to the Welsh Government, provided that it results in a pitifully small reduction in emissions.

Of course, it is not just the farming community that is being damaged by the disproportionate pursuit of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing emissions was used to justify the ludicrous 20 mph speed limit that now prevails across built-up areas in Wales—a measure so hated that nearly 470,000 people have signed a petition calling for it to be scrapped. The same justification was given for last year's decision to abandon all major road-building projects in Wales, including the desperately-needed third Menai crossing.

When he announced the policy, the Welsh Government's Deputy Minister For Climate Change—yes, they apparently have a Deputy Minister as well as a Minister—acknowledged that

"None of this is easy."

He was quite right in that respect. It is not easy for farmers, for commuters, for business people or for families. Livelihoods are being put at risk and lives are being made miserable by a Welsh Government who are putting dogma ahead of common sense. Let me repeat that to govern is to choose. The Welsh Government could, and should, make a new choice. They should recognise that they are the Administration of a relatively small, lightly populated part of the United Kingdom, and that they should be serving its specific needs and addressing its priorities in a proportionate manner. Wales needs better health care, better schools, better roads, a better economy and a better quality of life, and those needs are not well served by the dead hand of climate change fanaticism.

3.44 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is a huge pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing it. I have to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) that we have the best views in Wales—she cannot deny that.

I have to confine my remarks to two topics so that there is time for other colleagues to come in, and I would like to talk first about railways. Wales accounts for around 11% of the route length of the rail network in England and Wales, but has had only 1.6% of rail enhancement spending in the last decade. We in south-west Wales have a vital railway link from London to the ports of Pembrokeshire, where ferries provide a link to Ireland, but we desperately need investment in the line.

We have had the fiasco of the stop-start on electrification. When Labour left power in 2010, we had plans to electrify the line all the way from London to Swansea. The Conservative-Lib Dem coalition Government cancelled the section from Cardiff to Swansea, then reinstated it after campaigning from MPs—only to cancel it again. When the right hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) was Secretary of State for Wales, he stood at the Dispatch Box and claimed that it was not worth doing because the nature of the track meant that there would not be any significant improvement in speed, so the journey time would not be any shorter. That completely misses the point, because electrification of the lines is vital for other reasons.

The first reason is tackling climate change, as using electricity from renewable sources means that we can make a significant contribution to cutting emissions. The second reason is pollution; it is much better to have nice, clean electric trains, rather than the diesel fumes that are currently pumped out into our stations and urban areas. The third reason is noise. In Central Square in Cardiff, the noise and pollution coming from the diesel trains in the station is dreadful, and it is certainly not improving our city centre environment.

Then we come to the state of the railway. Time after time, colleagues and I find ourselves delayed on our journeys to and from London, and all too often it seems to be because of a basic failure of infrastructure. The failure of signalling systems means that some lines are blocked. There is points failure, damage to overhead electrical wires and defective track, with delays and cancellations between London Paddington and Reading. Often we are told that there is congestion through the Slough and Reading areas. There simply does not appear to be the capacity to carry the traffic, yet this is a major railway line linking south and west Wales to London. It provides an international route to Ireland, yet the problems are constant. It is an embarrassment that people coming to our capital city of Cardiff for important events are delayed, and the problem is that it is not an occasional occurrence but a regular problem. I find it easier to count the times that the train is on time than those when it is delayed.

If the issue is not technical problems, it is flooding in the Swindon area when there is heavy rain, as happened only 10 days ago. That results in a massive detour around Bath, with people packed like sardines on the train. We are told that these storm events are likely to become the norm and not the exception, so solutions should be found and improvements made. I urge the Secretary of State for Wales to lobby the Secretary of State for Transport for the badly needed improvements to the line. The connectivity is vital, and we want people to enjoy coming to Wales—whether for pleasure or business.

Coming further west, yes, we have seen improvements to the Loughor bridge, but we need a real commitment from the Government to invest in and upgrade the railway line all the way through Llanelli and Carmarthen to Pembrokeshire. We need pressure from the Government to ensure that Network Rail maintains its assets to the highest standards, not least to minimise flooding in areas along the coast from Llanelli to Carmarthen, through Ferryside.

I turn to energy. We in the Labour party are absolutely committed to making Wales and the UK a renewable energy superpower. Indeed, the Welsh Labour Government have already facilitated significant investment in wind energy and a range of marine technologies. We all understand that that is massively needed in order to slash people's electricity bills, power the transport of the future and cut our emissions, as well as to give us energy security so that we are not dependent on foreign despots. We have such potential for renewable energy in Wales. We have continued to develop wind energy, whereas the Tories have banned it in England.

In south-west Wales, we have potential not only for onshore wind, but for offshore wind and floating offshore wind. Floating offshore wind can be deployed further out to sea, in deeper waters, where the wind is stronger and more electricity can be produced. We also have ports such as Milford Haven and Port Talbot, which can be used both in the construction phase and in the maintenance of offshore floating wind, but we face two significant dangers: first, that investors do not come to that part of Wales at all; and, secondly, that we do not maximise the opportunities for a local supply chain.

As colleagues and I have previously said, we had a calamitous result in last year's bidding process when not a single company made a bid because the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero was either too inept or too stubborn to heed the industry's warnings about needing to adjust the strike price to take account of the surge in inflation. Although we had no bidders for floating offshore wind, the Irish worked with the industry and had a very successful bidding process.

Then there was the complacency of the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who effectively just said, "There's next time." That is a whole year in which other countries will be stealing a march on us. This year, I ask the Secretary of State to work with Government colleagues to ensure that we get the very best, including the scale of investment we need in floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. We need to have a number of different players taking part in the process.

The UK Government need to be aware of the stiff competition we face from other countries around the world. The investment in our ports and infrastructure has to be really attractive, as business wants clear direction, certainty and incentives from the Government. When I look around and see the investment in the United States due to the Inflation Reduction Act, when I see similar initiatives across Europe and when I see how countries such as Oman—countries that have hitherto been dependent on oil—are now investing massively in renewables and clean steel, the UK has to do more to develop a competitive edge. Ministers need to be cognisant that the problem for our ports is that a huge investment has to be made up front before they see any returns.

The other great danger is that of not maximising the supply chain opportunities. We in Llanelli have a strong engineering and manufacturing tradition, and the development of offshore wind should open up supply chain opportunities, but for this we need a very clear commitment and consistency from Government on the size and the timescale for the development of floating offshore wind. We need realistic support for upgrading our ports, a detailed analysis of the factors that will help or hinder the development of the supply chain industries in Wales, and a proper strategy and understanding of what will make it attractive to develop such supply chains in Llanelli, Port Talbot and the surrounding areas, rather than importing components from abroad. The tragic irony is that, just as we have a tremendous opportunity with the development of offshore wind, we could see the end of steel production at the blast furnaces in Port Talbot while the new electric arc furnace is still not up and running, nor is the quality of its product proven for the uses we may require.

Another essential area of UK Government responsibility is upgrading the national grid to provide the connections and transmission to get the electricity generated to the areas where it is needed. I know that the Welsh Government's Climate Change Minister, Julie James MS, has been raising this matter.

The Crown Estate's Celtic sea blueprint, published this month, gives a lot of detail on the components that will be needed for floating offshore wind, the port infrastructure required and the shipping needed. The report acknowledges the value of Celsa in Cardiff as the UK's primary rebar supplier, but it also refers to other steelmakers. The worry is that the capacity will not be there. The report also identifies a need to grow port capacity in the region, and to use it effectively.

[Dame Nia Griffith]

I stress that we need a joined-up effort from the Government, particularly from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Business and Trade, to ensure that we get the maximum benefit from this fantastic opportunity.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. To protect everyone's time, I will introduce a formal five-minute limit.

3.53 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting this important debate, and I thank the excellent Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). We have heard some fantastic speeches across a broad spectrum.

Some of the oldest churches on my island constituency of Ynys Môn are to be found on the coast, at places like Llaneilian, St Seiriol, St Padrig and St Cwyfan, otherwise known as the "church in the sea", by Aberffraw—it is arguably one of the most beautiful spots in Wales. The early Christian communities settled there because the missionaries who carried the gospel to Ynys Môn arrived by sea and built their simple churches where they landed.

Much like Dewi Sant, who we celebrate tomorrow, these missionaries left an indelible mark on Ynys Môn and the whole of Wales. Many of our place names stem from the age of the saints. The many villages whose name begins with "Llan"—Llanfaethlu, Llanfachraeth, Llanddeusant, Llanbedrgoch and so many more—give us a clue to their origin. The ancient Welsh word "llan" means a clearing in the trees where a church was built.

Some 1,500 years of the Christian church's existence in Wales has left a positive mark on language and culture, on history and geography, and on the values of the people, for which we have Dewi Sant and the many other missionaries of the Celtic age to thank. What many do not realise, however, is that we have the Christian faith and a British monarch to thank for the survival of our Welsh language. In 1588, Queen Elizabeth I, who spoke Welsh, among other languages, and was descended from the Tudors of Ynys Môn, commanded that the Bible be translated into Welsh. That translated Bible gave us the endearing story of Mary Jones, whose Christian faith was so important that she saved for five years and walked 26 miles just to purchase a Bible in her native tongue. In the 18th century, it was the same Welsh Bible that clerics such as Griffith Jones from Llanddowror used to provide Welsh literacy skills to children and adults alike, long before the state had even contemplated building schools. Thus, the Bible became a key tool to teach literacy, as well as religion.

The Welsh language is spoken by nearly 60% of the population of Ynys Môn and for many it is their first language. It is the language in which most council and public sector meetings are conducted, and the language we hear spoken in the streets and shops of Amlwch, Llangefni and Caergybi/Holyhead. It is important to me and my constituents that we preserve our language and culture, which is why I use specially-commissioned bilingual headed paper to write to my constituents. It is also why I have a Welsh website as well as an English one, and why I produce bilingual newsletters and use excellent local translators Alun Gruffydd, Ceri Hughes and the team at Bla Translation in Llangefni when I need to.

Although I grew up speaking English, because my father had to leave Wales to find work, I am doing all that I can to promote and preserve the native language of Ynys Môn. I continue to learn Welsh, and I read my oath of allegiance to this House in Welsh. I also support Anglesey Council's applications for UK Government funding, for example, from the community renewal fund, which is used to promote and support the Welsh language on Ynys Môn.

Above all else today therefore, Mr Deputy Speaker, Dydd gŵyl Dewi reminds us of the impact that faith has had on Wales. Much as the wind and the rain has shaped the Welsh landscape, so the Christian Church has shaped the character of the nation and a British Queen preserved its language. Diolch yn fawr.

3.56 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to be here again on St David's Day, Dydd gŵyl Dewi, to discuss our separate set of circumstances, issues and problems, and to celebrate what makes Wales unique, even if we each have only five minutes to do so today. Calls for a longer period of time in future would be very welcome.

This debate is particularly important this week because we are standing on the threshold of the spring Budget and we all have a duty to recognise how what we do here reverberates directly and indirectly in Wales. As each of us is a representative of the fairest constituency of Wales, we have a duty to aspire to and to seek to bring about fairness and ambition for our country. That bring us to the question of what is in the gift of the UK Government specifically to do to make a real difference.

What Governments can do is invest in what will make a material difference, and of course I would propose that investing in fair consequentials for the funding allocated for HS2 would indeed make a material difference. Not only are we owed about £3.9 billion from that fiasco, but the Prime Minister, in his autumn conference speech last year, promised us the electrification of the north Wales main line route for £1 billion. He did so despite that figure being based on a 2015 case and the Welsh Government saying that no development work has been done on the project in the intervening nine years, and so I imagine that prices have changed. This was like the previous promises that were made of an electrified south Wales main line—things have also gone quiet on that front, with Transport Ministers reluctant to give a timeline. Of course we will have heard, because we are in the run-up to an election, of plans to spend HS2 money in the midlands and the north of England being detailed.

A second thing that would make a real material difference to Wales would be to devolve the Crown Estate, whose asset value in Wales was £853 million, with its marine portfolio amounting to £603 million, two years ago. In 2020-21, the estate made £8.7 million, with £8.6 million from the marine portfolio. That goes directly to Treasury coffers, and 25% goes to the monarch via the sovereign grant. Imagine what we could achieve in Wales with that money.

Devolving the Crown Estate would also give us rights to offshore leasing. It would allow us to have our own green industrial strategy and save bill payers over £300 million each year through offshore wind, all while generating public funds for the Welsh Government to help better people's lives. We need only look at what is evolving in Scotland, where the Crown Estate is devolved, to see what is possible. Twenty projects approved through offshore leasing are projected to raise £28.8 billion of investment, and £700 million would be passed to the Scottish Government for public spending.

So many of the problems that we experience could be solved by fair funding. That requires reviewing and replacing the outdated Barnett formula with a system that delivers equitable funding for all parts of Wales. There are several reasons why the formula must be replaced. First, it does not address our needs; it has not for decades. Wales's funding floor is not based on Wales's current assessed need, but on estimates made by the Holtham commission in 2010, which drew on—wait for it—2001 census data. Secondly, the formula is not clear or transparent. When funding is announced in England, it may take weeks or months to find out if Wales will receive Barnett consequential funding, and if so, how much.

Thirdly, we all know the formula is open to political manipulation, with Wales being robbed of at least £3.9 billion through HS2 funding. Northern Ireland recently received a funding package of £3.3 billion from the UK Government to address its funding problems. If Wales were to receive an equivalent per capita funding package, it would get £5.4 billion. Looking ahead to the spring Budget, I hope that the Government will show, somehow or other, that they intend to tackle the deep structural problems that Wales faces, but I will not hold my breath.

For 14 years, Wales has had a UK Government who ignore and belittle our needs, wants and values, and use devolution—our democracy and our Senedd—as a political punchbag. That is bad for our democracy in the UK and in Wales, and we need to find a better way to deal with the UK as it stands.

4.1 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing the debate, and I echo his remarks on the time available to us.

I was born in Bangor. While it is my great privilege to represent Aberconwy and part of the area where I was raised, it will be my great privilege to contest the new seat of Bangor Aberconwy at the next election. My childhood was also privileged. How else could anyone describe enjoying north Wales's plunging valleys—scrambling up and occasionally rolling down its rugged mountainsides—and learning about its heritage, ways and language? As a result, I grew up in the firm belief that ours—mine—was a community and culture to be cherished. Although I had yet to put an understanding or reason to it, I knew intuitively, in my bones, that people and place mattered. There was also something else: a feeling shared by so many whom I grew up with that I would have to leave this home and north Wales to seek opportunities, develop a career and make something of myself. That was what I determined to change, to the best of my ability, when I became an MP.

Numbers give those ideas shape. The 2021 census revealed that Wales's Welsh-born and working-age populations are shrinking. Young people are leaving. The population is ageing. Fluency in Welsh is declining, as those raised speaking it find that they, too, must leave. This youth drain is not evenly spread. Data from the real estate site Compare My Move reveals that 72% of those moving home in north Wales leave north Wales, but fully 61% leave Wales altogether. Ours has the highest rate of outward movement of any Welsh region.

Analysis by the Higher Education Statistics Agency reveals that movers are disproportionately educated. One in five Welsh-born people leaves Wales, but a full third of all Welsh graduates leave Wales. A recent report by the Wales Governance Centre identified that growth of middle to higher-earning roles in Wales has remained stagnant since 2000. The 2023 Bevan Foundation report "Poverty in Arfon in the 21st century", commissioned by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), for which I commend him, reports that 37% of the jobs there are in the public sector, compared to a UK average of just 18%. The north-west Wales economy is dominated by agriculture, tourism, hospitality, public sector employment and few well-paid jobs. It is characterised by long hours and hard work that is honourable—honest, even—but the picture cannot be described as one of growth and opportunity, or full of prospects for the next generation.

How to respond? The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) correctly identified a need for investment, but the last major investment in north Wales was in the Conwy tunnel nearly four decades ago. A combination of the revised responsibilities of devolution and the lack of ambition and vision from the Welsh Government in Cardiff has led to little response to the challenges. Their report in 2016 identified that congestion, poor connectivity and a lack of resilience—traffic is set to increasing by 2038—represent a threat to locking in the benefits of proposals associated with the nuclear power station in Anglesey. Just last year, another of their reports found that proposed A55 and bridge upgrades could boost investment, but it concluded that such schemes would be

"inconsistent with Welsh Government's aim of reducing car mileage per person by 10%".

It was the same last October. On receiving news of the UK Government's investment in the electrification of the north Wales mainline, the response of the Welsh Government was that the scheme was not a priority for them.

However, I want to conclude on a note of hope for our young people, and to give clear, real evidence of the prospect of change coming down the line. The creation of a freeport in Anglesey with £26 million of seed funding will ensure that investment, skilled jobs and housing can flow into north-west Wales. An £80 million investment in an investment zone in Wrexham will leverage £1.7 billion more into high-value, advanced manufacturing, and the commitment of £1 billion to electrify the north Wales mainline carries the potential for faster journey times, higher frequency of travel, cheaper fares and more freight travel. That bumper investment is a huge step up in our regional competitiveness. There is nothing predetermined about decline. We are kindling the ambition that was once there in the '80s, expanding our infrastructure, liberating and connecting our communities and businesses, and securing for our young people a future that combines both prosperity

[Robin Millar]

and cultural continuity. The future for our young people in north Wales is brighter because of this Conservative Government, and of that I am proud.

4.7 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing today's Welsh affairs debate ahead of St David's day tomorrow. Like others who have spoken and will speak, I am very proud to be Welsh. I am proud of my country, my family, and the community that I represent, which is steeped in true Welsh values. I see them every day—people supporting each other and helping their neighbours, working collectively to tackle the issues affecting our communities. For me, that is most evident during the Everyone Deserves campaign, which has become an institution, not just in Swansea East but in communities across Wales, during the Easter, summer and Christmas school holidays. Everyone Deserves a Christmas 2023 shattered previous records, not just in the number of families that we supported, but in the number of people who answered the call to turn up and help.

It is always bittersweet talking about that, because although I am immensely grateful for all the support, and proud of what we achieve, it saddens me that the demand is so high, and that so many families in our communities are struggling to make ends meet. The cost of living in recent years has crippled households in Swansea and right across Wales. It is not only families struggling during the school holidays; last month, we saw the shocking results of a Bevan Foundation study on pensioner poverty in Wales, which found that one in 10 pensioners is skipping meals, and one in five is going without heating. Indeed, Everyone Deserves saw a rise in the number of pensioners seeking help last Christmas.

