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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 12 March 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

BISHOP'S STORTFORD CEMETERY BILL [*LORDS*]

Bill read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Minister of State was asked—

Humanitarian Situation in Gaza

1. **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [901930]

12. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [901944]

15. **Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): If he will resume funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. [901947]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We are doing all we can to increase aid into Gaza. With our allies, we will take decisions on the future of UNRWA funding after scrutinising Catherine Colonna's interim report on UNRWA neutrality.

Beth Winter: We have heard this morning some shocking reports about Palestinian medical staff in Gaza being blindfolded, detained, forced to strip and repeatedly beaten by Israeli troops, after a raid on Nasser Hospital last month. There is footage from Khan Yunis showing men stripped and kneeling, and patients with their hands bound being wheeled in beds. Do the UK Government believe that the Israeli Government are responsible for the conduct of their forces, and that this clearly appears to be torture and is in breach of international law, including the universal declaration of human rights and article 18 of the Geneva convention? What are the UK Government going to do about this?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to say that Israel must comply with the Geneva convention. We have seen these reports. A full explanation and investigation is required, and that is what the British Government are pressing for. I point out to her that, when it comes to

targeting operations, lawyers are embedded in the Israeli and Israel Defence Forces command, just as happens in Britain, which should ensure the acceptance and honouring of international humanitarian law. But I agree that a full explanation is required.

Paul Blomfield: For months we have seen the horrifying images of children in Gaza mutilated or killed by bombing, and now we see them starving. Aid by air and sea is welcome, but it is insufficient and it is a diversion from Israel's responsibility. Yesterday, 12 Israeli human rights organisations called out their own Government for failing to comply with the International Court of Justice ruling to facilitate access for humanitarian aid. Does the Minister agree that the Israeli Government should be told by the UK and our allies to unlock aid and end the killing, or face real consequences?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have both pressed Prime Minister Netanyahu, and indeed President Herzog, to ensure that more aid can get into Gaza. As the hon. Gentleman will also know, it is the policy of the British Government to do everything we can to achieve a pause so that we can get the hostages out and get more aid in, and move towards a sustainable ceasefire. We are doing everything we can to try to achieve that.

Alex Sobel: What we are seeing in Gaza is a starvation-level event. The United States has taken the desperate measure of air drops and flotillas, which do not direct aid like land-based aid. The only organisation big enough to fully distribute aid in order to avoid starvation is UNRWA. Canada reviewed the interim report of the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services and has resumed funding. Sweden has received bilateral assurances on the same actions that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is supposedly looking for from UNRWA and has resumed funding. It is scandalous that the UK Government's position is still for a suspension of funds, despite the interim report and without evidence of wrongdoing being provided by Israeli in the first place. The British public do not want to be responsible for starvation in Gaza. When will the Minister resume the funding?

Mr Mitchell: As I have told the House before, no British funding is due until April and enough funds have now come forward to ensure that adequate supplies are available. We are awaiting the report of the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services and the interim report from Catherine Colonna, the former French Foreign Minister. The view we take is that when we have seen those, we very much hope we will have the reassurance to recommence funding. That is also the position of the US, Germany, Australia, Italy, Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be comforted by the fact that we are very much trying to resolve this matter as speedily as we can.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The Foreign Affairs Committee recently returned from al-Arish, which is the staging point for aid into Gaza. It was very difficult to see thousands of trucks on that border. The Government have been clear that Israel has a legal

obligation to ensure that aid reaches civilians. The last legal assessment took place at the end of last year. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House, in legal terms, whether Israel is demonstrating a commitment to international humanitarian law? If he will not tell us in the House, will he please write to me?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for her visit with the Select Committee and for her comments. We are quite clear that Israel has the capacity and ability to abide by international humanitarian law. We review it on a regular basis, but as of today that remains the position.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The UN mission team that recently visited Israel concluded that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred in multiple locations during the 7 October attacks”.

In the light of that appalling and shocking conclusion, will the Government redouble their efforts to get the hostages home, because they might be suffering a similar fate to those victims on 7 October?

Mr Mitchell: I agree with my right hon. Friend. She will know that the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and Lord Ahmad have all met the families of the hostages. I had the privilege of meeting some of the families last week, the second occasion I have done so within the precincts of this House. She is right. We are doing everything we can to increase the flow of aid and get the hostages home. We will continue to do so.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): One of the most troubling aspects of the 7 October massacre was the fact that many ordinary Gazans—reports indicate hundreds, or even thousands—followed the Hamas terrorists into Israel and participated in the atrocities. Reports suggest that civilians kidnapped Israelis and sold them to Gaza-based terrorist groups, and committed further unspeakable acts of violence, including sexual violence. Is my right hon. Friend aware of those reports, and does he share my concerns about Hamas’s ongoing indoctrination of ordinary Gazan citizens?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am aware of those reports. The fact remains that the appalling events of 7 October were, as I have said in the House before, the worst atrocity and the worst killing of Jewish people since the holocaust and the second world war. We continue to want total accountability for the terrible events that took place on that day.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Accepting what the Minister says about there being no money due to go to UNRWA until April, can I say to him, however, that for us to continue not to fund UNRWA sends a truly dreadful signal to other countries on the world stage? Canada and Sweden have resumed their funding. Surely we should be attending to this now as a matter of some urgency?