I will not talk about every person who helped with the campaign, because there are genuinely too many, but I must mention my local heroes, who show their support time and again. The Swans and the Ospreys, who are legends on the pitch—my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) might disagree—are always there, unloading vans, packing boxes and delivering hampers. The wonderful ladies of the Valley Rock Voices choir, who have the voices of angels and hearts of gold, raise money throughout the year, week in and week out, for Everyone Deserves, and even throw impromptu concerts while packing hampers to keep everyone entertained. Pentrehafod School—I remember its headmaster being born, which is rather scary—helped to launch the Christmas appeal, did bucket collections at the football, and is hosting us again this Christmas, so that we have space to pack the hampers. My very dear friend Mal Pope went one better this year and actually wrote a brand new Christmas song to raise funds for us. I have known Mal literally all my life. I am so proud of him, because he celebrates 50 years in showbusiness this year, and I am so grateful for his unwavering support. There are so many more people whom I could mention, because this really is a whole community effort. In fact, it has spread way out of my community. Last Christmas, for example, we stretched even further, delivering hampers to Swansea East, Swansea West, Neath, Aberavon, Blaenau Gwent and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones).

I hope one day to be able to say, "There are fewer people needing help this year," and that Everyone Deserves has had fewer referrals, but I fear that may be a while away. Until then, it is an honour to provide support. That support may be provided directly into someone's home, involve funding a play session for Swansea's National Autistic Society or Hands Up For Downs, or even go to holding a coffee morning for the Swansea City Disabled Supporters' Association, which tomorrow, on St David's Day, launches the "Everyone Deserves a Cuppa" sessions. I am always proud of people's willingness to help each other, especially those who may need a little extra support.

We are a nation who wear our hearts on our sleeves—I do so more than most, probably. From the hillside to the vales, we thrive on welcoming people. There will always be a welcome for people who come to our home in Wales.

4.11 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd, a dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus i bawb. Rydw i'n caru Cymru, yn enwedig Cwm Cynon, lle ges i fy ngeni a fy magu, ac rydw i'n dal i fyw yno. I am just saying that, like everyone else in this Chamber, I love Wales, but especially Cynon Valley, where I was born and raised, and where I still live.

In our history, our plentiful natural resources have generated vast wealth. Sadly, though, the people of Cymru who created that wealth have not reaped all the benefits from it. Our wealth has been extracted. The profits to be made, whether from coal and steel, or, increasingly, from wind and waves, have been siphoned off by a tiny few,s while the many who helped to create and generate it suffer poverty, hardship and inequality.

This year, we commemorate 40 years since the miners' strike, when a Tory Government took on the coal mining industry, decimating local communities in south Wales in the process. Although the heavy industries that defined the Cynon Valley have retreated, the extraction continues in different guises. Almost 3,000 jobs are under threat at the Tata steelworks in Port Talbot. In Cynon Valley, the wind farms atop our hills are owned by the Swedish state, and the sandstone that makes up the steep valley sides is extracted for profit by a German multinational.

This is the story of Cymru's past and present, but it does not have to be the story of Cymru's future. In recent years, we have seen an unprecedented recentralisation of power in Westminster, which forces through legislation that conflicts with the position of the Welsh Government and the people of Cymru. Today, the Senedd has voted to withhold legislative consent to the anti-boycott Bill that was passed here in Westminster.

The final report of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales last month is a landmark moment in Cymru. It concludes that

"the status quo is not a viable option for providing stability and prosperity for Wales."

It proposes three options: enhancing devolution; a federal structure; and independence. The commission's proposals provide an opportunity for a much-needed overhaul of both political and economic power for Cymru, because the prevailing neo-liberal economic orthodoxy is inextricably linked with current constitutional arrangements.

On the economy, there are a number of demands to be made of the UK Government if it is to begin to redress the economic imbalance. They should replace the Barnett formula with a fair, needs-based funding system, and secure prudential powers, increasing the borrowing cap and winning an increased reserve for Wales. They should fund the safety of the 2,500 coal tips requiring £600 million of remediation works, a legacy of Welsh coal production, and ensure that the former mine workers are compensated properly, as demanded by the national mineworkers pensions campaign. The UK Government should uphold the forced-Brexit promise to Cymru, pay the Welsh Government the £1.2 billion owed and give them the reins of power on that. They should pay the billions of pounds in High Speed 2 consequentials. Finally, they should ensure that the £850 million of revenue from the Crown Estate in Cymru can be used to build a Welsh sovereign fund.

Such measures would give Welsh Government greater power to invest in big-ticket initiatives to transform the economy in the long term, whether that be major renewable generation projects or large-scale retrofitting of homes. The independent commission's proposals provide the opportunity for a future Cymru where we not only generate wealth, but retain and reinvest our wealth in our communities for the benefit of all, and in a way that tackles the climate crisis. This new approach of community wealth building—cymunedoli—is gaining traction from Blaenau Ffestiniog in north Wales to my constituency.

To conclude, none of that is possible unless we gain the involvement and confidence of the people of Cymru. The existing democratic deficit—the disconnection between conventional politics and the people of Wales—is extremely serious. Democracy is not just about voting once every five years, so that we can sit in Westminster or Cardiff representing or misrepresenting people; it is about giving people a voice, working collaboratively to bring about, for me, a socialist future for the people of Wales.

4.16 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to contribute to this St David's Day debate, although I add my own concerns about the lack of time. I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, to hear you say that in future we might have longer to discuss all the many important issues that face Wales.

I congratulate the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), and thank him for securing the debate and for the way in which he has chaired the Select Committee. In his opening remarks, he mentioned that we have in recent years taken a broad view of the issues facing Wales and its communities, none more so perhaps than the changing population of Wales and the demographic trends that we have witnessed not just recently but over decades. The hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) touched on that important point. The dynamic, I am afraid, affects Ceredigion just as it does his part of north Wales. It has long been the case that young people who grow up in Ceredigion leave for study or for work and seldom come back. The 2021 census reported that, sadly, Ceredigion's overall population has declined by some 5.8%, which is a remarkable figure, the largest decrease anywhere in Wales.

Within those figures, there is a story of real change in the demographic make-up of Ceredigion: fewer young people—children and young adults—and therefore a higher proportion of the population over 65 years of age. Indeed, Ceredigion has a remarkable demographic make-up, in that 13% of its population are under the age of 15 and 25% are over the age of 65. That is a problem that we should be considering in both Westminster and Cardiff, because it has real consequences for the ability to deliver public services in an effective and appropriate manner.

That also has something to do with the ability to ensure that we have vibrant communities. I do not want—I think no one else in the Chamber would want—parts of Wales, be that in west Wales or elsewhere, just to become places that shut for half the year, only coming to life during the summer months. We want a vibrant economy through the year, where young people can expect to pursue exciting careers in the place in which they were born and raised.

Others have mentioned investment, and I want to touch on the importance of investing in digital connectivity as part of the solution to develop the economy of rural parts of Wales. That is something I have raised in this Chamber before. Sadly, Ceredigion does not have a very good record when it comes to digital connectivity. Access to the internet has long been an essential, not a luxury, for people in the modern age, but our access to full gigabit broadband is constrained to just 37% of households compared with 76% for the UK as a whole, and 10.7% of households in Ceredigion receive broadband speeds below 10 megabits per second—the equivalent UK figure is 3.6% of households.

Although progress has been made in recent years, much more needs to be done. Not only would that help to ensure that people can access essential services, which are increasingly going online, but it could prove a bit of a boost for the local economy. I am very pleased to say that some companies are looking to relocate their head offices to Ceredigion, in the few villages and towns where we do have full gigabit broadband, because, as long as they have access to the internet through a reliable full gigabit connection, they do not mind being in west Wales—in fact, it is an advantage, and that can be quite an advantage for us, too, if we are serious about developing the rural economy.

In the moments that I have left, I will make a plea to the Secretary of State, because I know that he is also keen on rural broadband. Project Gigabit—the UK Government scheme—has been in existence for a few years now, but progress in rural areas is still too slow. In Ceredigion, we are still waiting to understand which premises will be connected in the next iteration of the scheme, and those who will not be connected will need to find alternative solutions. The sooner we have clarity, the better, because the quality of the lives and the services that can be accessed by those without connectivity are much diminished. If we could have greater prominence and priority for the connection of rural areas, I would be very grateful. More specifically, perhaps the Secretary of State could suggest to his Cabinet colleagues that they work outside-in for the next round of Project Gigabit, so that rural communities are connected first.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Appropriately, we have two Joneses to end the Back-Bench contributions to the debate. I call Ruth Jones.

4.21 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very pleased to be able to speak in this shortened but perfectly formed debate. I pay tribute to the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. This is my fifth St David's Day as the Member of Parliament for Newport West, and I want to use the few minutes available to me to talk about what is best about Newport West and Wales. I will touch on what we need and how my community represents some of our best qualities as a nation in our United Kingdom.

I also take this chance to send my best wishes to our First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS, who will stand down at some point in the coming months. Mark has worked tirelessly for Wales, often at great personal sacrifice to himself and his family. We all continue to mourn the passing of his wife, Clare. On behalf of the people of Newport West, I thank him for his service to our country and his commitment to public service. We wish him well.

As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, Wales is the land of song, and Newport has long played a role as a beating heart for new and emerging music, including the successful Goldie Lookin Chain, an absolute favourite of my predecessor, the late Paul Flynn MP. More generally, Wales has seen the prowess of Dame Shirley Bassey, Tom Jones, the Manics, Stereophonics, Feeder and Super Furry Animals—I could go on. I must not forget our hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who have voices that are second to none.

Acts, bands and singers cannot thrive unless they have spaces to perform, and in Newport West, I dare say that we have one of the best spaces in Wales: Le Pub, a welcoming, community-owned independent music and arts venue. It is a gem in the heart of Newport city centre, and I acknowledge the wonderful Sam Dabb, who is the inspiration, brains and hard work behind that wonderful venue.

Newport West is soon to have another live music venue in the form of the 500-seat capacity Corn Exchange. I checked before the debate, and the first show will be by the band The Bug Club. Before hon. Members go rushing to get tickets, I must tell them that it is sold out—sorry. There will be many more shows and bands performing there in future, however, so I encourage all Members to look at the events calendar and to come and see us in Newport West to hear something a little different and to enjoy our hospitality.

I would also like to acknowledge Barnabas Arts House, an independent art gallery run by Janet Martin—another venue that I encourage Members to add to their bucket list. The transformative nature of art can break out of set spaces; we have seen that in Newport at the Place of Wonder, a collaboration of 12 artists also led by Janet Martin, which has transformed Ruperra Lane from a derelict passage to an astonishing art haven.

It would take too long to name all the successes in Wales that have planted their roots in Newport soil, whether that is the international triumph of Tiny Rebel, the local coffee found at the Rogue Fox, or the small business of the wedding venue in the West Usk lighthouse. All are rooted in my constituency, and I deeply appreciate being surrounded by such entrepreneurs and to have the chance to represent them in this place.

Of course, I cannot miss the opportunity to give a big shout-out to the semiconductor cluster in south Wales, as well as Newport Wafer Fab and all the brilliant workers there, who are crying out for certainty, clarity and a coherent strategy from the Government. Hopefully, in his wind-up today, the Secretary of State will be able to give us some positive news—we can live in hope.

The past 14 years have been difficult, but I do not want to dwell on them today. Instead, I will say to all the teachers, NHS staff—professionals and volunteers—carers, transport workers, council officers and everyone else who lives, learns and works in Newport West and Wales, "Thank you for all you do to make our nation and this country what it is today." However, I cannot end my speech without mentioning steel. Steel produced, recycled and repurposed in Wales is as Welsh as it gets, from Port Talbot to Llanwern and Sims Metal and Island Steel in Newport West. We all want a transition to green steel production, but that must be a just transition. We need to utilise a blend of technologies, because decarbonisation must not mean de-industrialisation.

As we mark St David's day 2024, we have the chance to champion all the great and good that makes Wales what it is today; to appreciate what we have in Wales, and acknowledge that we could have so much more. We are not far from having the chance to deliver that change with a change of Government here in Westminster. The people of Wales need it, and they deserve it too—the sooner the better.

4.27 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I start by echoing the thanks given to the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Today, I will focus on a small number of key issues that are facing the communities I represent—areas where I believe this Government could be doing more to help, and in some cases, a lot more. The first issue I wish to raise is that of the once great Post Office, the foundation of a strong community spirit, which we in Wales are hugely proud of. In recent memory, almost every city, town and village had a local post office, once called the "front office for government". Local sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses knew their customers and could offer a wide range of government, financial and postal services.

Post offices were once the hub of every community—a trusted British service that was the envy of the world and the fabric of our communities—but sadly, that is now a thing of the past. We are all familiar with the truly appalling way in which the Post Office has treated its own loyal staff in the Horizon scandal, but the culture at Post Office Ltd seems to be ingrained. Post Office managers are turning their back on our communities and secretly closing post offices without any public consultation. It is an all too familiar pattern: a sub-postmaster or sub-postmistress retires or resigns. Post Office bosses initially claim that the closure is temporary, and promise to update elected representatives in 12 months if the branch is still closed. A whole year passes; with vital services closed, residents make alternative arrangements

through necessity. Post Office managers then claim that it is simply not viable to reopen the branch, as there is no customer base. Is there any wonder, if a branch has been closed for a whole year?

The Post Office has pulled that trick in Merthyr Tydfil. Five years ago, Treharris post office closed when the sub-postmaster left, and no replacement has been provided. Just last week, the sub-postmaster in Pantysgallog resigned, and the Post Office—which initially said that it would be a temporary closure—was forced to admit that it had no plans to recruit. Post offices are being closed, almost always permanently, and there is zero consultation with the communities that use them. This arrogance from the Post Office cannot continue. The Government must change the rules so that if a sub-postmaster or sub-postmistress leaves and there are no plans to recruit, Post Office Ltd must consult with residents and elected representatives. That is the very least that our communities deserve.

I also want to talk about the cost of petrol and diesel, which continues to be a major issue for people right across the country. Motorists filling up their car in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney are paying considerably more than those in areas just a few miles away—often as much as 10p per litre more. I have been campaigning on the impact that this petrol pump rip-off is having on residents in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, and have asked retailers to explain why prices are so much higher; none has been able to provide any reasonable justification.

I am afraid that, to many of my constituents, that looks like price gouging, and I agree. I have encouraged motorists to use apps such as PetrolPrices, but with prices remaining comparable in the local area, there is little scope to shop around. In Northern Ireland, the Consumer Council published a fuel price checker in September 2020, which has helped to keep fuel costs below those in Wales and England. People are continuing to suffer because of the Conservatives' cost of living crisis, and I believe that the Government must do more to ensure there is genuine competition and to end the petrol pump rip-off in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

The last area on which I would like to focus is pension credit. As we know, the Tory cost of living crisis has hit pensioners particularly hard. It should shame the Government to their very core that almost 1 million pensioner households across the UK are estimated to be missing out on vital support from pension credit, with a staggering £2.1 billion of pension credit left unclaimed. Just think what that £2.1 billion could do for pensioners who are struggling to pay their bills. Working with the citizens advice bureaux in both Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly, I organised a pension credit day of action, when in a single day we helped people claim over £200,000 in missing benefits. Just imagine what the Government could do if they really wanted to. Ministers must do better in getting cash out of the Treasury and into pensioners' pockets.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to end by taking the opportunity to wish a very happy St David's Day—dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus—to you and to all those celebrating tomorrow.

4.31 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): May I say what a pleasure it is to speak once again in this annual, if sadly truncated, debate on St David's Day? I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on once more putting in the leg work to make sure that we had the opportunity for such a wide-ranging and good-natured debate on matters Welsh.

I was not intending to mention the rugby, mostly out of politeness, but the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) raised the three straight defeats. I have to say, from a Scottish perspective, that we gave Wales every chance in the second half, but perhaps I had better just move on. Just to say that the SNP wishes everyone in this House and beyond a very happy St David's Day when it comes.

This is always a good opportunity to look back at history, but also to look forward. In looking forward, there is no issue of greater import, I would argue, to young generations than the climate, the energy transition and the economy, and we need to get all those parts working together, as the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) said so powerfully in her own contribution.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke about the role that the Crown Estate has to play in that. I can speak from the perspective of Scotland, and when the Crown Estate was devolved, the Scottish Government used that to forge ahead in granting licences for over 25 GW of offshore wind development, which in many respects puts us at the forefront of offshore wind development globally. That is double the UK's existing offshore capacity, and it will create high-quality jobs and draw in significant investment.

Having that power devolved has clearly been a huge benefit in Scotland, and as the hon. Member for Cynon Valley said—she did not quite say this, and I hope I am not putting words in her mouth—it is beyond time that Wales was able to directly benefit from its own resources, instead of only being able to catch a little bit on the way past as those resources are exported.

Those on the Treasury Bench sometimes get quite excited whenever that is brought up in the Chamber, but in light of the failure of the wind auctions, as the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) pointed out, we can see why. I think this is an area where the UK Government are in danger of being on the wrong side of Welsh opinion. YouGov conducted a poll that found that 58% of people in Wales support devolving the Crown Estate to Wales. That has also come out as a recommendation of the independent commission on the constitutional future of Wales, alongside other matters such as the devolution of justice and the devolution of railways, with a fair funding settlement to go along with them.

Another telling headline, at least from my perspective, from the independent commission's report was the willingness of that cross-party body to say that independence for Wales was a viable option for Wales's constitutional future. That might bring mixed reactions but I would say, from my perspective as a supporter of Scottish independence, that being able to get such a group to agree on that point is a pretty positive place to be, because it shows the respect there has to be between the different views on the constitutional position.

Too often in Scotland attempts are made to shut down debate around independence as if it is in some way too difficult or even, implausibly, unviable. The question should not be about whether this could happen, but should always be about whether it should happen; that is a good place for a respectful debate to take place.

[Richard Thomson]

Support for independence in Wales now regularly polls at about 30% with apparent majority support among those aged under 34, so this discussion will find itself in the public domain to a greater extent in the years ahead.

Robin Millar: I have never seen a poll showing any more than 20% in favour of independence.

Richard Thomson: I am not about to open up my phone to look at the exact polling, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman after the debate to show him the figures and apologise if I am wrong or claim a pint if I am correct.

Beth Winter: On the point about the independent commission, which is a landmark moment, does the hon. Gentleman that it is really important that the commission did not pick any of those three options but instead said very strongly that it was up to the people of Wales to decide? Does he agree that that is the right way forward?

Richard Thomson: I absolutely agree with that point. The principle of consent is enshrined in the Good Friday agreement for Northern Ireland and implicit in that is that it is a decision for the people. I would argue that that is the position Scotland ought to be in—it is a position for the people—and of course it is for the people of Wales to decide how to form a Government best suited to their needs and to then bring whatever pressure they can through the ballot box to bring that about.

Two other recommendations came out of the commission that struck me: the need to secure a duty of co-operation and parity of esteem between the Governments of the UK; and that the Sewel convention ought to be strengthened. That is something on which a Labour Government in Cardiff and an SNP-led Government in Edinburgh could probably find a lot of agreement. My party is often happier to find ourselves in agreement with the Labour party than the Labour party is to find itself in agreement with the Scottish National party, but there are examples that creep up where the Scottish Labour party appears to be at variance with its colleagues in Wales and I would like to use my remaining time to highlight one example.

When the UK Government find their record under attack, they point the finger, not always fairly I would say, at the record of the Labour Government in Wales, and in turn that Labour Government in Cardiff point a finger back about the funding settlement that is in place and it being imposed by the UK Government. Yet when Labour in Scotland tries to criticise the Scottish Government, it seems completely oblivious, in a way its Welsh counterparts are not, to the funding strictures also in place in Scotland. I do not know whether Welsh Labour ever speaks to Scottish Labour, but if they have not swiped right on each other yet, I would be more than happy to effect the introductions—I would be very happy to set up a blind date if that would be helpful.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will join me in wondering about the fact that nobody would come forward to recommend the status quo and the commission did not do so, because there are evidently no advantages to the status quo in the present devolution settlement.

Richard Thomson: Time is short and the right hon. Lady makes her point very deftly as always, but I want to come back to the point from the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire about the proposed expansion of the Senedd and the electoral system. I have to say that having multi-Member constituencies is not a new thing. They exist in Northern Ireland and also in Scotland for the regional lists, and they exist in local government here, and yes, of course, elected representatives treat people without fear and without favour, and without regard to who anyone voted for or even if they voted at all. *[Interruption.]* Yes, really, and certainly that is how any elected representative worth their salt will go about things. Conservatives, at least as I always understood it, used to be in favour of consumer choice and this means voters have an element of consumer choice in terms of who they wish to take their concerns to, or indeed if they wish to engage the services of more than one Member. There are examples which I would be more than happy to discuss with the right hon. Gentleman later, because it really is not the end of the world, as he is portraying it to be.

4.39 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair again for this annual debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also thank the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing the debate, and I gently echo his sentiments about the time we have for this debate today. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and all colleagues present for their contributions to what is always a wide-ranging debate on Welsh affairs.

I will mention just a few contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) talked about rugby and cockles. My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) gave a great speech about rail infrastructure, renewable energy, offshore wind delays and steel. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is formidable, and she spoke about her "Everyone Deserves" campaign. If she asks you to help, you dare not say no, Mr Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) talked about our proud industrial past. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) talked about music and culture in her constituency, and I am very much looking forward to visiting the Corn Exchange this weekend. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) talked about two very important issues: post office closures, which I entirely recognise from the experience of my constituents in Cardiff Central, and the Government's poor roll-out of pension credit.

St David's Day is a time to celebrate Welsh heritage and national identity, and the Labour party is fiercely proud of our Welsh heritage. Ever since devolution, delivered by a Labour Government, Labour-led Welsh Governments have delivered positive change for the people of Wales: free prescriptions, free school lunches for all primary schoolchildren, the highest number of nurses and consultants in the Welsh NHS for a decade, the protection of the NHS bursary, unlike in England,

and a ban on fracking, unlike in England, and those are just a few. Labour is the party of devolution. We are committed to reinforcing the status of the Senedd.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Jo Stevens: The right hon. Lady has made several contributions, so I will carry on, if she does not mind. We are committed to reinforcing the status of the Senedd, strengthening intergovernmental working and pushing power out of Westminster and into the hands of our communities.

Wales is brimming with potential. Yesterday, pupils from my constituency from St Philip Evans Catholic Primary School in Llanedeyrn came to Parliament, and I met them and their teachers at the end of their day here. They were fascinated by what they had seen and they gave me quite an enthusiastic grilling, with excellent questions, but they, like all children from across Wales, including those who visit Parliament's wonderful education centre—I thank all the staff there for the tremendous job that they do—are our future. We all have a responsibility to make sure that they have a good future, full of the opportunities that they deserve.

I am ambitious for a future fuelled by the talent and innovation I have seen up and down Wales. I am proud of our roots in industry. Industry has been our history, and it can be our future, too, but the chaos and failure of the Government risk squandering that future. My hon. Friends have rightly mentioned steel several times today. Steelmaking is the lifeblood of communities across Wales, the backbone of our local economies and the foundation of our manufacturing capability, and that is why the deep cuts to jobs mooted at Port Talbot are a kick in the teeth.

Instead of having a proper industrial strategy like Labour, Conservative Ministers have compounded the risk to likelihoods, forking out £500 million in taxpayers' money to see up to 3,000 people made redundant and forfeiting our ability to make virgin steel. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade—not known for diplomacy, I might add—said that Wales should consider it a win, and the Welsh Secretary said that it is mission accomplished on saving Welsh steelmaking. I am afraid that that attitude shows casual indifference to the thousands of people across Wales who have so much at stake here, and it shows a fundamental misunderstanding of our Welsh economy and a total disregard for the need to preserve the UK sovereign steelmaking capability.

However Conservative Ministers try to spin it, the loss of sovereign steelmaking is a fundamental threat to our UK economy and security—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) can chunter as much as he wants. However Tory Ministers try to spin it, that is the truth.

The floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea that we have heard about this afternoon and the new nuclear power plant at Wylfa that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) has been begging for year after year, and which Labour Members want to see, will need significant quantities of steel. Where is it going to come from? In an increasingly uncertain world, the Government are surrendering our sovereign capability to build the Royal Navy ships we need to keep our shores safe and our shipbuilding industry strong.

The Secretary of State has said on numerous occasions that no one will be left behind. He talks about his role as chair of the transition board—a monument to his party's failure to secure the future of sovereign steelmaking in Wales. I want to put a marker down here and now. If these job losses go ahead, I will be holding him to account every single step of the way.

I have seen this happen before. I grew up just take a few miles from Shotton steelworks, which in 1980, under a Tory Government, became scarred by its closure. The resulting loss of 6,500 jobs remains the biggest industrial redundancy on a single day in western Europe. It totally decimated the area. Nearly everyone at my school had family who worked in the steelworks or in the supply chain. The impact of those mass redundancies in our area was felt for years: all those skills and the potential of my generation wasted—the rug pulled from under our feet. I am deeply concerned that we will see that again, but this time in Port Talbot and right across our steel communities.

It is not just steel. On nuclear at Wylfa and on Newport Wafer Fab—the jewel in the crown of our high-tech south Wales cluster—the Government drag their feet while workers and their families nervously wait, jobs and investment go and opportunity withers.

Labour has a different view of how things could be, and we have set out our plan. A UK Labour Government will invest £2.5 billion in the UK steel industry by the end of their first term—that is on top of the Government's earmarked £500 million. We will increase domestic demand for steel by more than doubling onshore wind capacity, tripling solar power and quadrupling offshore wind. We will get Britain building again.

A general election is coming. It is an opportunity for voters to make their voices heard. My pitch to them after 14 years of Conservative Government is this: if people feel it is no longer true that when they work hard they get on, if people are bored and frustrated with watching a chaotic, failed Government more focused on holding their party together than on governing, and if people feel like it is time for a change, they should look to Labour. We can build the economy of the future, create good-quality jobs, drive down energy bills and provide energy security, and we in Wales will play a critical role in powering the whole UK through a decade of national renewal, rekindling Wales's proud industrial roots with the industries of the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Secretary of State.

4.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd, am y cyfle i ateb y ddadl heddiw. Thank you for allowing me to say a few things in this St David's day debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, for bringing forward the debate.

Let me turn straightaway to the comments made by the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens). First, on what has actually been delivered by the Welsh Labour Government in Wales, with due respect, she left a few things out. She did not want to mention that the Welsh Labour Government have delivered the longest

[David T. C. Davies]

waiting lists in the whole of the United Kingdom. She did not want to mention that the Welsh Labour Government are now having to build air filters to blow away the diesel fumes from the ambulances that wait for nine, 10, 11 or 12 hours at a time outside Welsh hospitals. She did not want to mention that the Welsh Labour Government, after more than 20 years of devolution, have delivered the lowest educational standards in the whole of the United Kingdom—that is according to the OECD. She did not want to mention that the 20 mph limit is causing extra congestion in Wales. She did not want to mention that the Welsh Labour Government are damaging the economy by bringing in a ban on any new roads being built.

Jo Stevens: Can I correct the right hon. Gentleman? He keeps repeating this ban on all road building, which he knows is not correct. If hon. Members on the Government Benches want to complain about 20 mph zones, they might want to look at their own Department for Transport, which promotes them, and the Tory-run councils that have introduced them. The right hon. Gentleman wanted 20 mph in his own constituency. The organisers of the anti-20 mph social media groups in Wales are run by a Conservative councillor from Sunderland who—wait for it—has supported the measure in his own patch. You could not make it up!

David T. C. Davies: Like all Members of Parliament, I support a 20 mph limit outside schools, hospitals or other places where there are vulnerable people. What I have never done—and neither have the Conservative Opposition—is to support a blanket 20 mph speed limit. What I would never support is a suggestion of bringing back Severn bridge tolls, which was put forward by a Labour council in Monmouthshire—it is in its own leaflet. What I would never do is bring forward a tax on the tourism industry, which will destroy more jobs in one of the most important industries in Wales.

What I certainly would not do is to tell farmers that they have to put aside 20% of their land for planting trees and other wildlife schemes dreamed up by people who do not know what the countryside is all about. What I would not do is spend over £100 million on just about the only effective job creation scheme the Senedd has ever come up with—to create dozens of extra Senedd Members. The hon. Lady and various others, including the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), mentioned the independent commission, which frankly was not that independent. The commission itself expressed grave reservations about the closed list voting system brought forward by the Welsh Labour Government without any proper discussion with the public upon whom it will be visited.

The hon. Lady wanted to talk about steel, so I suggest that she stop giving false hope to steelworkers in Port Talbot, or suggesting that this has come about as a result of a Government decision. The hon. Lady made a few comments that were simply factually incorrect; I might need to educate her a little about how steel is produced. First, there is no sovereign capability to make steel in a blast furnace, because every single bit of iron ore is bought in from abroad, as is all the coke, not least because the hon. Lady's party wanted to shut down all coalmines because of concerns about the climate emergency. There is no possibility of virgin steelmaking because all the ingredients come from abroad. Secondly, as far as I am aware, none of that steel is being used by the Royal Navy, but steel is being produced for the Royal Navy in the United Kingdom—from Sheffield Forgemasters, and it comes out of an electric arc furnace.

Labour says that it has a plan for steelworkers in Port Talbot. I actually visited Mumbai about two weeks ago and spoke to the global head of Tata, and the head of Tata Steel. They made it very clear that no such plan was put to them by the shadow Front Bench team. There is no plan that they are looking at. The reason that they are shutting down those two blast furnaces is that they are losing over £1 million a day. The only plan that they were going to consider was insolvency, and pulling out of steelmaking in the United Kingdom all together.

The plan that the Government came up with was not a plan of giving half a billion pounds to fire 3,000 people; the Government were presented with a situation where Tata came in with insolvency practitioners and said, "We are pulling out of the United Kingdom." Had it done so, it would have cost 8,000 jobs and 12,000 more in the supply chain. The Conservative Government, which I am proud to be serving, came up with a scheme whereby we put half a billion pounds towards building an arc furnace—a scheme that will save 5,000 jobs and a supply chain. It is absolutely wrong and misleading to suggest that we have given a steel company half a billion pounds to fire 3,000 people, when we have given them half a billion pounds to save 5,000 jobs, and to ensure that steel continues to be made in Wales.

The danger is that the hon. Lady's words are being heard by Tata in India. Many people there will be thinking to themselves, "Do we actually want to continue investing in the United Kingdom if we can't be certain that any deal we have will continue if there is a different Government?" The hon. Lady's words are also going to be seen by workers in Port Talbot, who may be thinking to themselves that there is some secret plan that could save their jobs. There isn't. If the hon. Lady does a little bit of research, she will find out very quickly that there is no plan C. There was a plan A, which would have shut the steelworks and cost every job, or a plan B, which saves 5,000 jobs.

The hon. Lady did not mention anything about the £100 million transition fund. The Government are not going to turn their backs on workers in Port Talbot. The Government have £100 million set aside to make sure that every single person who loses their job has access to the training they need to get further employment. The Government have saved jobs and are standing by the people of Port Talbot. I really hope she will find out a little bit more about it before trying to comment further.

I am also very proud of the work that the Government have been doing to level up across the rest of Wales. Under this Conservative Government, we have been responsible for four growth deals, three rounds of levelling-up funding, two investment zones, two freeports—including one in Port Talbot, which will encourage more industries to come in—the electric arc furnace, and the £1 billion project to electrify the north Wales coast main line. The Government have been doing an enormous amount to put money into Wales.

Following Brexit, the Government promised that farmers would not lose out by one single penny as a result of our leaving the European Union. We calculated what agriculture

was getting during the last control period—it was about £337 million a year—and we made sure that that money continued to be delivered. It is very disappointing, therefore, that the Welsh Government have decided to take that money and plough it into a scheme that will reduce the amount of land available for growing agriculture, increase food miles, and throw 5,000 people out of work. Yes—there will be 5,000 job losses on the Welsh Government's own figures as a result of the agricultural scheme that the hon. Lady's party's Government are planning to bring in.

I will just mention one or two other points in the last minute or so I have left. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) mentioned gigabit connections. I agree with him that we need certainty on where they will be and that there are challenges in rural areas, but I would point out that in 2019 about 11% of properties had a gigabit connection and that has now increased to 69%. The work is going on at pace.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) made a very good point, as did the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), about the cost of living. I am not decrying anything the hon. Lady has done, because she does do a lot of good work, but I again point out that this Government have ensured that pensions and benefits have all gone up in line with inflation. The living wage has gone up in line with inflation. There have been extra payments to pensioners and to those on benefits, and also to those in houses with a disability. That is not to say that that solves all problems. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney also rightly drew attention to the fact that some companies are perhaps not behaving as they should on petrol prices. I agree with him. The Government are following up the recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority to bring forward a scheme to provide extra transparency.

I think I have only about six seconds left, unfortunately; hopefully, a little more time will be allocated to us next time. I apologise to anyone I have not mentioned, although I am certainly not going to forget my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), who continues to champion nuclear. I will continue to work with Members of Parliament and many others to ensure that the floating offshore wind industry goes ahead. I also wish Members Dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus I chi gyd—a happy St David's Day to you all. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

4.58 pm

Stephen Crabb: I thank all Members who participated this afternoon in what has been a very good debate. I am particularly grateful to fellow members of the Select Committee who joined me in the application to the Backbench Business Committee. We thank that Committee for granting the debate. We look forward to future St David's Day debates that are perhaps longer and more expansive.

I was particularly encouraged to hear the speech from the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), which highlighted the opportunity for Wales of floating offshore wind. For a nation like Wales, which does not see many new industrial opportunities come along, that is the opportunity the UK Government and the Welsh Government together should be seizing. We look forward to some good news, hopefully, from the Secretary of State and his colleagues on port funding in Milford Haven and Port Talbot to help capture all the economic benefits that that new industry could bring to our communities. Thank you again, Mr Deputy Speaker, for chairing this St David's Day debate. Dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Let me just say, before everyone leaves, that I have heard very clearly what has been said about the time constraints that all Members had to endure during the debate. I have chaired a few Backbench Business debates in the past that have finished early, but if this debate had been allowed more time, it would clearly have gone the distance, and people would have had the opportunity to say far more things. I will raise that with Mr Speaker tomorrow.

Let me also say that I was at St Margaret's Church yesterday for the memorial service for John Morris, Lord Morris of Aberavon. Not only was it a wonderful service, but hearing the London Welsh Male Voice Choir boom out "Calon Lân" made me feel incredibly proud to be Welsh. It has been an honour and a privilege to chair the debate, and I end by saying: dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus i bawb.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the statement on the security of elected representatives earlier today, I made a measured contribution on the need to protect not only MPs but the public's right to peaceful protest. The Minister for Security appeared to lose control of himself, and said in his response to me that I supported organisations that would "close this Parliament" or "end our democratic processes".

The code of conduct for Members of Parliament states:

"Members shall never undertake any action which would cause significant damage to the reputation and integrity of... its Members generally."

Mr Deputy Speaker, how can you ensure that the code is adhered to by Ministers during difficult discussions? How I can put on the record the fact that I do not support organisations that would close this Parliament or end our democratic processes, and that that is not the goal of organisations such as those that were lobbying MPs and protesting in Parliament Square last Wednesday? People were legitimately protesting about hundreds of thousands of casualties, including and 30,000 deaths, in Gaza in recent months. I found what was said particularly offensive, insensitive and inappropriate, given that much of the House's time today has been taken up by issues relating to abusive language, and threats to Members of Parliament, and to women specifically.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I was not in the Chair at the time, and indeed the Chair is not responsible for the content of Members' speeches, but the hon. Lady has expertly put her views on the record, and I know that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what she said and will pass it on to the Minister.

Young Adults with Spinal Injuries

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

5.2 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate, which I sought on behalf of my late constituent Tom Lazarides and his family, some of whom are present in the Public Gallery. Tom was a 20-year-old student at Durham University when, on 13 June 2020, he dived into a swimming pool and suffered a catastrophic spinal cord injury that left him paralysed.

In preparation for the debate, I reread an interview that Tom's mother Bridget gave to a newspaper in October 2020. In that interview, Bridget spoke about her talented, sporty son, about how loved he was by all who knew him, and about the overwhelming outpouring of support for him from across the country. Bridget's interview was also full of determination—Tom's determination and hers—and hope that, despite the devastating nature of his injuries and the many challenges that he faced, with the love and support of his family and friends and good treatment and care, somehow Tom would be okay. I am sorry to report to the House that Tom Lazarides sadly passed away in November 2023.

Tom and his family were devastated by his injury. Instead of helping them to come to terms with what had happened, and enabling Tom to live as well as possible with his injury, the systems that should have been there to support him failed utterly to deliver the care that he needed. Tom's spinal cord was permanently injured in two places. He was tetraplegic as a consequence, and had many health complications. He had a potentially fatal condition called autonomic dysreflexia, which causes unpredictable and dangerously high spikes in blood pressure. His skin was very fragile, leading to grade 4 bedsores. He had a tracheostomy, leading to communication difficulties. He was unable to cough, leading to repeated inhalation of food particles, which caused pneumonia and pulmonary oedema, and he suffered from muscular complications.

Tom had spent 18 months in hospital, including a year of rehabilitation at Stoke Mandeville. His injuries were permanent and unequivocal. They were well understood by his doctors, and were fully and properly documented. The injuries gave rise to a need for ongoing clinical care from qualified nurses, which could not possibly have been delivered by local authority social care. Tom was discharged from Stoke Mandeville in the autumn of 2021. Under the policy of discharge to assess, he was referred for consideration for NHS Continuing Healthcare funding.

According to the NHS, eligibility for Continuing Healthcare funding is determined on the basis of a person's needs, rather than a particular diagnosis. There should be no limits on the setting where it can be provided or the type of support, and it is determined according to an assessment by the local NHS integrated care board. The assessment comprises two parts: the NHS continuing care checklist, which can be completed by a nurse, doctor, other healthcare professional or social worker, followed by a full assessment undertaken by a multidisciplinary team.