Mr Mitchell: I listed the countries that take the same view as us. The right hon. Gentleman is right that there is a division, but Britain is not due to provide any funding until we reach the next financial year in April. We will, of course, seek to do everything we can to resolve the matter by the time that funding is due.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Can the deputy Foreign Secretary confirm that Israel is co-operating with an increasing number of lorries entering Gaza carrying essential humanitarian aid? I have been looking up the figures: 16,405 aid lorries, 203,300 tonnes of food and 26,160 tonnes of water. Is it not correct that the Israelis have said there is no limit on the amount of aid that can come in, but that there is a delay once it has passed Israeli checks and before it gets into Gaza proper?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to say that there has been an increase in the number of trucks getting in. In February there were, on average, only 97. In March that figure is 162. So there has been an improvement, but the House will recognise that there is nothing like enough getting through. The easiest way to do so is by truck and road. It is because that is so difficult that we have had to find other mechanisms, such as the maritime and air routes.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): May I return the Minister to the serious allegations made today, following a BBC investigation, that medics in Gaza were detained, stripped and beaten while trying to perform their life-saving humanitarian duties? All of us in the House have repeatedly called on all parties to abide by international law, but the Government have so far declined to say that the provisional measures of the International Court of Justice should be implemented in full. Will he now tell us that they should be, and that the UK will support the International Criminal Court investigation, led by Andrew Cayley, to ensure not only that all allegations against all parties are investigated, but that there is accountability for those who break the law?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is quite right: there needs to be a full and thorough investigation and accountability in respect of what was reported today by the BBC, and I can assure her that the Foreign Office is pressing for full transparency and accountability on that matter.

Lisa Nandy: But surely the Minister can see the problem. Unless the ICJ’s provisional ruling is implemented and the ICC is allowed to go about its work, those words are simply meaningless; and unless the international community makes it crystal clear that rules will be upheld by all parties and those who do not uphold them will be held accountable, more people will die. Peace is built on the bedrock of international law. May I ask the Minister again to make it clear to the House that the Government will support the ICC’s investigation of Hamas as well as its investigation of Israel and will press for the full implementation of the ICJ’s provisional ruling, and that international law will be upheld not when it is convenient but always, as the precondition for peace?

Mr Mitchell: Let me be very clear about this: we did not believe, and do not believe, that the ICJ referral is helpful to attempts to secure dialogue. We respect the role and independence of the ICJ and will consider any advisory opinion, but we did not think it helpful, without the consent of both parties, for the Court to deliver an advisory opinion on what is essentially a bilateral dispute.

However, we keep all these matters under review and, as I have said, our current position is that we believe Israel has both the capacity and the intent to abide by international humanitarian law.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Minister will have seen the shocking images of parachutes dropping aid into Gaza at the same moment as a barrage of Israeli missiles struck. There is, of course, every chance that the aid and the missiles originated from the same source, and I wonder at the level of cognitive dissonance required to supply aid to innocent civilians while at the same time providing the means by which Israel can continue to kill them indiscriminately. When will this Government recognise the moral absurdity of selling weapons to Israel while attempting to salve their conscience by airdropping aid to those civilians who are fortunate enough to have survived the bombardment?

Mr Mitchell: As I think I have mentioned to the hon. Gentleman before, in this country we have the toughest arms control mechanisms anywhere, but we accept that Israel has a right of self-defence, and this has to be seen through that prism as well as the prism through which he sees it. But I can tell him that we continually keep these matters under review—that is not only international humanitarian law, but the arms export regime—and we will continue to do so.

Israel and Palestine: Two-state Solution

2. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. [901932]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We must generate momentum towards a permanent peace, with an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Minister for his comments. Everyone in the House wants to see a negotiated diplomatic agreement to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on two states, but does he agree that the first step towards achieving that is an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the release of all hostages?

Mr Mitchell: The problem with calling for an immediate ceasefire is that neither side wants to have one, and therefore, in my view, it would be an unhelpful intervention. That is why the British Government, and other Governments too, have called for a pause to get the hostages out and get aid in, which can then be built on and lead to a sustainable ceasefire, and that is what we are seeking to do.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The ideal of a two-state solution is one that unites this House. However, there are practical barriers, not least the fact that Hamas are surging in the polls—what polls there are—across the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestinian Authority continue to have hateful preaching in the school curriculum that is breeding the sort of hate that leads to evil organisations such as Hamas having a grip on Gaza,

and it continues to pay salaries to convicted terrorists' families. If we are to get a two-state solution, that needs to stop, does it not?