Tom's assessment was completed in January 2022. His family raised concerns with me that the assessment process appeared to start with a blank sheet of paper and did not take into account anything that was already known about Tom's injuries and their impact on his health. For example, he was asked by an assessor whether he got around the house on a Zimmer frame, and to show that he could not use his hands when he was clearly tetraplegic. His family were left with the constant impression that no one involved in the assessment, or in reviewing the decision later in the process, had ever properly read Tom's medical records.

In May 2022, a decision was reached that Tom was not eligible for Continuing Healthcare funding. For Tom and everyone who knew him, the decision was as astonishing as it was devastating. Tom's level of clinical need was crystal clear. As Tom's mother has said to me on a number of occasions, all that needed to happen was for Tom's very clear medical notes to be read. Tom's family appealed the decision. The process was beset by difficulties, including changes of personnel at the case manager level, records being lost and constant delays. Tom found the visits to his home intrusive, and they had a detrimental impact on his already fragile mental health.

There was no prescribed timescale for the assessments and appeals, and no clear point of contact for Tom and his family to liaise with during the process. Tom and his family felt that there was constant pressure for him to move to a care home, despite the study published by Professor Brett Smith 12 years ago, which documented the very poor outcomes for young adults with spinal cord injuries who live in care homes, arising from their lack of agency in the decision to move to the care home, the shortage of properly skilled and qualified staff who can meet the needs of residents with spinal cord injuries, the lack of independence, and isolation. Tom was a bright young person with so much to contribute. What he wanted and needed was care and support at home, so that he could live well with the consequences of his spinal cord injury. In the last few months of his life, Tom repeatedly expressed a wish to end it. He simply could not see a positive future, when the struggle to access the care and support he needed was so difficult.

Tom Lazarides' family have asked me to raise a number of issues that arise from his experience, which indicate the ways in which the healthcare system is simply not working for young adults with spinal cord injuries. The first is the discharge to assess policy. Discharge to assess is not designed for people with a catastrophic injury. What may be appropriate for a frail, elderly person who has had an emergency hospital admission, giving rise to concerns about their care needs at home, or for someone with a progressive condition that may be reaching the point at which more care is needed, is simply not appropriate for someone with a catastrophic permanent injury. It gives rise to a lack of continuity from hospital to home, and requires the person to be assessed by people who do not have the same detailed or specialist knowledge of their needs as the hospital clinicians who have been caring for them as an in-patient.

The second concern is that the patient has no involvement in decisions about their care. Tom was clear and consistent that he did not want to live in a care home. He was a bright and articulate young man whose paralysis should not have resulted in the removal of all agency in his own life, yet the completed decision support tool, the first stage in the assessment process, was submitted without

being checked by Tom or his family. Panel meetings took place in a context of secrecy—about their membership, the dates and times of meetings, and the content of discussions. A system is not delivering patient-centred care when the patient is completely shut out of the decision-making process.

The third concern is the lack of any certainty or transparency about the timelines for decision making. The processes relating to Tom's care took years, and the lack of continuing healthcare support had a profound impact on his day-to-day life during that time. Tom and his family simply had no idea when they would have any news about the next steps.

Everyone, the Lazarides family included, is acutely aware of the pressures on our health and social care system and the need to ensure value for money for the public purse, as well as ensuring safe, appropriate and high-quality care for individuals who need it. Tom's case, however, was not a matter of resources. In the end, following the appeal, the ICB decided that he was eligible for continuing healthcare funding. The tragedy is that his family were only informed of this after he had died.

It is devastating for any young person to suffer a spinal cord injury that has life-changing consequences but, with the right care and support, it is possible to live a good life with independence and dignity. Depression is not inevitable, but poor mental health is sadly all too common. Tom Lazarides and his family encountered a system that seemed incapable of delivering the safe, appropriate, high-quality care and support that he needed and was entitled to. As a consequence, they spent the two years from Tom's discharge from Stoke Mandeville Hospital in the autumn of 2021 to his untimely death in the autumn of 2023 constantly fighting a system that ultimately failed them.

What attention is the Minister paying to the experiences of young adults with spinal cord injury and the quality of care that they are able to access? What action is she taking to ensure that the quality and availability of care for young adults with spinal cord injury is consistent across the country? Will she look at the policy of discharge to assess and its appropriateness for patients with a sudden and permanent life-changing injury? Will she look at the assessment process for continuing healthcare funding and take steps to ensure that a patient's existing healthcare records always play an integral part? Finally, will she take steps to ensure that the assessment process for continuing healthcare funding has increased transparency and accountability, and increased certainty on the timescales and decision-making processes?

No one who reads the facts of Tom Lazarides's injury and subsequent health needs could be in any doubt that he needed long-term nursing care to be safe and to live well with the consequences of his injury, yet the tragedy of his injury was compounded by the failure of our healthcare system to deliver the care that he needed, or indeed to treat him and his family with respect and dignity.

Tom's family have asked me to raise his case, in order to press for accountability and for improvements for others. I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate and for her powerful speech telling us about Tom Lazarides's experience, his tragic accident and his injury. I welcome his family, who the hon. Lady said are here in Parliament today. I offer them my sincere condolences on the loss of Tom, who sadly died in November 2023.

I listened carefully to the hon. Lady's speech, although I did not have advance sight of her comments, and I will do my best to respond. I assure her that I am happy to write to her with further details about the points she has raised this afternoon. I am responding as the Minister with oversight of continuing healthcare and discharge, so I will be able to say more on those points. Particularly in her summing up, she talked more generally about care for people with spinal injury, which can have such a devastating impact and can mean that a person needs a great deal of care from multidisciplinary NHS teams.

I could go into the way NHS England commissions services for spinal cord injuries—there is a national specification and a range of support—but I think I could make better use of the time today by picking up on the question of continuing healthcare and the discharge situation, which the hon. Lady outlined. She described how Tom's family feel that the system failed him and his clearly complex health needs as a result of his injuries. She described the long time he spent in hospital and the long-term rehabilitation he needed, which meant he needed significant ongoing clinical care. She described how he was considered for continuing healthcare and the experience of the eligibility assessment, and how Tom and his family felt it did not take into account his injuries and health conditions, and did not take full account of his medical records. She described how he and the family were then told that he was not eligible. They subsequently and rightly appealed, and I heard how difficult the hon. Lady said that process clearly was for the family and for Tom, with the lack of transparency, the uncertainty, and the feeling that meetings happened without them and their involvement. I heard how Tom felt under pressure to move into a care home, when he really wanted to live well at home. All of us can completely understand that. Anyone, whether a young person such as Tom or someone of old age, wants to live as independently as possible, whatever their health needs at home. I also heard about the experience with discharge to assess.

Clearly, a process is in place for accessing NHS continuing healthcare. The intention of the process is to consider the individual's clinical needs, the combination of those needs and how they come together, and therefore to assess whether somebody is eligible. The intention is to design a package of care around the individual to support them where they wish to live, be it at home or in a care home. First, a checklist is used, which leads to someone having an eligibility assessment. If I understood it correctly, Tom experienced and went through the eligibility assessment, but, as the hon. Lady mentioned, the initial decision was that he was not eligible. I am happy to make some inquiries. As a Minister, I cannot make a call on any particular decision that is made on an individual, but clearly I want always to be assured that the right process has been followed. It is probably helpful if, with the help of officials, I try to seek some further information outside the Chamber from the hon. Lady to see what I can do to understand fully what happened and to be assured as to whether there is anything we need to do to make the process work better, particularly in the circumstance that she has described,

[Helen Whately]

where somebody such as Tom has clearly had some severe injuries. I am also happy to meet her and Tom's family to understand this process better.

The hon. Lady raised a point about discharge to assess and how it did not work for someone with a catastrophic injury. Again, we should pick that up in a conversation outside the Chamber. In general, the purpose of discharge to assess is a good one: to avoid people having long and unnecessary stays in hospital, where we know that frail and elderly people, in particular, are likely to decondition and live less independently as a result. She knows that well from the work that she does on social care. Once somebody has been discharged home, they are often able to live with more independence and regain mobility in a way that was not clear when they were assessed in hospital. Sometimes assessment in hospital will lead to delays and a longer stay in hospital, and to what is called over-prescription, with somebody ending up living longer in a care home when they might have continued at home. In general, discharge to assess is a good thing but, as I say, I am happy to look into the specific question of whether there might be circumstances, such as when somebody has had a very serious injury, when the process works differently. I will take that away.

The hon. Lady made a point about the involvement of patients in decisions about their care. It is fundamental that patients should be involved in decisions about their care, as should families and carers. In many circumstances, the patient and those around them will be the experts on what they will need. They need to be involved in the ramifications of whatever decisions are made. That should take place, but let us investigate further outside the Chamber whether that is working as it should be, together with the points she made about transparency and trying to ensure that people are involved when continuing healthcare is being assessed and considered.

I receive a significant amount of correspondence about continuing healthcare. The NHS has a challenging job to ensure that the decisions go the right way. I know the process can be long and hard for those involved in it. I want to ensure it works as well as it possibly can, so that those who should be eligible receive such care. I understand in Tom's case that, after the appeal, the decision was made that he should be receiving continuing healthcare. How sad that that came after his death and after all the suffering that he and those close to him must have gone through.

I thank the hon. Lady for bringing Tom and his family's situation to my attention. I commend her for her powerful speech and how clearly she put across the concerns. I look forward to speaking about this further outside the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I pass on the deepest condolences of everybody here at the House of Commons to Tom's family, friends and all who mourn his passing. It was a very moving speech.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 February 2024

[Sir Robert Syms *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Colleges Week

1.30 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Colleges Week 2024.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Robert, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate during Colleges Week, which runs from Monday until tomorrow. I should also point out that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for further education and lifelong learning, the secretariat for which is provided by the Association of Colleges, to which I am grateful, among others, for the briefings and support they have provided ahead of the debate.

This debate essentially falls into three parts: first, celebrating the great work that colleges do all around the country; secondly, highlighting where Government policy and support are working; and thirdly, pointing out the areas where more work and attention are required so that colleges can realise their full potential for the benefit of the people and the communities they serve.

It is important, first, to celebrate the great work that colleges are doing. All around the UK, they are an essential part of our education system. They are firmly embedded in their local communities, where they are fully cognisant of the opportunities and challenges and the strengths and weaknesses of their local economies. They enable people of all ages and backgrounds to realise their full potential. They are key players in boosting local regeneration and levelling up and in eliminating the gaps in skills and productivity, which are in danger of ever widening. They also play a vital role in preparing people for the jobs of tomorrow, which, all of a sudden, are with us today in areas such as digital, artificial intelligence and the low-carbon fields.

Colleges touch all our lives. English colleges educate 1.6 million students every year and employ approximately 103,000 full-time equivalent staff. Some 925,000 adults study or train in colleges, and 608,000 16 to 18-year-olds study in colleges. The average college trains 950 apprentices, and 100,000 people study higher education in a college. Twenty-three per cent of 16 to 18-year-olds and 27% of adult students are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Twenty-six per cent of 16 to 18-year-olds in colleges have a learning difficulty or a disability, and 58,000 college students are aged 60 and over. In summary, colleges do their job very well. Ninety-two per cent of colleges were judged to be "good" or "outstanding" for overall effectiveness at their most recent inspections. At times, however, colleges feel that they are doing their job with one arm behind their backs, and I shall touch upon that shortly.

I will briefly highlight the great work that East Coast College does in Waveney. It now operates from two campuses, in Lowestoft in my constituency and in Great Yarmouth in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis). It fully understands the challenges of coastal communities, the communities in which it is deeply immersed, and works very closely with local authorities, local businesses, the James Paget University Hospital, CEFAS—the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, where the Government's marine scientists are based in Pakefield next to Lowestoft—and the two universities that cover the area, the University of East Anglia in Norwich and the University of Suffolk, which has its headquarters in Ipswich but operates across Suffolk.

In Lowestoft, East Coast College is an active member of the place board, of which I am also a member, which has overseen the projects carried out as part of the town deal. Its work focuses on two areas: first, the need in the health and care sector to support an ever growing elderly population. It has put in place the Apollo project —not a journey to the moon, but a two-year workforce programme designed to address recruitment and retention challenges in the health and social care sector. Secondly, opportunities are emerging in the energy sector. Among other projects, there are the offshore wind farms anchored off the East Anglian coast and the Sizewell C nuclear power project just down the coast.

In recent years, significant capital improvements have been carried out at East Coast College. Those include the Energy Skills Centre in Lowestoft and the eastern civil engineering and construction campus at Lound, midway between Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. At present, the college's challenges centre more on revenue funding, and its needs mirror those of the rest of the sector, to which I shall now turn.

The good news is that, in recent years, there has been a realisation of the vital role that colleges play in providing people with the skills they need to realise their full potential, to address regional inequalities and to ensure that the economy fires on all cylinders. Some good initiatives have been put in place, such as the lifelong learning entitlement, and funding has improved, albeit from a low base. That said, significant challenges remain; some are structural and long term, and others derive from the cost of living crisis and the long and sharp tail of covid.

The Local Government Association points out that

"the national employment and skills system is too centralised",

"short-term" in outlook, and that

"no single organisation is responsible or accountable for coordinating programmes nationally or locally. This makes it difficult to plan, target and join-up provision."

It also identified that

"poor-quality, insufficient and fragmented CEIAG"—

careers education, information advice and guidance—

"is a persistent and key barrier to youth employment",

notwithstanding the introduction, finally, of the Baker clause in the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022.

The Edge Foundation focuses on the problem that is all around us: the skills shortages that are getting worse. The shortages are numerous and have grown significantly. The rate of skills investment is in decline, and skills shortages have significant costs for UK businesses, the economy and the environment. The engineering sector is important to me locally, as engineering skills will be much in need to fuel the transition to a low-carbon economy. EngineeringUK, in its "Fit for the future"

[Peter Aldous]

engineering apprenticeships inquiry, has highlighted the variability and quality of training provision and the problems in recruiting teachers and trainers.

Colleges Week normally takes place in the autumn. This year, however, for good reason, it has been brought forward to the spring—not only so that it takes place in advance of the general election campaign, to provide the sector with every opportunity to set out its stall, but so that urgent representations can be made ahead of next week's Budget to meet many of the challenges that I have highlighted.

I confess that I was expecting the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), to be here, but it is great to see the Minister for Schools in his place, because he and I have discussed this issue a great deal. I would be most grateful if he conveyed some of these asks to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in advance of his Budget statement next Wednesday.

As I have mentioned, there are skill gaps across the country in all sectors of the economy. To eliminate those gaps, I urge the Government to invest the extra money raised from the immigration skills charge to enable colleges to tackle the urgent priorities identified by employers in the local skills improvement plans that are now being rolled out across the country and those that are found in relation to the increased number of skills shortage vacancies revealed in the latest Department for Education employer skills survey.

At the Conservative party conference in Manchester in October, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister rightly announced a 10-year plan to give young people a better start in life through the advanced British standard, with more hours, a broader curriculum, and extra help for those who have struggled up to the age of 16. Those ambitions are the right ones, but if they are to be achieved —if there is to be any chance of having the teachers, the trainers and the facilities in place to deliver them—we must start investing now. To do that, three issues need to be addressed.

First, the pay gap between those teaching in colleges and those teaching in schools must be closed. It has been widening in recent years and now stands at £9,000 per annum. That pay gap cannot persist if the advanced British standard is to be a success.

Secondly, colleges are disadvantaged when it comes to VAT. Unlike for schools, VAT is not reimbursed for colleges—it cannot be recovered. Colleges in England were reclassified as public sector organisations back in 2022 and are now subject to all the controls that apply to academies, but, unlike academies and schools, they are unable to reclaim VAT under the refund scheme in section 33 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994. That could be addressed by amending that Act. The funds that would be released, totalling around £210 million, could then be reinvested, helping colleges to deliver the improvements to the school system that the Government seek.

Thirdly, as I mentioned, covid has had a long and sharp tail, impacting harshly on young people's education. The Government recognise that and are providing funding for tuition support to help those with the greatest need to obtain the necessary grounding in English and maths and to catch up on the vocational courses where assessments were deferred. That is good news, but the indications are that the demand for those lessons and courses is still growing. It is estimated that approximately 40,000 more students than last year need to resit their English GCSEs, with 20,000 needing to resit maths. I therefore urge the Minister to do all he can to ensure that the funding for that tuition support is extended.

I am reaching my conclusion, Sir Robert. I am sure that others in this debate will refer to FE and colleges as being the Cinderella of the education system. Indeed, that was right in the past, but my sense is that all parties across the House have recognised the error and folly of that. We are now, after a long time, travelling down the right road, with the importance of vocational learning as provided by colleges being acknowledged and accepted by all. However, we are driving down this road in third gear and we now need Government to provide resources, support and more policies so that we can quickly and seamlessly move into top gear. If we do that, we shall provide opportunity for many and eliminate all those stubborn gaps that I have referred to a great deal during this speech.

1.45 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this Backbench Business debate and on marking and celebrating Colleges Week.

I want to speak in support of the colleges of our nation, which are such a significant part of our education system. My hon. Friend outlined some powerful statistics when he was making his case so eloquently a moment ago, but one in particular jumped out at me, which is that more than 1.5 million students—1.6 million, in fact —are educated at colleges in England every year.

Colleges play a critical role in delivering the skills that our nation and our economy need. I visited many colleges some years ago when I worked on apprenticeships, and they were great visits. However, there is one feature from them all, which I want to draw out and comment upon: the links between colleges and local employers. Through those links, colleges not only provide the workforce that companies need now, but develop the skills programmes for the future.

We are seeing huge changes in the global economy, as countries face the challenges of sectors and routes to market that are going digital. There is also the overarching challenge of net zero and the consequent decarbonising, and how that is creating new skills, new industries and a requirement for significant training. Colleges are at the forefront of meeting those challenges through skills, based on partnerships and local insight, through apprenticeships, with each college training 950 apprentices, as my hon. Friend mentioned, and through professional development, as careers change and people of all ages need to reskill as industries develop. Further, colleges are training tens of thousands of people aged over 60. It is therefore important to keep investing in these areas for our future national prosperity.

The UK has not valued colleges enough over past decades. There has been some kind of underlying assumption that the system should really be focused on university degrees, which are right for so many but not the only definition of excellence. I see opportunity and

excellence much more widely; I see it in our college network. Spreading the word about the range of choices that people have is one of the benefits of Colleges Week.

I should also congratulate the Minister on a policy change that has quite recently put apprenticeships on the UCAS website. That is a game changer. The feedback I have had from school and group visits in Harrogate and Knaresborough is that that has been a highly successful initiative and people have become aware of apprenticeships. It has almost been like giving them a parity of esteem, which has not been present before. It has certainly boosted knowledge in a very positive way.

We are obviously here supporting colleges today, and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has made a powerful case. It is also fair to say, however, that colleges have not fully received the attention that their success and scale merit. My hon. Friend said colleges were formerly a Cinderella service. That might be a little strong and people have woken up to that; however, Colleges Week presents a great opportunity to pay tribute to all our colleges and all that they achieve.

I want to highlight a major development taking place this week at Harrogate College, and also to congratulate the team at Harrogate College and the Luminate Education Group on their work on it. That development is a £20 million scheme to replace the main building at the college and construct a renewable energy skills hub. In effect, there will be a totally new campus, which is very exciting and a real game changer.

Preliminary work started this week and full construction starts next month. Energy efficiency is being built in and will help the college to deliver its plan to become carbon-neutral by 2035. The upgrade will see state-of-the-art facilities on campus, including a mock hospital ward, an electric vehicle workshop and a construction centre that will focus on renewables and the building methods of the future. Basically, that directly relates to my earlier points about how important the links between colleges and local companies are for the skills that are needed; indeed, it is proof of the wisdom of that policy.

The college principal, Danny Wild, has kept me posted throughout the development of this great project, and I was able to speak with Ministers and do all that I could to help to get it over the line. Of the total budget of £20 million, £16 million comes from the Department for Education's further education capital transformation fund—and transformation is indeed what we are talking about with this development. It will make Harrogate College future proof—the college's words—and consolidate its position as the leading provider locally of T-levels. It is anticipated that the new development will be open for students in the summer of 2025, which really is not long for a project of this scale and ambition.

Apart from providing better facilities for the students, this development will send a major signal that Harrogate College and all that it does are both aspirational and of the highest quality. Basically, students will be equipped with the skills for a new era. When we see college investment and college success, it is not just about small initiatives at the college itself; the economy of the entire area will benefit. We have a strong local economy, but the companies within it often report difficulties in filling vacancies—the unemployment rate locally is 1.8%. This project will help to fill those vacancies, because it will help to tackle skills shortages.

So I say well done to the Harrogate College team. I look forward very much to visiting the college shortly, and I know that there are positive developments right across the country. There is much to celebrate all over the country, but I just wanted to highlight and celebrate this local news. I look forward very much to hearing what the Minister has to say about ensuring that this sector is front and centre in our education system.

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): We now move to the Front-Bench wind-ups, starting with the Opposition spokesman.

1.52 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Robert, and to speak in this debate.

It is right that we pay tribute to the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this debate. I know that he is incredibly passionate about further education and the skills sector, and he has raised a number of very important issues, which I will address. I also acknowledge his work on the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning—I am a passionate supporter of that group—and work of the Association of Colleges, as the secretariat to the group.

I thank all our colleges up and down the country for the vital contribution they make to our national skills system, and to young people and adult learners across the country. In addition to noting the support and advice from the Association of Colleges, it is worth our reflecting on the support and advice that comes from the Sixth Form Colleges Association, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, and our qualification providers, including City & Guilds and others, which have also played an important role in the Future Skills Coalition. In addition, this week, *FE Week* and City & Guilds put on the annual apprenticeships conference, which played an important part in pulling everybody together during this important week.

I acknowledge the contribution made by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who made important points about engagement with employers and about how Harrogate College is helping to meet local skills and workforce needs. That is a story that all our colleges could share, so it was good to hear those examples.

The hon. Member for Waveney said that colleges play an important role around the UK in our skills system and are firmly embedded in our communities. They understand the needs of our local economies, and have played an important role in the development of our local skills improvement plans. Like many other college leaders, Tracy Aust, the principal of West Thames College in Hounslow, who also oversees the Feltham skills centre, has been pivotal in pulling together those voices so that we can better match the skills needs in our local economy with the provision coming through our colleges. That also helps local authorities and other players to develop a deeper understanding of the community learning requirements.

In that context, our FE institutions truly stand as pillars of knowledge and ambition, but they are also beacons of adaptability. They work together to foster an environment that encourages lifelong learning. One of the best parts of my role as shadow Minister is going

[Seema Malhotra]

to colleges across the country to meet and listen to learners and employers. That includes West Thames College and the Feltham skills centre, which do important wrap-around work on employability and mentoring. Logistics apprentices from the Institute of Couriers are in Parliament today to celebrate their achievements. I pay tribute to the chairman of the institute, Carl Lomas, for all he does, with great enthusiasm, including building links and investing in colleges. The apprentices I saw today feel they know him personally. Those relationships and that social capital around our systems are really important.

I have spoken to students studying T-levels, apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications, and adult learners upskilling, at City and Islington College. I have spoken to people working and learning at the National College for Nuclear, and health and aerospace apprentices in Milton Keynes, Newcastle and Liverpool. Last week, I visited South and City College in Birmingham to see the important new facilities for robotics, electric vehicles and so on. This is not just about connecting young people and adult learners with the content of learning, but about giving them hands-on experience with new technologies.

I am launching my colleges tour over the next few months, which will focus on how we are engaging with small and medium-sized enterprises in our communities and what the barriers are. SME apprenticeship levels have been dropping significantly—they have fallen by 49% since 2016—and we absolutely must turn that around.

As a nation, our No. 1 priority is to grow our economy so that we can invest in our public services and greater opportunities for all. To achieve that ambition for growth, we need to invest in human talent to grow our skills and our workforce across all sectors where there are skill shortages. Colleges play an important role in delivering skills for green infrastructure, our creative industries, our life sciences sector, our public services and our everyday economy, including hospitality. All those things require workforces with specialised skills. It is vital that people across our country have pathways into high-quality vocational training, secure, enjoyable work, and opportunities to upskill. I have talked to adult learners who have told me that the qualifications they did five or 10 years ago have left them out of date, compared with those coming through the system now. Given that nine out of 10 adults are likely to need some retraining in the next decade, that will be an important part of all our futures.

Colleges are uniquely placed to deliver on this combined mission of economic growth and improved life chances for all. They provide an exceptionally diverse range of education and training courses to meet the needs of local economies. They are centres of lifelong learning for people of all ages and at all levels, as the hon. Member for Waveney so effectively highlighted. But just as it is important to acknowledge the successes of colleges this week, we must also acknowledge the challenges they face, a number of which were eloquently outlined by the hon. Member.

As examples, apprenticeship numbers have fallen, real-terms funding for the further education sector has fallen to record lows, and vital decision-making powers have been taken away from local communities. The Conservatives have also overseen more than a decade of decline in skills and training opportunities. I say that because apprenticeship starts have fallen by 200,000 since 2017—it is important to recognise the figures. In every region, apprenticeship starts have fallen since 2010, and small and medium-sized enterprise engagement with apprenticeships has fallen by 49% since 2016.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I apologise to the Chair, as I will not be able to stay to the end of the debate as I have a meeting with the head of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to talk about progression and issues of this sort.

With apprenticeships, it is very important that we compare like with like. It is a great thing that all apprenticeships now involve a year of work and a qualification. That was not the case under the last Labour Government.

I want to put on the record my tribute to the Heart of Worcestershire College and the Worcester Sixth Form College, for the fantastic work they do. I commend to both Front Benches the report from the Education Committee on post-16 qualifications, which made a number of recommendations, including increasing the number of youth apprenticeships and setting a target for the proportion of apprenticeships that lead people into work.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution and for sharing the work of the colleges in his area, with which I know he is well connected. I acknowledge his work as Chair of the Education Committee, including on that report.

It is important that we are clear about the figures, but it is also important to recognise that things have got harder, particularly for small businesses, since the implementation of the levy. We need to address those challenges. For level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships, the numbers are falling in proportion to apprenticeships as a whole—these are challenges that the Education Committee has rightly highlighted. It is important to make sure that there are pathways post-16 for those who may not have the same qualifications at GCSE. That is a point I will refer to further in my remarks.

It is also true that the Government are on track to miss the 67% achievement rate, with almost half of apprenticeships not being completed. There are a range of reasons for that. Level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships have seen some of the worst falls; there has been a 69% fall in the number of starts at level 2 and a 21% fall in the number of starts at level 3. In addition, too many young people and adult learners say they are not aware of the opportunities available to them. Colleges have also seen real-terms funding cuts under successive Tory Governments. Since 2010, spending per pupil has fallen by 14% in colleges and 28% in school sixth forms.

Labour will put colleges at the heart of our plans for breaking down barriers to opportunity and boosting Britain's skills. Central to that is our plan to develop technical excellence colleges, enabling colleges in local skills improvement plan areas to specialise in the particular needs of their local economies and businesses, driven by LSIP priorities. We know that Whitehall does not have all the answers for what is needed in our local communities. That is why we will continue to build on the already begun process of devolving and combining power and budgets for skills and adult education to combined authorities and local areas, so that the right decisions and right priorities are led by those with the most local information, who are in the right places.

These plans will empower FE colleges to take a lead in responding to local needs. We see it as important that we reform the apprenticeship levy to become, in part, the growth and skills levy, giving businesses and employers the flexibility they need to invest in skills and training and to continue to support SMEs to take up apprenticeships, too. An estimated £3 billion in unspent levy has gone to the Treasury since 2019 that could have been spent on more training opportunities for learners and, through that, on training providers too, supporting capacity to grow the sector. The system is not working as it needs to be. Bringing more flexibility is a policy backed by the Manufacturing 5, the British Retail Consortium, techUK, the Co-operative Group, City & Guilds—the list goes on.

It is vital that young people are aware of their post-16 options so that they know which routes are open to them and how to take them. That is why Labour wants to train more thsn 1,000 new professional careers advisers. I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Waveney about fragmented advice and guidance, but we want to train those new advisers for students in our colleges and schools and introduce two weeks of compulsory work experience for every student to connect them earlier with the workplace.

There are real concerns about the chaotic roll-out of T-levels and the phasing out of many overlapping qualifications among college staff and young people—a serious issue that has been raised with me. The Protect Student Choice campaign estimates that 155,000 students could be left without an appropriate course of post-16 study if the Government go ahead with these plans in this way. That is why Labour will ensure that all students are able to complete their qualifications and will pause and review the proposed removal of courses until we can be sure that these reforms will not prevent young people from pursuing high-quality vocational qualifications.

In conclusion, boosting Britain's skills will be a national ambition for Labour, led by our new body Skills England, which will help provide that overarching national skills framework, connecting that with regional and local need, and will bring together businesses, training providers and unions to meet the skills needs of the next decade across all our regions. I am proud to say that colleges will be at the heart of that ambition.

2.7 pm

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Robert. I join colleagues in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this debate in Westminster Hall on this important subject. He rightly mentioned that he and I have talked about these topics many times over—I think it is fair to say—many years. I know he has a fervent passion for and deep knowledge of the subject, and I thank him for what he does with the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning. I join him in thanking and congratulating the Association of Colleges. Like many colleagues, I had the opportunity earlier this week to go over the road—the other side of Parliament Square—to the AOC awards event. It was great to meet an award winner from my local college in Alton and its other campus in Havant, but also to see the huge variety of people benefiting from all that colleges have to offer. Both my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) spoke with passion about the importance of colleges and the great work they do in educating and training people of all ages and backgrounds, as well as the key role they play in communities. They rightly talked about the challenges they face, and I do not argue with any of that.

I am the Minister for Schools, but I still know there is no more important subject than colleges. I see every day that we have great schools educating our children, giving them a great education and grounding to take them on whatever path they choose at age 16. Of course, we also have strong higher education institutions, delivering world-class higher education to young people and equipping them with the high-level education and skills they need. We then have further education colleges, which are the filling—if you like—in the education sandwich. Like the best sandwich options, there is a variety to choose from because colleges do just about everything, including all the things I have just mentioned. They do basic skills, English and maths and so-called level 3 provision. More recently, there has been the introduction of T-levels. They do apprenticeships, as we have been talking about, and I will come back to adult learning. As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney reminded us, FE colleges also do HE, as well as pre-16 provision for certain groups of young people. To cap it all, some colleges even have their own nursery—they are really providing the full range of education. We are not talking about jacks of all trades, because they do not just do lots of things; they do them very well. The latest figures show that approximately 92% of colleges were judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection, which is quite an incredible figure.

The Secretary of State and the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education visit colleges around the country frequently. I should say, by the way, that the latter would have loved to be here today. He phoned me this morning to say so, and to ask me to pass on his best wishes, in particular in celebration of Colleges Week. He is not able to physically be in two places at once; otherwise, he would have been here. The Secretary of State and the Minister meet staff and students and see at first hand some of the excellent work they are doing, as I have had the opportunity to do in previous roles in the DFE. They are astounded by the range and breadth of high-quality provision on offer in fantastic facilities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney rightly alluded to another key role that FE colleges carry out, which is acting as agents of social mobility. Many learners in FE come from disadvantaged backgrounds, so our colleges are essential for ensuring that individuals from all backgrounds are supported to progress into employment or further learning. It is fair to say that for many years, colleges were unsung heroes, doing fantastic work without ever really getting commensurate recognition for that work. That has changed now, because everybody understands and recognises the importance of what they do. This debate is a great example of that recognition.

The skills agenda, in which colleges play a critical role, is one of my Department's key priorities. Colleges are delivering our radical skills reforms, helping individuals with basic skills needs right up to challenging the highest performers to reach their potential, raising the stages of technical education through the delivery of apprenticeships and the introduction of rigorous T-levels.

[Damian Hinds]

It is easy for us to say that colleges are great, and that we recognise all they do, but we need to back that up with support and investment. That is why we are making major investment in post-16 education, in which colleges play a huge part, with an additional £3.8 billion over this Parliament for education and skills. In particular, throughout this Parliament, we have consistently increased overall funding for 16-to-19 education year on year, including an extra £1.6 billion in 2024-25 compared with 2021-22—the biggest increase in 16-to-19 funding in a decade. FE colleges, like all 16-to-19 providers, have benefited from that investment. We are investing £3 billion in capital between 2022 and 2025 to improve the condition of the post-16 estate, deliver new places in post-16 education, provide more specialist equipment and facilities for T-levels and deliver institutes of technology.

We recognise that the issues colleges are facing are not just about whether they have enough funding and how to make the funding stretch to deliver everything they need to do, but about systems, procedures and bureaucracy. Colleges have told Government that we need to address those things, and we have listened. That is why we have consulted on reforming the further education funding and accountability systems, and last year issued our response. We have committed to simplifying funding systems and creating a single adult skills fund and a single development fund. We have already started delivering on those commitments and will continue this work to reduce the bureaucracy associated with funding. We have set out a much clearer approach to support an intervention for colleges, and will also remove duplicative data collection and take steps to simplify and improve audit. All these things will help to minimise burdens on colleges and let them focus their efforts on delivering that excellent education and training.

Of course, FE would not be what it is without teachers and teaching. The quality of teaching and leaders is the biggest determinant of outcomes for learners, and that is why we are investing £470 million over the financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25 to support colleges and other providers, and to address key priorities, including on recruitment and retention. That funding has already fed through to colleges and other providers via increased 16-19 rates and programme cost weight increases from last September.

It is part of a wider programme to support the sector to recruit excellent staff. That includes a national recruitment campaign to strengthen and incentivise the uptake of initial teacher education, teacher training bursaries and the Taking Teaching Further training programme. We also announced £200 million to improve teacher recruitment and retention by giving those who teach key shortage subjects a payment of up to £6,000, tax-free, per year in the first five years of their career. For the first time, that applies to those teaching eligible subjects in all FE colleges.

Let me turn to some of the comments made by the hon. Lady who speaks for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). This debate has not been primarily party political, and nor should it be. We are celebrating Colleges Week, and that is something on which colleagues right across this House agree. I welcome a number of the things that the hon. Lady said, but there are a couple that I cannot quite let go, particularly on the subject of apprenticeships.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) was quite right in saying that, if we are going to talk about apprenticeships, we must talk like for like. I am afraid that, before 2010, there were some people who, when asked about the quality of their apprenticeship, did not know that they were on an apprenticeship. We have changed that and underpinned the apprenticeships programme with guarantees of quality: the minimum length of the course; the minimum amount of time in college; the creation of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education; and, critically, employer-designed standards. That has made a very solid set of very high-quality apprenticeships. I would urge the hon. Lady and her party not to pursue the plans and policy that they appear to be—not to undermine those apprenticeships or have fewer of them, and instead create a new quango.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for his comments, and we do not need to get into a debate today—there are many other opportunities for that. He is right that it is important that we do not create dividing lines where we do not have them, in an area that needs both stability and long-term planning, but I want to challenge him on the point he has made. It is true that apprenticeships starts have fallen, and I am not saying that we have not also supported some changes through the passage of time. However, we all know that there are challenges, such as employer involvement in start-ups, employer fatigue due to the difficulties with the current apprenticeship system and the drop in SME engagement, and it is really important that the Government acknowledge those challenges.

It is also important not to misrepresent Labour's call for a reform where employers, if they so chose, could spend up to 50% of their apprenticeship levy more flexibly. Too much of that levy is being returned to the Treasury because employers are unable to spend it on any learning. For most employers, the reform would not make much of a difference because they are only able to spend about 50% of their levy, and that would not change. Perhaps the Minister might also know that, if we see more growth in the economy, we will also see more of the levy coming in and greater apprenticeships there too.

Damian Hinds: Again, let us not have a party political debate—that is not the nature of this discussion today. I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that I have not misrepresented the Labour party's policy in the slightest. She then went on to repeat it, which is to say that there would be less money guaranteed to be available for apprenticeships. That would surely lead to a move away from those high-quality apprenticeships that I mentioned. I understand the attraction of voices saying that the levy is not a good way of doing things, but I have to tell the hon. Lady that it addresses a fundamental problem—

Seema Malhotra: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Absolutely, and I will come back to the fundamental problem in a moment.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister again, but I think he does not fully understand the Labour policy and that may be because he has not engaged with it in detail. The point on the growth and skills levy is that the opportunity to spend on more modular courses and more flexible learning, creating the opportunity to build

qualifications through more modular approaches, could support more engagement with learning and contribute to a reduction in the early ending of apprenticeships, where the targets of apprenticeship completion are not even being met. That is a real issue.

Damian Hinds: I assure the hon. Lady that if there is any misunderstanding about the Labour party's policy, it is not because people have failed to engage with it; it is because it is not clear—and one great benefit of our apprenticeship system is that it is clear. The approach of the apprenticeship levy resolves one of the fundamental questions of investing in human capital, training and people, which is the so-called free rider problem.

For many years, some employers invested strongly in their workforces and then some of the members of those workforces, after a couple of years of training, would get up and go to the competitor. The levy is precisely to make sure that the whole of our economy and the whole of industry has a like interest in developing those skills and developing investing in the potential of people. I advise the hon. Lady to be careful in deciding to get rid of that and replace it with a new and unneeded quango.

I turn to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, who also spoke about the centrality of apprenticeships and the quality of them. He spoke about the importance of colleges to the whole local economic area. I too represent an area with a particularly low level of unemployment, even though unemployment across the country is low compared with historical norms—it is at slightly less than half the level it was when I and my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough and for Waveney came into Parliament in 2010.

Particularly in areas of even lower unemployment, however, skills matching becomes vital for the local economy. I also join my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough in congratulating both Harrogate College and the Luminate Education Group on their work on the renewable energy skills hub. That is a great example of colleges being future-looking, forward-looking and innovative, making sure we are equipped with the skills for the future and creating facilities that contribute to that.