Mr Mitchell: In respect of the textbook allegations that my hon. Friend made, I have received those allegations. Last week I had a meeting with the head of UNRWA, Mr Lazzarini, in which I presented him with the evidence and asked for a full account. In respect of the two-state solution, let me be clear that within both the Israeli Government and civil society throughout Israel, there are pragmatic voices that believe in self-determination for Palestine as the only way forward. It is very important that we try to build on that vision, which is why the Foreign Secretary is so committed to trying to bring people together so that when the political track can open, it has real substance to it.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that a two-state solution has become more difficult because of the construction of over 700,000 illegal homes in the west bank, which continues with the backing of the IDF and the Israeli Government? Even now, we see images of people being turfed out of their homes and others taking over, and illegal settlement homes are being sold to people in the USA.

Mr Mitchell: There are things that we want the Israeli Government to do in that respect. We want them to release frozen funds, halt settlement expansion and hold to account those responsible for settler violence, which is why Britain has sanctioned four extremist Israeli settlers. Let me be clear: as I understand it, the Israeli Government are not against Palestinian statehood but are against unilateral recognition without bilateral negotiations. That was the burden of a vote in the Knesset on 18 February this year.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): The wider discussion of a two-state solution outside this place is being misrepresented. Restaurants are being boycotted for selling Coca-Cola, because people think the company supports Israel. The Coca-Cola factory in the west bank is actually owned by a Palestinian franchisee, so we need to educate people. To get back to the discussion of a two-state solution, we clearly need a ceasefire and the hostages to be released by Hamas. Will my right hon. Friend detail what discussions he is having in that regard?

Mr Mitchell: Those discussions are going on all the time with our friends and allies, with the regional powers, at the United Nations and, indeed, directly with Israel. As I said, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary talk regularly to Prime Minister Netanyahu, and we will continue to do so. My hon. Friend eloquently set out the reason for the Government's policy of trying to create a pause to get the hostages out and aid in, and we will continue to pursue that objective.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The situation in Gaza is truly appalling, but the situation in the west bank is also a cause for huge concern. Since the horrific 7 October attacks, over 400 Palestinians have been killed and thousands have been detained. Further to the

question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), last week Israel advanced plans for 3,400 new homes in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. As a two-state solution is the only path to a lasting peace, does the Minister agree that a firm position on these issues must be taken now by the United Kingdom and the international community?

Mr Mitchell: I hope that I have set out my broad agreement with what the hon. Gentleman says. Britain wants to see steps taken against illegal settlements and settlers who have committed crimes—we want to see them arrested, tried and punished for those crimes. We want to see the Palestinian Authority reinvigorated, with new leadership and a strong approach to taking up the roles that it will need to fulfil when the sky clears and there is a moment for the political track to begin.

Gaza: Sustainable Ceasefire

3. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment he has made of the steps needed to secure a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza. [901933]

13. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What assessment he has made of the steps needed to secure a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza. [901945]

18. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his US counterpart on a potential UN Security Council resolution on a ceasefire in Gaza. [901951]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We need a humanitarian pause to get aid in and hostages out, leading to a sustainable, permanent ceasefire. We are pressing for this with Israel, regional leaders and our wider international partners, including the United States.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Given the importance of their role, the Palestinian Authority will require thoroughgoing reform, won't they?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is right, and that is why both the Foreign Secretary and the noble Lord Ahmad have been in discussions with the Palestinian Authority and the wider regional community—to try to ensure that when the moment comes, as I set out in my response to the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), the Palestinian Authority are able to seize it.

David Duguid: Does my right hon. Friend agree that an unsustainable ceasefire that rapidly collapses would only make it more difficult to build the confidence required for peace, and that if there was a humanitarian pause now, we could get more aid in and hostages out, and it could help to bring about the conditions required for a sustainable ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend has put his finger on a critical point. We do not believe that calling for a general and immediate ceasefire and hoping that it would somehow become permanent will work. A ceasefire will not last if the hostages are still being held. We

cannot just will it if neither side wants it, and the conditions need to be in place for it not to collapse within days.

Gavin Newlands: Some of these answers—“We have the toughest arms licence regime”, “We have urged Israel to follow international law”—are the same meaningless, supine nonsense week after week, month after month from this Government. I have said many times that it sickens me that although this Government—and indeed the Labour Front Benchers—called out Putin's war crimes in Ukraine at light speed, they prevaricate on doing the same when it comes to the Israeli bombardment and siege of Gaza. It sickens me that this Government have abstained on UN Security Council ceasefire resolutions. Will the Minister guarantee that the UK will work with partners to draft a resolution that reflects the will of this House, and finally vote for a ceasefire to end the suffering of so many in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's final point, which I think was the question, the answer is yes, but in respect of everything else he said, the answer is no.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Women in Gaza are giving birth without even having a chair to sit down on. They are having caesareans without medication. The Minister will know that many aid agencies have repeatedly called out the horrific suffering of the Palestinian people and Israel's unacceptable restriction on aid flows. We have been talking about the urgency of an immediate humanitarian ceasefire; how urgently are the Government actually pushing for this with both sides and with partners in the middle east—not just for the urgency of the ceasefire, but for a plan for what comes next?