I come now to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who has brought us to this Chamber today—and we are all grateful to him for doing so. He listed some of the several ways in which colleges are vital to our economy and society. He too spoke of the importance of colleges in their local communities. He reminded us that that is about people of all ages—including those who might not have had that great an experience coming through education the first time, who can have another chance, and those who had a fantastic experience the first time around, who can further develop their skills. It is also about the jobs of tomorrow and making sure we can continue to adapt and that in so doing we offer social mobility to people throughout the country.

My hon. Friend also talked about productivity, which is so important here. We know that there has long been a big productivity gap—since the year I was born and beyond, and I am 54—between this country and the United States and Germany in particular. It has improved, but it is still a gap and we need to move further. Making sure we can match skills to where they are needed and hone those skills is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the importance of colleges themselves as big employers in local areas, and we should never forget that. He also discussed the importance of working with employers, a subject also covered by our hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough. In particular, I note the work of Suffolk New College in leading on the local skills improvement fund for my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney's area. Indeed, I pay tribute to all three colleges serving his local area—East Coast College, Suffolk New College and West Suffolk College.

We are getting close to a fiscal event, and my hon. Friend quite rightly put in his Budget bids, which will have been heard. He also talked about some of the progress made. I agree that the value of the Baker clause is not just what it does directly, but the symbolism and the message it gives that all children should know about the full range of what is available to them at the age of 16. Some of those children will be better suited to going to a school sixth form, some will be better suited to going to a sixth form college and some will be better suited to going to an FE college. Some will be better suited to a largely academic route and some will be better suited to a technical and vocational route. Having those options made known at a suitable time in that journey is really important.

There are also T-levels. Of course, colleges are not the only places that deliver T-levels, but they are at the centre of that great reform. They offer more hours in college and bring English, maths and digital skills right into integration with the core vocational subjects and, crucially, the nine-week or 45-day industrial placement. When I meet employers or young people who have done T-levels, that is the thing they always talk about the most: the opportunity to apply what they learn in college directly in a workplace and develop the workplace skills that we know are so valued by employers. By the way, they bring an opportunity to see a young person in action in the workplace for an extended period.

There are the higher-level technical qualifications and the advanced British standard, which is in development now. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney was quite right that we are developing that landmark reform to remove fully the artificial divide between the academic and the vocational. In doing that, we need to start investing now—and we are investing now. That is such an important point to make, and it is understood across Government.

When people think about a college, probably the first thing that comes into their head is a picture of a building, but my hon. Friend and I, and everyone here, know that it is all about people. That is why those investments in people are so important, including the extension of the levelling-up premium to further education colleges for the first time. The Teach in FE recruitment campaign is running, and there is the Taking Teaching Further programme. We know that there is a particular importance to, and sometimes a challenge in, getting people with recent industrial experience—those "on the tools"—into college to impart those skills onwards. There are FE teacher training bursaries worth up to £30,000, depending on the subject, tax-free, in the academic year 2024-25.

I will close by thanking everybody who has taken part in this debate, particularly our hon. Friend the Member for Waveney for tabling it and convening this

[Damian Hinds]

important discussion. It was informative to hear from him and others about local issues, successes and, of course, how much we value our colleges—"Love our Colleges", to coin a phrase from Colleges Week. The one clear thing coming from this debate is that we all recognise the importance, value and role of our colleges, as the strapline that I just mentioned makes clear.

I have set out how we are backing our recognition of colleges through investment and support by increasing funding, investing in facilities and estate, reforming accountability and funding to reduce burdens and investing in programmes to support and boost the further education workforce. I hope and believe that those things will benefit colleges and support them to deliver. I know that we ask colleges to deliver a lot these days, but that is because we know that they can and do deliver incredibly well.

2.29 pm

Peter Aldous: I am a shade disappointed, not by the quality of the debate but because there was high demand to take part and we have not had as many colleagues as I would have hoped for. There are loads of demands on people's time. However, what we have lacked in quantity, we have made up for in quality. I am the odd person out in this debate; I am the only participant who has not had a Front-Bench role, so it has been interesting to hear the views of those on the frontline.

The three of us on the Government Benches—I, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones)—have all been here since 2010. Colleges are in a better place, generally speaking, than in 2010, particularly in terms of the quality of their estate. That has certainly improved, but we need to move on. While the shiny new buildings are important, we need the teachers and trainers to be able to help with the learning in those colleges. That is where we have a particular problem. Look at the energy sector that East Coast College is having to deal with: we have a crying need for welders and fabricators, but there is a real challenge in getting those teachers and trainers.

Lord Baker fought for the Baker clause for years. He took too long to get it, but he got it. At some stage, I would welcome some information on how it is going down in practice, because when I go around the community I represent, I cannot say, "Ah! That is a result of the Baker clause." If we pull a lever in this place, it does not automatically lead to a gear change in the rest of the country.

The one disagreement we have had is on the issue of apprentices. If one looks at where we were in 2010 and where we are today, we are generally in a better place, but the journey has not been smooth—there have been ebbs and flows along the way. I am slightly confused by some of the statistics. It may be that we were in a better place two or three years ago than today. One of the challenges is to get SMEs properly involved in the apprenticeship system.

That brings us on to the levy. The levy is a great idea, and the Government were right to introduce it, but there have been teething difficulties and challenges with money being returned to the Treasury. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), and I have been in events where I have said that we need to press ahead with a review now, rather than waiting for next year after all the hullabaloo of the election. It must take place now, so that we can iron it out and get it on the right journey.

Finally, here are my funding asks of the Chancellor. This is ultimately about ensuring a level playing field. Colleges are not on a level playing field with schools and academies when it comes to VAT. They are not on a level playing field when it comes to what teachers are paid.

At the beginning of the time that I have spent in this place, there was the problem of colleges having to pick up the pieces for young people who, for whatever reason, had not acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills in secondary education. That situation has improved dramatically, but covid has thrown a big spanner in the works and the colleges are having to work very hard to address that. It is not going to go away immediately, and that is why they need those funds to be extended.

Sir Robert, thank you for bearing with me for a few extra minutes. It has been a good debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Colleges Week 2024.

2.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week

[Mr Philip Hollobone *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2024.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. Across the UK, 1.25 million people have eating disorders, which include binge eating disorder, bulimia, anorexia, other specified feeding or eating disorders, and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder.

Left undiagnosed and untreated, eating disorders can be silent killers. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and results from one study have shown that a third of people with binge eating disorder are at risk of suicide. For too long, sufferers have been left feeling trapped and alone. Urgent action is needed to tackle this rising epidemic.

The theme for Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2024 is avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, or ARFID. The condition is characterised by a limited range of food intake. Sufferers may eat only "safe" foods, and can avoid entire food types. That means that they have difficulty meeting their nutritional and energy needs, and can experience weight loss and health problems.

ARFID can come from sensory sensitivity and fear of negative consequences from eating. Beliefs about weight and shape do not necessarily contribute. Be Body Positive, an NHS-backed psychoeducation website, has shared a story of what life can be like with this condition. Tahlia was diagnosed with ARFID when she was 20. She was initially misdiagnosed as a fussy eater before eventually being misdiagnosed with anorexia as a teenager as a result of her significant weight loss. Because she was misdiagnosed, she missed out on early vital treatment. In her own words:

"Growing up, I felt misunderstood and isolated because of my eating habits…Knowing that ARFID exists has been a validating experience, connecting me with a community of people who share similar challenges."

The helpline run by Beat received more than 2,000 phone calls from people looking for support for ARFID last year—2,000 only last year! However, awareness of ARFID is still very limited. Misperceptions that it is just fussy eating leave sufferers like Tahlia feeling alone. There is no solid data on how many people in the UK have ARFID; it could be anywhere from less than 1% of the child and adolescent population to over 15%.

Because of those perceptions, accessing specialist treatment can be a lottery. There is a lack of standardised treatment pathways for ARFID, and it is hard to find out what support is available. A recent survey of NHS websites found that only six of the 55 NHS providers of eating-disorder services for children and young people explicitly stated that they provided treatment for ARFID, and only one of the 49 NHS providers of adult eating-disorder services said the same—one out of 49!

Rigid stereotypes of eating disorders persist in other areas. Despite their high prevalence, eating disorders are frequently misunderstood and viewed as a lifestyle choice. Contrary to popular belief, eating disorders are most common among people with severe obesity. I have been appalled by stories of people being turned away from treatment because their body mass index was too high, and have long supported Hope Virgo's "Dump the Scales" campaign to change that.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines state that single measures such as BMI should not be used to determine whether someone receives treatment. However, those guidelines are not being uniformly implemented. Some services are still using those barriers due to severe mismatch between demand and capacity in chronically underfunded services.

It is not uncommon for patients to get to a worryingly low BMI before they are considered appropriate for an in-patient bed. That requires investment, but eating disorder treatment is cost-effective at any stage. We know that early diagnosis is critical: the earlier someone receives intervention for their eating disorder, the more likely they are to make a full recovery. The longer symptoms are left untreated, the more difficult it is for someone to recover. Healthcare should focus on prevention before cure. Access to the right treatment and early support is life changing. If we want to save money, prevent hospital admissions, save lives and improve outcomes for all sufferers, we need to ensure full implementation of clinical guidance around diagnosis.

There are many wonderful organisations working up and down the country to get people the help they need. I pay tribute to SWEDA, previously known as the Somerset and Wessex Eating Disorders Association, which provides invaluable support to so many families across my local area and is expanding its operations this year. Last year, SWEDA told me that it saw a 150% increase in people attending support and guidance appointments for eating disorders compared with pre-pandemic figures. Its children's service was overwhelmed with young people and their parents desperately seeking help.

Eating disorders wipe out adolescence. Young people suffering from eating disorders miss out on so many educational and social opportunities. Those years are stolen from them—not to mention the potentially irreversible effect on their physical health. I welcome the access and waiting time standards already set for children and young people's services. However, those targets have still not been met; 6,000 children and young people are stuck on the NHS waiting list for treatment. In two thirds of those cases, patients have been waiting for over three months, despite the standard stating that for routine cases, treatment should start within a month. Between 2022 and 2023, fewer than three quarters of children's urgent cases started treatment within one week—well below the 95% standard. If we have standards, the Government must provide the resources to meet them.

For adults, there are not even targets in place. Adult eating disorder services in England are severely under-resourced, especially now that demand has risen to even higher levels as a result of the pandemic. Those services typically have either long waiting lists or strict referral criteria. That means that many adults are unable to access the treatment they need until they have become very ill. On average, people wait almost three and a half years to get treatment for their eating disorder, and adults wait twice as long. Shockingly, sufferers are reaching the point of emergency hospitalisation before they can access care.

Delays have deadly consequences. In 2017, the parliamentary health and service ombudsman published a damning report into the failings that led to the death

[Wera Hobhouse]

of 19-year-old Averil Hart from anorexia and that of two other adults with an eating disorder. Last February, the *Health Service Journal* identified at least 19 adults with eating disorders whose death sparked concerns from coroners about their care. At least 15 of those were deemed avoidable and resulted in formal warnings being issued to mental health chiefs. We can never allow that to happen again. We must remember that eating disorders are treatable.

Targets are crucial if we are to tackle this epidemic. An access and waiting time standard for adults would provoke significant extra funding and focus. If we want to encourage people to seek help, we need to give them a guarantee that they will be seen. Having clear standards can facilitate service improvement. They enhance the experience for patients and drive up health outcomes. Although there is still a way to go, the standards introduced for waiting times for children and young people's eating disorder services have driven some crucial service improvements. We need to see the same for adults.

Our health service is simply neither equipped nor empowered to deal with eating disorders. I was disappointed that the Government decided against publishing a 10-year cross-Government mental health and wellbeing plan for England; instead, they developed and published a major conditions strategy, which included mental health alongside cancer, cardiovascular disease and dementia. We need targeted and varied strategies for targeted and varied issues.

I again point the Government towards Hope Virgo's eating disorders manifesto. It calls for the Government to implement an evidence-based national eating disorders strategy, with a plan outlining how they will tackle the huge rise in the number of people affected by eating disorders. I would also like to see the appointment of an eating disorders prevention champion to co-ordinate the Government response.

The strategy should integrate obesity and eating disorder prevention plans, because there are so many overlapping factors between the two. The Government should also consider reforming treatment approaches. For example, an Oxford University study found that using the integrated CBT-E or enhanced cognitive behaviour therapy approach rather than the current in-patient approach reduced readmission rates for people with anorexia by 70% over the course of a year.

We should also consider the other available options. The all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders, which I chair, is currently conducting an inquiry into intensive out-patient treatment. Such programmes are designed to support people with severe eating disorders for whom traditional out-patient treatment is not working. Patients go home in the evening and at the weekends, and have access to increased meal support and therapy. They can be treated in a familiar community-based setting. Such programmes are recognised as an effective and less expensive alternative to in-patient care. Importantly, both patients and their loved ones often find this form of treatment far preferable to other forms of treatment.

However, intensive out-patient treatment is not widely available across the country and there is no up-to-date information about exactly how many services are providing it. Again, we return to the importance of appropriate early intervention. Universal access to intensive out-patient services could minimise the need for disruptive in-patient stays. I hope to hear comments from the Minister about investment in such treatments.

Much of what I am talking about comes back to resources. The Government funding needs to reach frontline services, but the APPG on eating disorders found that 90% of the additional NHS funding given to clinical commissioning groups for children's services did not reach the frontline. The Government must ensure that their funding pledges are not empty words and that money gets to where it is needed. A one-off boost is not enough. Soaring demand for underfunded services will leave people missing out on care when they need it most.

To tackle eating disorders, we also need to understand them fully. From 2015 to 2019, eating disorders accounted for just 1% of the UK's already severely limited mental health research funding. The APPG on eating disorders previously conducted an inquiry into eating disorder research funding, which found that a historic lack of investment has led to a vicious cycle of underfunding. The APPG also emphasised that we need to diversify the research agenda.

Certain eating disorders and patient groups have not been served by current research. That is a real barrier when it comes to efforts to improve care. We cannot identify the obstacles that exist without having more information. Some progress is being made. It has been encouraging to see some increased investment into eating disorder research and a commitment to actively involve people with lived experience in emerging research collaborations. We now need to see targeted investment and ringfenced funding.

Eating disorder sufferers are being abandoned. We are well aware that the NHS is in crisis. However, although we have heard harrowing stories about delays in ambulance services and accident and emergency departments, the impact on mental health services has received little attention. Eating disorders are an epidemic and the sooner we realise that, the sooner we can treat them with the attention they deserve. No one should be condemned to a life of illness and nor should anyone die of an eating disorder in 2024.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): This debate can last until 4.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 3.57 pm and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for His Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Then the mover of the motion will have two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. In the meantime, it is Back-Bench time. I call Olivia Blake to speak.

3.14 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank hon. Members across the House for their support in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing it. All the work that the APPG on eating disorders does is very much appreciated, and it rightly puts this issue back in front of us to discuss during each and every Eating Disorders Awareness Week. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us time to debate this issue.

Like many serious mental illnesses, eating disorders are often endured in silence. That means symptoms can go unnoticed, resulting in devastating consequences.

Without diagnosis and treatment, eating disorders can be deadly. They have the biggest mortality rate of any mental health condition.

Around 1.25 million people in the UK live with disordered eating—a number that has inevitably been made worse by the pandemic. Although younger women are especially at risk of suffering from eating disorders, it is vital to remember that eating disorders can and do affect all people regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or background. So the general topic of today's debate—Eating Disorders Awareness Week—is an important one, and it is especially important to one of my constituents.

I want to talk about someone I have been supporting for the past two years, who has shared her deeply distressing experience as an in-patient on a mental health ward. She spoke about the way in which she was

"reduced to numbers before receiving help."

Despite not being able to eat, drink or take medication for five full days on the ward, and after asking for medical help, she was told she would only be referred once she had reached a specific blood pressure and blood sugar reading.

During my constituent's ordeal, she was not provided with any support at mealtimes and, eventually, staff stopped asking if she wanted any food or drink. That resulted in her being transferred to another hospital in a critical condition and requiring emergency medical treatment in the ambulance on the way. As my constituent rightly told me,

"no one should ever be left to the point of medical emergency before needing help."

It is right that we acknowledge the hard work of eating disorder specialist NHS workers and campaigners in my constituency and across the country, such as Hope Virgo, whom we have heard about, and many others. Specialist frontline workers continue to provide vital life-saving care in increasingly difficult circumstances and with increasingly scarce resources. We also need much more training in eating disorders for all frontline staff so that they understand how to treat patients in their care.

We know that eating disorder services are at breaking point. Demand is going up, cases are becoming more critical, training and resources are scarce, and the availability of support is a postcode lottery. This means that unacceptable cases such as this are inevitably becoming more and more common. The current system is failing. As I said last year, we face a crisis with terrible human consequences.

The specific theme of this year's Eating Disorders Awareness Week is avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. Anyone can have ARFID; it can affect children, teenagers and adults. Although it is a little known and often misunderstood condition, it can have serious consequences for health if left untreated. Too often, misconceptions about picky or fussy eating trivialise this serious condition. The stigma and fear of judgment means that those with ARFID and their carers often suffer in silence. The charity, Beat, has reported an increase in calls to its helpline from people affected by ARFID. In 2018, it received 295 inquiries about the disorder. By 2023, that had ballooned to 2,054 calls.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Member agree that this is also about the carers, care givers and the parents who need to know about the condition? They are often worried to death when they see a child or a young adolescent in such a condition and they do not know what to do.

Olivia Blake: I absolutely agree. I have had carers contacting me to ask where they can find guidance because of the limits locally, which I will go on to in a bit. That is probably why we have seen the increase in calls for support for carers.

Carers are hearing time and again that people are struggling to get the help that they desperately need. That is partly due to limited awareness, limited research on the condition and a lack of standardised treatment pathways. Today's debate plays an important role in tackling the misconceptions in the system and raises awareness of a serious condition that can have fatal consequences if left untreated, due to malnutrition and other issues.

Another part of the problem is under-resourcing in the system. Since 2011, hospital admissions for eating disorders have nearly doubled in England, going from 2,287 to 4,462 last year, after peaking at 5,559 cases in the year 2021-22. Currently, 12.5% of 17 to 19-year-olds are estimated to suffer from disordered eating. Shockingly, an NHS England survey found that 59.4% of 17 to 19-year-olds exhibited behaviours that suggested it was possible that they had an eating disorder. Among girls, the figure rises to just over three quarters, at 77%.

While Ministers promised more funding, the scale of response simply is not matching the alarming level of demand. The waiting time targets for specialist eating disorder services for children and young people are consistently not met, even though they have only recently been put in place, while the lists have simply been growing longer and longer. As a bare minimum, there should be an action plan to address the backlog, and a similar target must be put in place for adults seeking help. That was part of a previous plan, but it has clearly been dropped in the major conditions strategy, which the hon. Member for Bath mentioned. Without a clear plan in place to meet those targets, it is really important that we make sure that care is available to people. All children and adults with an eating disorder should be able to get access to the care that they need.