Mr Mitchell: I can reassure the hon. Lady that on both of those two points—pressing for a pause and pressing all the regional powers on what comes next—the Government are actively and continually engaged. On her first point about the terrible plight of women in Gaza, that is why the British Government gave nearly £5 million just a week or so ago specifically to try to alleviate the desperate circumstances in Gaza that so many women find themselves in.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The best way to deal with a sustainable ceasefire is obviously to deal with the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and that is best done by UNRWA, not through individual bilateral actions. The Minister mentions states that have suspended their funding, and the situation is evolving really fast. The EU has just announced €50 million for UNRWA, and two further tranches of €16 million, subject to the satisfactory completion of an audit. I take the point that no funding is due from the UK to UNRWA until April, but what further reassurance does the UK need to ensure the funding will be in place, because UNRWA is the best organisation to disburse it and the UK risks being very much on the wrong side of these developments?

Mr Mitchell: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's last point. It is true that Canada, Sweden, Spain and the EU, with conditions, expect to be able to resume funding, but as I mentioned earlier, America, Germany, Australia,

Italy, Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland take the same view as us. To the substantive points he makes, we are in discussions with the leader of UNRWA, Mr Lazzarini, and we are awaiting the report from the former French Foreign Minister and the report from the UN. We hope that as a result of those reports, sufficient change will be secured, so that we can continue to fund UNRWA, but the hon. Gentleman should be in no doubt that we have fully funded UNRWA into the next financial year.

Illegal Migration

4. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to help tackle illegal migration. [901934]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): We are engaging with international partners on a “whole of route” approach to addressing irregular migration. This includes: a multi-year operational plan with France to stop small boats; developing partnerships to tackle organised immigration crime; improving returns processes; and working with partner countries through a number of international fora to address the root causes.

Tom Hunt: Small boat crossings continue to be a massive concern for my constituents, many of whom point out to me that there is some logic to the argument that if those who illegally enter our country from France, a safe European country, were returned on the same day, the problem would probably be dealt with overnight. Has my right hon. Friend discussed this with her French counterpart, and is her counterpart open to this undeniable logic? If so, why does France not accept them back on the same day?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend raises a point that is raised in many of our postbags. The reality is that individuals in need of international protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach; that will always be the fastest route to safety. We, of course, continue to work collaboratively with our European partners, including France, to address our shared migration challenges. I can update the House that our partnership with France has helped to bring down small boat arrivals, and together we stopped more than 26,000 crossings last years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response. We in Northern Ireland have a border with the Republic of Ireland. What discussions has she had with her counterparts in the devolved nations, and particularly in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, about tackling illegal migration? I am ever mindful that we have a land border that needs to be patrolled and policed.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said, we continue to engage across a number of international fora to strengthen our collaboration, and to make sure that we have secure and ambitious partnerships to tackle irregular migration. I will ensure that my colleague updates the hon. Gentleman on the meetings they have been having with the PSNI.

Ukraine

5. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his German counterpart on the war in Ukraine. [901935]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I regularly speak to our ministerial counterparts on a range of issues, including the war in Ukraine. He met Foreign Minister Baerbock at the UK-German strategic dialogue on 7 March in Berlin to reaffirm our commitment to supporting Ukraine.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. He will be aware that the head of the luftwaffe, Lieutenant General Ingo Gerhartz, made an appalling lapse of security. The former director general of German intelligence, August Hanning, said on the subject that NATO security and British troops had had their existence in Ukraine “compromised.” Does the Minister agree?

Leo Docherty: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s motivation in asking that question. We should keep in mind that our relationship with Germany on supporting Ukraine is strong, united and deeply co-operative. Together we are delivering the fighting edge that our friends in Ukraine need.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): One of the things that rang in my ears after my recent visit to Ukraine was the frustration with what is happening not just in the US, but even in those European countries—Germany, the UK, France and others—that are a “yes” on weapons support. It is the slow yes that is frustrating people. What is the Minister doing to turn that slow yes to Taurus into a quick yes? More broadly, does that not make the case for a comprehensive defence agreement between Britain and the EU?

Leo Docherty: No, it does not, but we continue to work very energetically and closely with our friends across Europe, including at the recently convened French summit, to ensure that the heft and military capability of all Ukraine’s allies are brought to bear in increasing Ukraine’s fighting edge.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Our defence, security and foreign policy relationship with Germany is critical, not least in relation to our united and mutual support for Ukraine. I will meet German counterparts about those issues in Berlin this week. Will the Minister give us more detail on the discussions he and the Foreign Secretary have had with German counterparts on three issues: urgently speeding up and expanding the delivery of weaponry, bolstering our diplomatic coalition and, crucially, using frozen Russian state assets across Europe to pay for urgent needs to support Ukraine?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman asks a characteristically intelligent and pertinent question. We are working together to increase defence industrial capability. Some new ideas have come out of the French summit about increasing domestic capability for our Ukrainian friends. A lot of diplomatic support goes into that. On

frozen assets, he will have seen recent thinking from the European side about using the interest payments from those funds, which we will consider. We need to find a reliable legal route, if that is to be sustainable.

Vladimir Kara-Murza

6. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help secure the safety and release of Vladimir Kara-Murza. [901936]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The UK has consistently condemned Vladimir Kara-Murza's politically motivated conviction and called for his release. We sanctioned 11 individuals in response to his sentencing, as well as two individuals involved in his earlier poisoning. We regularly raise his case both with the Russian authorities and at multilateral fora.

Bob Seely: Since the death of Alexei Navalny, do the Government recognise the increased urgency of Vladimir Kara-Murza's case? He is now the most high-profile living political prisoner in Russia. What more are the Government considering doing? Are the Government working with our allies, such as the United States, on a number of issues in this field?

Leo Docherty: Our ambassador raised Mr Kara-Murza's case in person with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister on 19 January, repeating our request for consular access. The Foreign Secretary met Mrs Kara-Murza, and Mr Kara-Murza's mother, Elena Gordon, on 1 March. We remain in close and regular contact with his family and legal representatives, and we will continue to keep his case at the top of our agenda.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent, Evan Gershkovich, was detained by the FSB—the Federal Security Service—almost exactly a year ago, on 29 March 2023. He is an American citizen who lives in the UK and works for *The Wall Street Journal*. His continued detention is another stain on Russia. Although Mr Gershkovich is not a British citizen, is the Minister conferring with his American colleagues to ensure that Mr Gershkovich is released?

Leo Docherty: Yes, I am happy to confirm that. I will seek an update from our head of mission in Moscow for the hon. Lady's increased awareness.

Israeli Occupation of the West Bank

7. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the Israeli occupation of the west bank. [901937]

20. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the Israeli occupation of the west bank. [901954]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Israel must not undermine prospects for peace and security in the west bank. As the occupying power, Israel must protect the civilian population.

Peter Grant: The Minister forgot to mention that this is one of the rare occasions on which the United Kingdom Government have a long-standing position that Israel is acting unlawfully in the west bank. Some 700,000 separate criminal acts of unlawful occupation have been endorsed and instructed by Benjamin Netanyahu. Because that illegal occupation has gone unpunished, we now see extremists, with the tacit acquiescence and sometimes direct support of the Israeli Defence Force, committing acts of cold-blooded murder against innocent civilians. If they do not stand up to criminals, those crimes will get worse. The Minister mentioned that two individuals have been sanctioned for their crimes in the west bank. Why have the President or the Prime Minister of Israel, who ordered that unlawful occupation, not also been sanctioned?

Mr Mitchell: The Government pursue the objectives I have set out clearly to the House in a way most likely to bring success. The five core asks that are so relevant to many of these questions are: the release of all hostages; formation of a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza; removing Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel; Hamas no longer being in charge of Gaza; and, with our allies, the provision of serious practical and technical support for the Palestinian Authority. That is the approach that is most likely to command support and not, I fear, the line that the hon. Gentleman took.

Alan Brown: The Minister said that Israel has a duty to protect civilians, but in the west bank there have been 400 deaths. There are now testimonies from Palestinian civilians, including women and children, who have been subject to kidnap, torture and abuse at the hands of Israeli settlers, yet the UK Government have sanctioned only four illegal settlers. What further action are the UK Government going to take against settlers? Surely it is time to ban the trade of goods from those illegal settlements once and for all.

Mr Mitchell: I really do not think that that would be a very sensible thing to do. We do not comment across the Floor of the House on who is about to be sanctioned or where the sanctions regime is going, but the hon. Member may rest assured that we keep these matters under very careful review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As Ramadan begins and Passover and Easter approach, it is vital that all places of worship in Jerusalem be respected. I was extremely concerned by suggestions from Israeli Minister Ben-Gvir that restrictions could be imposed on worshippers at al-Aqsa mosque. I welcome subsequent statements by Israeli authorities that the sanctity of the holiday will be preserved. Authorities must show respect and restraint at this crucial moment. Have the Government made it clear to Israeli counterparts that Minister Ben-Gvir's comments were unacceptable and inflamed tensions, and that the status quo arrangements must be maintained?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member is entirely right about the importance of religious freedom, particularly in the circumstances that she so clearly set out. She may rest

assured that those are points that the British Government make very strongly to Israel. It is helpful that the Opposition and the Government speak with one voice on that very important matter.