It is not good enough to address the in-patient figures alone. We know that early intervention is the right treatment. The devastating consequences of eating disorders can be prevented, yet the Government have done very little to move us in the right direction towards preventive care.

Due to the delays in identification, referral and waiting times, those able to access treatment are waiting on average three and a half years between onset and start of treatment. That is far too long, when we know that the earlier we get to people, the better their chances. The delay is potentially fatal to many, with recovery being far more likely for patients who receive medical intervention early, when behaviour can be adapted before it becomes too ingrained. For ARFID, we need an NHS-commissioned treatment pathway and trained NHS staff so that people do not go undiagnosed or untreated, or sit in treatment pathways that are not suitable for their needs.

It is seven years since the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report, which has been mentioned. That report was damning. It concluded that patients had been failed by NHS eating disorder services. It is shameful that we cannot point to more progress in this

[Olivia Blake]

area and that, since then, the ombudsman has felt the need to reiterate the findings of that report to try to get more action.

This crisis should be an opportunity to rethink our approach to how we support and treat people in the UK who suffer from an eating disorder. I urge the Minister to look at the transformative work that groups such as South Yorkshire Eating Disorder Association are doing to help build an alternative framework for care nationally. It is time that we acknowledged the crisis and committed the training and resources necessary to fix it.

3.23 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) not just on securing this debate, but on her dogged pursuit of this issue over the years. The Minister should be aware that the all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders is one of the most active and effective in Parliament, as a result of her work. She has collected around her hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), who are extremely committed in representing their constituents.

We all come to this issue as a result of dealing with our constituents and the hardships that they have faced. I thank Hope Virgo for her work, her campaign and the book she has written. If it was not for her, I do not think we would have been on this agenda as effectively as we have been in recent years.

I thank the Government as well because, early on, they recognised that there was an issue and brought forward some resources. I am grateful for that, but this is one of those issues where things are moving so rapidly in terms of the scale of the problem. We will have to come back to the Government regularly to look at how we top up those resources.

Much has been said about the statistics. I heard the figure of 1.25 million people mentioned and others have said 1.6 million, but it seems like a bottomless pit. The health survey was really interesting. If I remember rightly, it looked at those who had the potential for an eating disorder, so it was trying to get ahead of the numbers, and it said that 16% of the population—19% of women and 13% of men—could be at risk. One of the issues that the APPG has been really good at breaking through on is that this is not just about women; a large number of men are also affected by this problem, and that needs to be addressed.

In all these debates, we try to get across the impact and, to a certain extent, highlight to our constituents that we understand how their lives are affected. Of course, the mental health issues are fundamental. There have been suicides and deaths, but there has also been an outbreak of self-harm among people suffering from this condition. People have reported that there has been an impact on their ability to work, meet socially and engage in a full life. What has worried me most is the huge increase in the numbers being admitted to hospital—I think there has been a fourfold increase in recent years.

As has been said, this is the mental health condition with the highest mortality rate. Part of that is because there is a mismatch between the scale of the problem and the resources available, and that includes the number of hospital beds. I understand that there are only 450 specialist beds, but the admission rate is about 20,000, so there is a startling difference between what is needed and what has been provided.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the biggest problem is that for too long, this condition has been seen as a lifestyle choice rather than an illness? We still need to make a breakthrough on that.

John McDonnell: Thanks to the work that the hon. Lady, the campaigners and others have done, the media reporting of this issue has, to a certain extent, changed dramatically, but that has taken years to achieve. I agree that this is still seen as a lifestyle choice. It is not seen as serious; people do not relate deaths to this condition, but we all know from dealing with our constituents that that is what happens.

The other issue about the access to hospitals and clinics is that we have all had to map out, across the country, where constituents can go. Often, what happens is that they are discharged from one unit and it is then almost impossible to get them into another, particularly if there are specialist concerns.

The issues that we are reiterating today include the fact that the funding needs reviewing again, because the situation has moved on since we last discussed funding with the Government. There is also a lack of clarity, so we need a concrete action plan for the coming period. One of the issues is how we bring people together. There is a real concern about the lack of monitoring. One of the proposals, which I think Hope Virgo first raised, is to have a discussion about how we are monitoring this situation, both in terms of incidents and the effectiveness of different treatments. A proposal from one of the discussions we had is that it is time to bring together again those with experience of the condition and the key clinicians in the field, so that we can stand back and objectively look at where we are at. When we have dealt with homicides and suicides in other fields, we have set up independent inquiries because of the seriousness of the matter. In some instances, I feel that we need some form of inquiry to see where we are at and what is needed in the future.

The hon. Member for Bath and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam mentioned the staff. The impression I get from the discussions I have is that, because of the increasing demand, staff are experiencing a level of exhaustion and a morale issue about simply being able to cope with the numbers and severity of the conditions they are dealing with. One thing we can do today, as others have, is to acknowledge the commitment and dedication of those staff, while recognising that they need greater support, in terms of both numbers and pay, to demonstrate just how valued they are.

The issue around the NICE guidelines has already been raised, and my experience is the same as others', really. It is hit or miss; there is a postcode lottery in the provision of treatment under the guidelines. The Dump the Scales campaign by Hope Virgo and others has been effective at moving the debate on from just talking about BMI, so that a wider range of discussions are now taking place, which I really welcome. However, there is still no recognition across services that eating disorders are a mental health issue, and that therefore mental health practices that have been effective elsewhere

need to be applied here. I argue very strongly for the need to fund cognitive behavioural therapy, which has a success rate of 70%, I think. It has also reduced readmission rates down to about 15%, so it is a huge money saver for the NHS. Again, we need to look at the levels of investment, both in training staff for that and in ensuring access.

I want to mention another issue that has been raised before. We have found too many examples of the provision of palliative care to eating disorder sufferers, which we are hoping will end. Palliative care should be offered only if there is another life-threatening condition; it should not be offered just because of this condition. We hope that that has now been ended, but it needs monitoring again to ensure that the message is out there. Our overall view is that, with the right support and early enough intervention, people's lives can be saved, and that their lives can be transformed as a result, but it does need adequate funding.

The hon. Member for Bath mentioned the ringfenced fund that is needed for research. At this stage, it is time to stand back, bring together sufferers and clinicians, and look at what the strategy should be. We need an adequately funded, concrete strategy that we can all sign up to. This is a cross-party issue; it is not party political. As I say, I welcome what the Government have done so far. We are now at the stage where we know so much more about the escalation of the problem and the need for therapeutic interventions, and about what works and what does not.

My final point is to pay tribute, as others have done, to all the campaigners who have put this issue on the agenda and provided support throughout. I pay tribute to all the clinicians, of course, and to one group in particular, which is the school nurses—Members may recall that we held a session with them. They brought forward their programme for how they would provide advice and assistance to pupils, which proved to be incredibly effective. Of course, I also pay tribute to all those who have supported the all-party parliamentary group of the hon. Member for Bath with such expert advice, as well as consistent nagging.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Benchers, the first of whom will be Patricia Gibson for the SNP.

3.33 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I wish to begin, as others have, by congratulating the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on bringing forward this debate in Eating Disorders Awareness Week. I am very glad to once again participate in this debate, as I have done in the past. When I have spoken in this debate previously, I have always begun by pointing out that I first became aware of eating disorder conditions in the 1980s, when Karen Carpenter died, and then again in 1999, when Lena Zavaroni died. Both women had struggled with eating disorders for a number of years and sadly succumbed to them, when they ought to have had so many years ahead of them.

An estimated 1.25 million people across the UK face a similar struggle. Eating disorders, as we have heard, do not respect age, ethnicity, gender or background. Indeed, a quarter of those with eating disorders are men.

The mortality rate is high, especially for those with anorexia, which has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and one in six people with binge eating disorder attempt to end their lives. Other mental health challenges can often accompany eating disorders, such as depression, self-harm, anxiety and obsessive behaviours. Eating is fundamental to survival, so those with eating disorders typically develop severe physical health problems. Yet we know that, with the right support and treatment, we can change lives, and early intervention provides the best chance for recovery.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week this year seeks to highlight avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, or ARFID, which is a relatively new term. It is different from other restrictive eating disorders in that it describes a pattern of eating that avoids certain foods or food groups entirely and/or is restricted in quantity. Sometimes those with it eat very small amounts. Avoidant and restrictive eating is not related to a lack of available food, cultural norms or even fasting for religious reasons, and it is not related to a person's view of their body shape or a specific purpose, such as losing weight. Nor does it feature some of the other behaviours that can be associated with anorexia or bulimia, such as over-exercising. ARFID is often dismissed as picky eating, but the crucial difference between what we might call a picky eater and a child with ARFID is that a picky eater will not starve themselves to death. A child with ARFID very well might.

While the exact causes of ARFID are unknown, it is thought that people who develop it do so because of sensory sensitivity, fear of negative consequences or a lack of interest in eating. For example, they might be very sensitive to the taste, texture or appearance of certain types of food, or have had a distressing experience with food, such as choking, vomiting, infant acid reflex or other gastrointestinal conditions. That may cause the person to develop feelings of fear and anxiety around food, leading them to avoid it. It does not discriminate; it can affect anyone of any age, including even babies, and can be diagnosed in children as young as three.

Researchers know much less about what puts someone at risk of developing ARFID, but it has been discovered that people with autism spectrum conditions are much more likely to develop the condition, as are those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and intellectual disabilities. In addition, children who do not outgrow what we might call "normal picky eating", or in whom picky eating is severe, appear to be more likely to develop ARFID. Many children with ARFID have a co-occurring anxiety disorder, and they are also at high risk for other psychiatric disorders.

According to Beat, the UK's largest eating disorder charity,

"There has been a sevenfold increase in calls to our Helpline"

related specifically to ARFID over the past five years. The variable service provision for the condition is due partly to the lack of research into treatment. The Scottish Government have provided Beat with more than £600,000 to provide a range of support for those affected by an eating disorder, but performance still varies across health boards. There must be no complacency. To help tackle that, a consultation was undertaken on the draft national specification for the care and treatment of eating disorders in Scotland to ensure that support and services meet the

[Patricia Gibson]

needs of those living with an eating disorder, wherever and whoever they are in Scotland. The responses to the consultation will be considered carefully.

When a person has an eating disorder of any kind, they need compassionate support with their mental and physical health. Their loved ones also need support, because this is a condition that affects whole families and not just individuals. Indeed, very often, it is close loved ones who are the first to pick up on the fact that their beloved family member has an eating disorder. There is nothing worse for them than watching their loved one's mental and physical health deteriorate before their eyes from a condition that is often not well understood and, sadly, not always sufficiently supported through prompt and sensitive treatment.

I am glad that we are once again having this important debate on this condition in Eating Disorders Awareness Week and taking the opportunity to raise awareness of eating disorders in general and, this year, of avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. Much more research needs to be done into that, and I confess that I knew almost nothing about it before I started preparing for the debate. I hope debates like this one will help those living with an eating disorder and their loved ones to feel less alone, because it can be an isolating illness for individuals and their families, which can only compound the pain and fear that this condition often generates.

3.40 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I want to start by praising the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake). They are true champions of those suffering from eating disorders or mental health issues, especially our children and young people. I congratulate them on securing the debate and on their excellent contributions, as well as their continued work through the APPG on eating disorders to help champion this issue. They have put this issue on the national radar and have worked effectively cross-party to try to eradicate the epidemic of eating disorders.

I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who talked passionately about the impact that eating disorders have on individuals and highlighted the fact that we need to understand the impact they have on people's lives, including at work. He also talked about the huge spike in hospitalisation figures.

I want to touch on some of the points mentioned by the hon. Member for Bath, who used powerful statistics to make the growing problem of eating disorders hit home. She highlighted the disparity between areas in how high up the agenda the issue is—it is not always high up the agenda—and talked about the importance of carers and parents knowing more about the condition so they can help to address it. That was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam, who talked passionately about her constituent, who said she was "reduced to numbers" before receiving help. She also highlighted something that hit home with me when she spoke about how her constituent had said that no one should be "left to a medical emergency" before getting help, and that there should be standardised treatment for this particular matter.

I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Opposition to mark Eating Disorders Awareness Week. As many people in the room will be aware, eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can have severe consequences. It is estimated that over 1 million people in the UK live with an eating disorder, and the reality is that for far too long, those suffering have been ignored. Eating disorders are responsible for more loss of life than any other mental health condition, as has been said. Unfortunately, as we have seen with the statistics raised in the debate, it is increasingly becoming quite common. The sooner someone receives treatment, the better their chances for making a full and sustained recovery, yet that is often not the case. It is a credit to the many campaigners and parliamentary colleagues in this room who have been working on this, along with vital charities, such as Beat, that we can say progress has been made in awareness and support. However, as we continue to face the severe consequences of the pandemic, we see a mental health crisis across our country. We all know that so much more urgently needs to be done.

The NHS figures suggest that the proportion of those aged 17 to 19 with an eating disorder stands at 12%, which is up from just 0.8% six years ago. Hospital admissions are double what they were a decade ago, and last year the awareness week focused on the specific challenges for men.

I also want to quickly echo the point made my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam, as well as other Members, on the importance of recognising that eating disorders do not discriminate. They affect any age, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic background. It is important to highlight those facts when continuing to break down the stigmas and stereotypes that prevent so many people from reaching out and receiving much needed help.

This year, Beat has focused its attention on another important issue that has often been overlooked—avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. It can affect anyone of any age, and Beat has estimated that the number of people with that disorder in the UK could be over 200,000. It can be very difficult to diagnose, and as Beat has highlighted, the information available to those seeking help can be very limited, which echoes what has been said by hon. Members today about parents and carers not having sufficient information on how to address these issues. For example, it has been highlighted that eight in 10 eating disorder service providers do not state on their website whether they offer ARFID care.

The data clearly shows that such cases, like all eating disorders, have surged in recent years across the UK. However, as cases have risen, services have struggled to match the demand, which means more waiting in anguish for longer. In 2015, the Government introduced new waiting times and access standards for community-based eating disorder services for children and young people. That included targets for one-week urgent treatment and four-week routine treatment, but those targets have never been met. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us what will be done to address that failure. Meeting those targets is much needed. Instead of meeting those targets last year, one in five patients with non-urgent referrals were not seen within four weeks, and one in three patients with urgent referrals were not seen within a week. When children and young people with urgent cases of eating disorders wait more than 12 weeks to start treatment, the severity of the current crisis cannot be overlooked.

I also want to raise the important issue of providing adequate care to adults. As highlighted by the HSJ report last year, the deaths of 19 eating disorder patients, with at least 15 of those being deemed avoidable, demonstrated an urgent need to improve eating disorder provision. What more are the Government doing to address those concerns and ensure that all those patients receive the quality of care that they deserve?

I also want to touch on some of the points mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam, and the hon. Member for Bath. They mentioned the lack of monitoring of the effectiveness of treatment being provided. Is the Minister aware that the Royal College of Psychiatrists has published guidance for healthcare professionals to support the development of specialist skills and knowledge to assess and treat people with eating disorders? What are the Government doing to ensure that that guidance is embedded in primary care and emergency departments? The Opposition recognise that, when it comes to eating disorders and all mental health issues, prevention is so important, and early prevention provides the best chance of recovery. Too many people, especially our children and young people, are stuck on mental health waiting lists for months or years instead of receiving the urgent care that they need.

We face a mental health crisis in this country, and we must have a Government that acknowledge that and will take urgent action. That is why Labour have committed to a child health action plan, with a bold ambition for this to be the healthiest generation of children ever. We will recruit thousands more mental health staff to cut waiting lists and ensure that more people can access treatment. We will focus on prevention, early diagnosis, early intervention and timely treatment near where people live.

To do that, we will put an open-access mental health hub for children and young people in every community, and a mental health specialist in every school. That will be paid for by abolishing tax loopholes for private equity fund managers and tax breaks for private schools. We cannot continue to lurch from crisis to crisis, which is what is currently happening. We must look at how we can build a new, solid, long-term foundation for a resilient health and care system, with an NHS that is truly fit for the future.

3.50 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing an important debate on an important topic. I know that both as an MP and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group she has long been a champion for those living with eating disorders. She has worked with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and others on the APPG to ensure that eating disorders are kept high on the political agenda.

I share the passion for this issue expressed by all the hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. As the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, one thing that unites everybody in the Chamber today is that we have all tried to help a constituent, or the family of a constituent, who is suffering from an eating disorder. I have certainly done so in my 13 years as the MP for Pendle, and those cases that I have dealt with are some of the most difficult and emotional to have come across my desk in my surgery.

Improving eating disorder services is a key priority for the Government and a vital part of our work to improve mental health services. As we have heard, this week is national Eating Disorders Awareness Week, and raising awareness is essential to making progress on this important issue. I am grateful for the work of Beat and other charities across the whole sector; they have shone a light on eating disorders and they support people who are struggling.

We know that having an eating disorder can so often be utterly devastating for those with the condition, as well as for those around them. As I think has been said by pretty much every hon. Member who spoke today, we know that eating disorders can affect people of any age, gender, ethnicity or background. However, we do know that recovery is possible, and that access to the right treatment and support can be life changing. Early intervention is vital, and we want to ensure that children and young people with eating disorders get swift access to support.

Since 2016, investment in children and young people's eating disorder community services has risen every year; £53 million was invested per year in 2021-22, and that figure rose to £54 million in 2023-24. As part of the £500 million covid-19 mental health recovery action plan, we invested an extra £79 million to significantly expand young people's mental health services—enabling 2,000 more children and young people to access eating disorder services. We have also introduced a waiting time standard for children and young people with eating disorders. Our aim is for 95% of children to receive treatment within one week for urgent cases, and within four weeks for routine cases.

Abena Oppong-Asare: On the Minister's point about getting waiting time targets down to one week, those targets were implemented in 2015, and they are yet to be met. Could the Minister explain what work is being done to address that, because he just mentioned those same targets again?

Andrew Stephenson: I completely recognise the shadow Minister's challenge on that point and the concern that she has—I will set out what we are doing to address it. She also mentioned the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which published a report on this today. It is worth putting on record that we very much welcome that and that we look forward to working with it and other stakeholders. Waits are not as short as we would like, and the Government are determined to meet our waiting-time standards for children and young people with eating disorders. Extra investment is going into the services to meet increased demands and reduce waits, so hopefully we will start to see progress made towards meeting those targets. However, we acknowledge that, while there has been record investment and progress in improving access to eating disorder services and improving quality, there has also been a significant increase in demand for those services over the past few years. That was especially true during the pandemic, with increased demand outstripping the planned growth in capacity.

Children and young people's eating disorder services are treating 47% more children and young people than before the pandemic, with almost 12,000 children and young people starting routine or urgent treatment in

[Andrew Stephenson]

2022-23, compared with just over 8,000 in 2019-20. That surge in demand has made meeting our waiting-time targets more challenging, and waits are not as short as we would like them to be. However, I am proud that our services and clinicians, backed by new funding, are supporting more children and young people than ever before. Those services are changing and saving lives.