Falkland Islands

8. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps he is taking to uphold the Falkland Islanders' right of self-determination. [901938]

10. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What steps he is taking to uphold the Falkland Islanders' right of self-determination. [901941]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The UK Government will always protect and promote the Falkland Islanders' right of self-determination. Only they can decide their future. We want a good relationship with Argentina, but have been very clear that we will never negotiate away the islanders' democratic rights. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary reassured the islanders about our enduring commitment during his welcome visit to the Falkland Islands last month.

Mrs Murray: I am the chair of the British overseas territories all-party parliamentary group. I remember watching the ships leave the Tamar in my constituency and head to the Falklands more than 40 years ago. In 1982, our Prime Minister, Maggie Thatcher, said:

"Defeat? I do not recognise the meaning of the word."

Do the Government retain that steely resolve?

David Rutley: I am young enough to remember those days as well, and yes, the UK Government remain steadfast in their resolve to ensure that the Falkland Islanders' right of self-determination is upheld, and we will continue to use all diplomatic means to that end.

Mr French: Will my hon. Friend join me in recognising the efforts of the Falkland Islanders to build a modern, thriving community and economy, and does he agree that as long as they wish to remain part of the British family, the sovereignty of the Falklands Islands will not be up for discussion?

David Rutley: Well said. The modern, diverse, economically prosperous Falkland Islands of today is testimony to the islanders' achievements since the 1982 conflict. The islanders are a valued part of the British family, and as long as they want to remain part of the family, sovereignty will not be up for discussion.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Have the very commendable words that the Minister has said at the Dispatch Box today been relayed to the Argentinian authorities?

David Rutley: As I have said, we are working on our good relations with Argentina, but the country is very clear about our position on the Falkland Islands.

British Overseas Territories

9. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps he is taking to support effective governance in the British overseas territories. [901940]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is good to see my hon. Friend in his place, and continuing with his strong interest in our overseas territories. The UK is committed to ensuring the security and good governance of the overseas territories and their peoples. We support improvements in institutions to ensure greater accountability and transparency, and fairer societies.

Andrew Rosindell: The Minister will know that the 16 British overseas territories are cherished parts of the British family, and we rightly expect good governance from them in return for their being part of our British family. However, is it not time that they were given some form of representation—not necessarily here in the British Parliament, but in institutions such as a Committee of the House, where they could actually have a voice? At the moment, they have no representation in any sense; they are not even allowed to be members of the Commonwealth—not even associate members. Will he look at that, and see whether the Government can come up with a new approach to ensure that our British overseas territories are fully represented?

David Rutley: I understand my hon. Friend's point, which he makes with characteristic conviction. The Foreign Affairs Committee is setting up a Sub-Committee that will engage the overseas territories more. Of course, I am a strong voice, along with many other people here, for the overseas territories and will continue to be so.

Turkey: Surgical Procedures

11. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What information his Department holds on the number of UK nationals who have died following surgical procedures in Turkey in the last 10 years. [901942]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): We are aware of 28 British nationals who have died in Turkey following elective medical procedures since 2019. The UK Government continue to engage actively with the Turkish Government on how to support the safety of patients who travel to Turkey for medical treatment.

John Mc Nally: I thank the Minister for that answer; that is far too many people who have died. Many gruesome deaths have occurred following cosmetic surgery in Turkey. The family of my constituent, 28-year-old Shannon, witnessed the most agonising, horrific death as she lay on a table convulsing for some nine hours.

As far as I am aware, not once have Foreign Office Ministers raised those needless deaths with Turkish Government officials. Furthermore, a pitiful byline of travel advice on the gov.uk website is simply not good enough. Will the Minister investigate an advertising suspension, in collaboration with Cabinet colleagues and regulators, for countries known for dangerous health tourism as a possible way to avoid further deaths like Shannon's?

Leo Docherty: We raise that issue with our Turkish counterparts at many levels. We will always look at what more we can do, but the head of mission in Ankara is seized of the urgency and importance of the issue and is working in close collaboration with the Turkish authorities.

Israeli Hostages in Gaza

16. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help secure the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza. [901948]

17. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to support efforts to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza. [901950]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We have been working tirelessly to secure the release of all hostages, including British nationals, since 7 October.

Nicola Richards: Last week, the UN published its first report into the violence against women in Israel on 7 October and against hostages. It concluded that rape, gang rape and genital mutilation were systematically used against Israeli women and girls. The fact that the victims who survived do not trust the UN enough to speak to it about their experience adds another layer of heartbreak to the situation. What will my right hon. Friend the Minister do to urge the UN to make it a priority to rebuild trust and tell the world that #MeToo counts for Jews too?

Mr Mitchell: The world very much needs the United Nations, and I completely recognise the position that my hon. Friend so eloquently describes. We will do everything we can as a leading member of the United Nations—one of the P5—to try to improve that relationship. On the appalling events of October 7, which she described, we are doing everything we can to try to help, as I set out earlier.

Bob Blackman: The hostages have been in captivity for more than 100 days. *The New York Times* has reported that of the 134 hostages still in captivity, 50 may have been killed. Given that 10 Israeli citizens have been in captivity in Gaza for more than 10 years, does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that there must absolutely be a commitment to return the hostages before we can move to a humanitarian ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. He sets out the position extremely well. It is a top focus of all parts of the British Government to try to get the hostages back, as I set out earlier. The Prime Minister and the International Court of Justice have called for their immediate release. Although I cannot give a running commentary, we are working closely with the US, Qatar and Egypt to secure their release.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): In the past five months, Israeli and Palestinian civilians have borne the brunt of this conflict. We are getting only the slightest glimpse of the rape, torture, hostage taking and murder that is going on. Will the Minister tell us what our

atrocities prevention team and preventing sexual violence team are doing on the ground to document and stop that?

Mr Mitchell: We are very clear that we seek to document atrocities so that people can be held to account, no matter how long it takes. I set out earlier the additional funding specifically to help women who have been the subject of appalling sexual violence. I am grateful to the hon. Lady and the International Development Committee for their visit to the region. On the issue that she raises, the British Government's position is that there can be no impunity.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The utter tragedy in the middle east is that innocent civilians on both sides are paying the price for failed politics and extremism. To take the Minister back to his answer to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, if he accepts that Israel has the capacity to meet international law, he is saying, is he not, that Israel is in breach of it?

Mr Mitchell: No, I am not saying that. I am saying that the current judgment of the British Government is that Israel has both the capacity and the intent to abide within international humanitarian law. It is an issue that we keep under review, as the hon. Gentleman will understand.

Topical Questions

T1. [901955] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): On the question of Britain's priorities in Ukraine, Gaza and across the world, the Government are delivering. At the Munich security conference, the G20 in Brazil and the United Nations, the Foreign Secretary has argued for standing by Ukraine as the invasion enters its third year. On Gaza, we are pressing with partners for a humanitarian pause and increased aid flows to Palestinian civilians. We have expanded the blue belt, defended shipping in the Red sea and launched an innovative development partnership with Qatar. The international development White Paper is being implemented across Government and has been widely welcomed around the world.

Marion Fellows: Following recent events in Ukraine, what steps have been taken to speed up the process of releasing funds from the sale of Chelsea football club to support all victims of the war in Ukraine, wherever they are in the world?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is quite right that releasing those funds is taking far too long. There are significant complications addressing the release, which involve the European Union and Portugal, as well as Britain. I can tell her, however, that there is renewed energy in the Foreign Office to try to bring this matter to a head as swiftly as possible.

T2. [901956] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): The International Atomic Energy Agency has recently made an assessment that enough uranium has been enriched in Iran to produce three atomic warheads. If that is true, what is the Government's consideration regarding snapping back sanctions on Iran?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): These enrichment levels have no credible civilian justification. We are working with partners to ensure that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon, are prepared to use all diplomatic options, including triggering UN snapback if necessary, and will continue to monitor the situation very closely.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Next month is the anniversary of a full year of unmitigated horror in Sudan. On Friday, the Security Council called for an immediate Ramadan ceasefire, and I know that our excellent diplomats and the Minister were pivotal in that resolution. The African Union, the Arab League and Members across this House echo that call, but the violence has not stopped. If the warring parties continue to refuse to listen, how can the Government work with partners to step up the pressure?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is quite right to raise the appalling position in Sudan, which to some extent has been masked by other terrible events in the world. She will be pleased to hear that, thanks to British leadership at the United Nations, a new Security Council resolution was passed, I believe, last Friday. We are seeking to bring together all the different parties to try to make progress, so that the next round of talks, possibly in Jeddah, will be more successful than the last. Britain condemns any arming of either party inside Sudan. We are seeking also, through the work of our diplomatic mission in Khartoum, currently based in Addis, to help build civil society so that a political track can emerge.

T3. [901957] **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to four key Latin American markets, I have seen at first hand the work that His Majesty's Government and the UK private sector are doing to help with the responsible extraction of key minerals such as lithium. With the drive to net zero accelerating, those minerals will only become more important, and competition is increasing. What diplomatic steps is the Department taking to strengthen the UK's security and its economic relations with countries in Latin America?

David Rutley: We are grateful for the outstanding work of our well-respected trade envoy—my hon. Friend does amazing work. Trade and security are two central tenets of the UK's relationship with Latin America. Joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership creates huge opportunities for businesses in Latin America and in the UK, and as my hon. Friend is aware, sustainable and reliable supply chains for critical minerals—including lithium—are key. I look forward to meeting the Bolivian vice-president this afternoon.