We also know that even earlier intervention is critical to prevent eating disorders from developing. Community-based early mental health and wellbeing support hubs for children and young people aged 11 to 25 can play a key role in providing that support. In October 2023, we announced that £4.92 million from the Treasury's shared outcomes fund would be available to support hubs, and an evaluation to build the evidence base underpinning those services.

Wera Hobhouse: Can the Minister perhaps comment on what I said about intensive out-patient units, in that we really do not have any information on how widely spread they are and where they are being provided? They are a very good alternative way of treatment, and we really need more information about where they are available.

Andrew Stephenson: We do need more information on that, and I will come to that point. The next point that I wanted to make was on an announcement that I know the hon. Lady will already be aware of, but other hon. Members may not be. Following the evaluation of some excellent commercial tenders from hubs across the country, the Government announced just this week that we are now providing an additional £3 million, which means that total of 24 hubs will receive a share of almost £8 million in 2024-25. That is more than double our original target of funding 10 hubs, and organisations across England—from Gateshead to Truro—will now benefit.

I appreciate that there is still a bit of a postcode lottery around the country, but we are looking to strengthen services, working with different partners across England, to ensure that we are improving services—enhancing existing services—or developing new services where they have not been provided in the past.

Abena Oppong-Asare: I just want to add to the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) about hubs. What work will be done to ensure that the data is captured to see how the growing problem of eating disorders can be addressed and what effective treatments could slow the increase?

Andrew Stephenson: We are working very closely with NHS England and partners to ensure that that data is captured. We are also working with the charities involved in this sector and with others.

I know that the Minister with responsibility for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), has been doing a lot of work on this and has met with various stakeholders. I perhaps should have said at the start of the debate that the reason my hon. Friend is not here and hon. Members have me instead is, of course, that the International Women's Day debate in the Chamber was still going when this debate started —so, unfortunately, there was an unavoidable clash.

However, I know that this is a topic very close to my hon. Friend's heart, and getting the data right is really important for us to ensure that the gaps that currently exist in services are being addressed. I will certainly ensure that the shadow Minister's issue is raised with my hon. Friend; if I may, I will ask her to write to the hon. Lady on that.

We know that eating disorders can have devastating effects on adults too. Under the NHS long term plan, by 2023-24 we are investing almost £1 billion extra in community mental health care for adults with severe mental illness, including eating disorders. That extra funding will help to enhance the capacity of new or improved community eating disorder teams covering the whole of the country. As part of funding provided in 2021-22 in response to pressures created by the pandemic, we also provided £58 million to support the expansion of community mental health services for adults, including those relating to eating disorders.

Many hon. Members in their contributions raised avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, or ARFID. I share their ambition to improve support for people living with this under-recognised condition. In 2019-20, NHS England funded seven community eating disorder teams for children and young people, one in each region of England, in a pilot programme to improve access, assessment and treatment for children presenting with ARFID. The pilots ran from September 2019 to March 2020 and included training to support the adaption of each service's existing care pathways, assessments and treatment interventions for children and young people with ARFID. The training from those pilots is now available for local areas to commission for their community children and young people's eating disorders services. In 2021, NHS England also commissioned ARFID training for staff delivering treatment in inpatient children and young people's mental health services.

We recognise that more needs to be done. We know that the earlier treatment is provided, the greater the chance of recovery. NHS England continues to work with eating disorders services and local commissioners to improve access to treatment for all children and young people with a suspected eating disorder, including those presenting with ARFID.

Several hon. and right hon. Members raised the issue of BMI and the Dump the Scales campaign. NHS England continues to emphasise to systems and services that BMI should not be used as a single measure to determine access to treatment within either adult or children and young people's eating disorders services. That is in line with NICE recommendations and is included in the national published guidance, as well as in the recent community mental health framework. NHS England is also in the process of updating the children and young person's guidance, which will also state that BMI should not be used as a single measure.

The hon. Member for Bath asked whether we would consider appointing an eating disorder champion who could help to galvanise action and support for people living with those conditions. As she may know, the Government do not currently have plans to appoint a specific champion role, but I can assure her that the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England already work closely with stakeholders advocating for better care, such as Beat. We are also very grateful for

the work of Dr Alex George in his role as the Government's ambassador for children and young people's mental health, which includes championing the needs of those with eating disorders.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington raised the issue of palliative care pathways. I want to assure him and other hon. Members that people with eating disorders should not be routinely placed on palliative care pathways, including those with severe, complex or enduring eating disorders. The NHS is clear that all those with severe, complex or enduring eating disorders should have access to evidence-based treatments focused on helping people recover, including hospital-based care if appropriate. Staff involved in the care of people with complex and severe eating disorders must adhere to the legal frameworks that safeguard their best interests, and NHS England will work with patient groups and stakeholders to develop further guidance on that.

The hon. Members for Bath and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raised the issue of suicide. It is critical that we all do all we can for those affected by eating disorders before they reach that point. That is why the Government published a suicide prevention strategy in September of last year, which aims to reduce suicide over the next five years. I want to reassure right hon. and hon. Members that people in contact with mental health services, including those with eating disorders, are a priority group for the strategy.

In closing, I extend my thanks once again to the hon. Member for Bath for securing the debate, and to all the hon. and right hon. Members here today for their thoughtful contributions and questions.

4.4 pm

Wera Hobhouse: I want to thank everybody who took part in today's debate on Eating Disorders Awareness Week. It was an opportunity for all of us to learn more about ARFID, or avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder —it has a long and difficult name, but it is a very severe condition and it is important we understand more about it, as it now affects many young people and their families. I am therefore glad that Beat chose that particular theme for this year's Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

We have heard about the many different forms that eating disorders take. Many aspects of those different forms are still not entirely known, and that includes ARFID. We need a lot more research into the condition. Most of all, we must increase awareness of support for sufferers and caregivers, urgently increase access to services and especially provide access in a timely manner. We have heard several times that we have targets for children and young people, but they are not being met, and we certainly need targets for adult services. While we have made progress, there is still much more to do.

I want to thank Beat, the many other eating disorder charities and those working in eating disorders services for their sterling work. They are all doing amazing work. Last but not least, I want to pay tribute to the indefatigable Hope Virgo. Without her tireless campaigning, we would not be here today. However, there is still a lot to do. I know the Government are listening and I hope for and look forward to further co-operation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2024.

4.6 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 29 February 2024

CABINET OFFICE

Transforming for a Digital Future: Progress Update

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): In June 2022, the Government published "Transforming for a digital future: 2022 to 2025 roadmap for digital and data". This set an ambitious plan that by 2025, we will deliver a transformed, more efficient digital Government that provides better services for the people of the United Kingdom.

In September 2023, I published an update to the road map to ensure we are keeping pace with emerging trends, challenges and opportunities.

At the request of the Public Accounts Committee, I am now updating Parliament on progress made against the road map including progress made by individual departments. Key recent achievements include:

16 of the top 75 services have so far reached great, well on the way to our target of 50

29 Government services are now live with gov.uk One Login and over 3.3 million people have so far proven their identity through the new system

The Government digital and data profession has grown from 4% to 5.4% of total civil service headcount, close to our target of 6%, bringing in the key skills we need

The generative AI framework for Government has been published, to provide detailed guidance, resources and tools for the safe and secure usage of generative AI

There is much work still to be done, but I remain confident that under this Government's plan we are on course to meet the commitments set out in the road map by 2025.

We will be depositing a full copy of "Transforming for a Digital Future: Government's 2022 to 25 roadmap for digital and data, February 2024 progress update" in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS299]

DEFENCE

Contingency Fund Advance: Afghan Relocations and Assistance Programme

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): The Ministry of Defence is continuing to deliver the Afghan relocations and assistance programme. Defence expenditure this financial year now includes supporting Afghan individuals and families with important integration services on arrival in the UK as well as sourcing private rental accommodation where required through existing defence contracts. The Ministry of Defence is seeking a Contingencies Fund advance in order to fulfil its commitments under ARAP.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £17,000,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Defence. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £17,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS301]

Contingency Fund Advance: MOD 2023-24 funding

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): The Ministry of Defence new cash requirement for the year exceeds that provided by the main estimate 2023-24. The supplementary estimate has not yet received Royal Assent.

The Contingencies Fund advance is required to meet commitments until the supplementary estimate receives Royal Assent, at which point the Ministry of Defence will be able to draw down the cash from the Consolidated Fund in the usual way, to repay the Contingencies Fund advance.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £2,450,000,000 and £750,000,000 of capital will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Defence. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3,200,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

This is a routine Contingencies Fund advance request that has been agreed with HM Treasury. This request does not affect the Ministry of Defence's departmental expenditure limit position.

[HCWS302]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

England Rare Diseases Action Plan 2024

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): The Government have published England's third rare diseases action plan on www.gov.uk today, on international Rare Disease Day.

Rare diseases are those affecting less than 1 in 2,000 in the population. Although rare diseases are individually rare, they are collectively common with one in 17 people being affected by a rare disease at some point in their lifetime. Approximately 3.5 million people in the UK are living with one of over 7,000 rare diseases, such as muscular dystrophies or Huntington's disease. People living with rare diseases often face challenges with the health and care system. The National Conversation on Rare Diseases received nearly 6,300 responses and helped us to identify the four priorities of the 2021 UK rare diseases framework: faster diagnosis; increased awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals; better quality of care; and improved access to specialist care, treatment and drugs.

This 2024 England rare diseases action plan is part of the Government's continued commitment to improve the lives of those living with rare conditions. This year's action plan provides an update of the progress made against actions outlined in the 2023 and 2022 action plans, and sets out seven new actions to continue to address the priorities highlighted in the UK rare diseases framework.

The Government have shown strong leadership in addressing the concerns faced by the rare diseases community over the past year. Key achievements include:

Designing and securing funding for a pilot of two syndromes without a name clinics in England to deliver care and diagnosis for people with rare undiagnosed conditions.

Updating the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence quality standard on transition from children to adults' services to ensure that it is relevant to the rare diseases community.

Publishing the UK rare diseases research landscape report, illustrating the strengths of UK research, with over £1.1 billion of rare disease research funded by the Government and charities, and over 250 research projects supported by industry over a five-year period.

A £14 million investment to fund the UK rare disease research platform, which is made up of 11 UK-wide research nodes and a co-ordinating hub facilitating greater collaboration between academic, clinical and industry research, and people living with rare diseases, research charities and other stakeholders, to accelerate the understanding, diagnosis and therapy of rare diseases.

Announcement of over 200 rare genetic conditions that will be screened in the Generation Study. This is the biggest study of its kind in the world, screening over 100,000 newborns with the aim to understand whether sequencing babies' genomes can help to discover rare genetic conditions earlier.

The 2024 action plan also includes significant new commitments against the framework priorities, developed collaboratively with our delivery partners across the health landscape, and in close consultation with members of the rare disease community. These include:

Developing a genomics communication skills resource to ensure healthcare providers are equipped to have sensitive conversations relating to the gathering of genomic information, consent for diagnostic genomic testing and feedback of results.

Developing the specialist genomics workforce through the Genomics Training Academy.

Developing networked models of care for rare diseases, ensuring that specialist expertise is always available while allowing patients to be treated and cared for as close to home as possible, starting with networked models for inherited metabolic disorders and amyloidosis.

Improving access to whole body scans to increase survival rates and outcomes for people who have rare conditions that result in an inherited predisposition to cancer.

Addressing health inequalities for people with rare conditions through publishing a toolkit for highly specialised services and by mapping and measuring the geographic spread of patients accessing these services.

Under the action plan, the millions of people with rare diseases in England will see more efficient and equitable access to care and new treatments introduced. Over the coming year, we will closely monitor the progress of these actions, seeking input from those living with rare diseases to ensure we are measuring the outcomes that matter most. Progress will be reported in 2025, as part of England's commitments to report annually over the five-year lifetime of the UK rare diseases framework.

Through this third action plan, we will continue to take steps towards achieving our overarching vision—delivering improvements in diagnosis, awareness, treatment and care, and creating lasting positive change for those living with rare diseases.

[HCWS298]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Finance Settlement Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): On 5 February, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) set out the final local government finance settlement for England for 2024-25. The final settlement includes new funding for local authorities worth £600 million and makes available up to £64.7 billion for local authorities in England, an increase in core spending power of up to £4.5 billion, or 7.5% in cash terms—an above-inflation increase—on 2023-24.

As a result of this settlement, the vast majority of local authorities will be able to set balanced budgets in 2024-25 and continue to deliver vital services for their communities.

Members of the House will be familiar with the small number of local authorities with severe local failure, where the Government have had to step in and take the most serious action through statutory intervention. These authorities are Birmingham City Council, London Borough of Croydon Council, Liverpool City Council, Nottingham City Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Slough Borough Council, Thurrock Council and Woking Borough Council. The House receives regular updates on the progress of these interventions. In some of these cases, significant local failures in governance and financial management have resulted in acute financial failure, and these councils have asked the Government for continued support to help them set budgets including for 2024-25.

In addition, the Government have always stood ready to engage with local authorities who may request support on an exceptional basis due to local issues that they are unable to manage themselves. While those discussions are confidential, the Government are committed to making the details of any support that is agreed public, in the interests of transparency. Today, my Department is publishing on www.gov.uk details of in-principle capitalisation directions provided to a small number of these local authorities. I will deposit copies of any relevant documents in the Library.

Capitalisation directions permit a local authority, in specific and exceptional circumstances, to meet revenue costs through capital resources, enabling them to manage budget pressures over time—for example through the sale of council-held assets. They do not include any additional direct grant funding. At this stage, and in line with precedent, the Government have provided these local authorities in-principle support only, to ensure that they can set their 2024-25 budgets and deliver vital services for their communities.

In line with the usual framework for agreeing capitalisation directions, appropriate conditions will apply. These are intended to ensure that the process is only used in circumstances where it is truly necessary, address the drivers of the issues that have led to local authorities requesting support, and ensure continued progress towards achieving financial sustainability. In all cases, the Government expect these local authorities to take into account the need to reduce wasteful expenditure, and ensure every area is making best use of taxpayers' money. Where statutory interventions are in place, any

final agreement to support will be contingent upon the demonstration of ongoing improvement, transformation and recovery.

Where the Government have agreed to provide support, it is essential that appropriate assurance arrangements are in place. Where appropriate, any final agreement to support will be conditional upon the completion of rigorous external assurance reviews to assess, at a minimum, the local authorities' financial management practices, and the production of improvement and transformation plans that focus on securing the local authorities' medium-term financial position. The Government are taking additional action in the case of Plymouth City Council, which has requested a very significant capitalisation as a direct result of the incorrect accounting treatment of a transaction in 2019-20 through which the council borrowed to pay off a large part of its pension deficit. Given the unusual nature of Plymouth's approach, the in-principle capitalisation is conditional on a thorough, independent investigation into the transaction.

I am clear that the Government will not hesitate to take action if needed to protect local taxpayers.

[HCWS300]

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 29 February 2024

EDUCATION

The following are extracts from Education questions on 29 January 2024.

Support for Children with SEND

Rachel Hopkins: Every child with special educational needs or disabilities should receive the high-quality support they deserve, but schools and councils do not have the necessary resources to meet increasing demand and rising costs. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the funding and powers available to councils to improve SEND provision?

Gillian Keegan: That is one reason the high-needs budget is up by over 60% in the past four years, and will reach £10.5 billion in 2024-25. We are also supporting local authorities with financial deficits through the safety valve and delivering better value programmes. In most constituencies, including in the hon. Lady's area, the funding has gone up by 25% to 35%.

[Official Report, 29 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 588.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan):

Errors have been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins). The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: That is one reason the high-needs budget is up by over 60% **in five years**, and will reach £10.5 billion in 2024-25. We are also supporting local authorities with financial deficits through the safety valve and delivering better value programmes. In most constituencies, including in the hon. Lady's area, the funding has gone up by 25% to 35% **since 2021-22**.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the provision of training in SEND during initial teacher training to ensure that more teachers are aware of the support that children might need, and on the recruitment of specialists, such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists?

Gillian Keegan: We are implementing a gold thread of high-quality teacher training reforms to ensure that teachers have the skills they need. The Department has been exploring opportunities to build expertise, through a review of the initial teacher training core content framework and the early career framework, to identify how we can equip new teachers to be more confident in meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND. There will be more investment in educational psychologists, of which there will be another 400, and more investment in early years SENCOs, of which there will be another 7,000.

[Official Report, 29 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 590.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education:

An error has been identified in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena). The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: … There will be more investment in educational psychologists, of which there will be another 400, and more investment in early years SENCOs, of which there will be **up to** another 7,000.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Similarly to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), I welcome the introduction of a new SENCO national professional qualification—I declare an interest, as my wife is a SENCO—but to create a truly inclusive school environment, all teachers need the knowledge, skills and practical training to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. What steps is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State taking to ensure that initial teacher training gives them that support and training?

Gillian Keegan: … As I said in answer to the earlier question, there is a golden thread of high-quality teacher training reforms. We will be looking at a revised framework and working with providers so that they can ensure that the contracts deliver the very best support for teachers. What will be vital, and something that Members will feel, is the additional 7,000 SENCOs that will be trained in the coming years.

[Official Report, 29 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 590.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education:

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: … As I said in answer to the earlier question, there is a golden thread of high-quality teacher training reforms. We will be looking at a revised framework and working with providers so that they can ensure that the contracts deliver the very best support for teachers. What will be vital, and something that Members will feel, is the **addition of up to 7,000 early years** SENCOs that will be trained in the coming years.

Degree-level Apprenticeships

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Next week is National Apprenticeship Week, and I look forward to celebrating apprenticeships across the country. As the Secretary of State knows, small and medium-sized enterprises are crucial to delivering high-quality apprenticeships at every level throughout our economy, but the number of SME apprenticeships has plummeted by 49% since 2016, and research shows that the levy is failing to reverse the decline in employer training more widely. The Secretary of State pretends that everything is fine, but is not the real answer to back our businesses, giving them greater flexibility to enable them to deliver the training that we need to get our economy growing again?

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely. Obviously, one reason for the reduction in some of the SME numbers is the fact that we made improvements to ensure that every single apprenticeship was of high quality. I want to make sure that all young people who embark on an apprenticeship, as I did, put their trust in the system and get what they deserve. We have removed the limit on caps on SMEs, and we are working on reducing the number of steps to make it easier for them to access the system. We are also looking at what more we can do: we are focusing on a number of ways in which to ensure that apprenticeships work well for SMEs, which account for 70% of employment.

[Official Report, 29 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 602.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education:

Errors have been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: … We have removed the limit on caps on SMEs, and we **have reduced the number of steps needed to register, making** it easier for them to access the system. We are also looking at what more we can do: we are focusing on a number of ways in which to ensure that apprenticeships work well for SMEs, which account for **60%** of employment.

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