T4. [901958] **Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** Statehood is the inalienable right of Palestinian people and not in the gift of any neighbour, so does the Minister agree that no country has the right to veto the UK's recognition of a Palestinian state?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government have always made it clear that they will recognise the Palestinian state when they think the time is right and such recognition would be helpful.

T5. [901959] **Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con):** The Belarusian company Alutech has somehow managed to circumvent sanctions and set up in the UK, in direct competition with its business partner, Dewsbury-based Alunet, whose turnover has been halved from £30 million to £15 million and has shed jobs as a result of that unfair competition. Will the Minister agree to meet with me and directors of Alunet to discuss how we can resolve this terrible situation?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. As he knows, some of our officials have met representatives of the company concerned, and we are continuing to take action to close gaps between our Russian and Belarusian sanctions—we keep them under constant review. I would be very happy to meet with my hon. Friend to discuss the Belarusian sanctions further.

T8. [901964] **Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab):** The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have been clear that we must be bolder, seizing hundreds of billions of pounds of frozen Russian assets to support the Ukraine war effort, and that we must get hold of the interest on those assets. In February, the Prime Minister said,

“And then, with the G7, we must find lawful ways to seize the assets themselves and get those funds to Ukraine too.”
Can the Minister update the House on progress within the G7?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question. We are making progress, but he is also right to point out that what we do needs to be lawful. That is the key thing, and that is what we are working on.

T6. [901961] **Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** Would the Minister for development and Africa please update the House on his recent visit to Ethiopia?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I was recently in Ethiopia, and was able to visit Tigray and the edge of the most food-insecure area, where—as the House will know—starvation and food shortage is rising alarmingly. The situation is as if a football was being kicked at a plate glass window; we have the power to alter its trajectory, but if we do not, it will smash that window. That is why Britain is setting up a pledging conference—working closely with the United Nations—and a contact group on Ethiopia. In the next financial year, we are increasing our bilateral funding very significantly.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): While the world looks the other way, Sudan is suffering from a catastrophe, with 8 million people displaced, 15 million with no healthcare whatsoever, and 24 million going hungry. What little aid there is is not getting in, and all aid across the conflict lines has been suspended since last December. What efforts is the Minister making to advocate for additional crossing points for aid to get in to Chad and South Sudan and across the conflict line, and will he attend the aid conference in Paris next month?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, I do expect to attend that conference. I speak regularly to counterparts in the African Union, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and spoke last night to Tom Perriello, the new US special envoy for Sudan. We work very closely with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the Troika. We understand that the violence in Darfur bears all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing and are funding an open-source organisation, the Centre for Information Resilience, to keep account of those events, so that there can be no impunity in that respect either.

T7. [901963] **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in order to see Palestinian self-determination, we need an end to human rights abuses, antisemitism and the glorification of violence, and we need Palestinians free from Hamas?

Mr Mitchell: We certainly agree with my hon. Friend's last point about a Palestine free from Hamas. There is no place for Hamas in the future Government of Palestine. On the point he makes about how we proceed further, the Government are absolutely clear that there is no place in our society, or anywhere else for that matter, for Islamophobia or antisemitism.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Israeli Minister Benny Gantz is the only person to have been granted a special mission status certificate by the Foreign Office since the beginning of last year, in effect protecting him from arrest for his part in suspected breaches of international law. According to reports, Israel did not grant Gantz's delegation official status, so can the Minister explain why the UK Government still chose to provide diplomatic cover for this individual?

Mr Mitchell: Whatever the position of the Israeli Government, let me assure the hon. Member that Benny Gantz was received in this country. He was seen by the Foreign Secretary, and his visit was most welcome.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Minister will know that European security continues to be underpinned by the USA, which funds the vast majority of the NATO budget. Could I please ask him what is being done to coerce more of our NATO allies to meet their 2% commitment, and does he agree that European nations must shoulder more of the burden for our own security, for good strategic reasons?

Leo Docherty: I do agree that we must put our money where our mouth is, but as we survey the landscape of European and Atlantic security on the 75th anniversary of NATO, we see—with the accession of Finland and Sweden—that NATO is in very good order indeed.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I acknowledge what the Minister of State said about sanctioning certain west bank settlers, although four seems a very low number to me. Has he raised the activities of those settlers with his opposite number in the Israeli Government?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government have certainly raised those activities with the Israeli Government. That is why we have asked that they should be arrested, prosecuted and punished for those activities. On those who may or may not be subject to a sanctions regime,

we keep that fully under review, but the hon. Member will understand why I think it is best not to discuss that across the Floor of the House.

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Has any Foreign Office Minister, official or embassy member had any discussions with our American allies over the dysfunctional extradition treaty since the disgraceful end of the Scoolas case?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend asks an extremely good question. He and I have co-operated on this matter many times in the past. If he would be so good as to table a question on this matter, I will make sure that he immediately gets a full answer to that question.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): When Jeffrey Sachs, a UN adviser—from a Jewish American family, incidentally—says on camera:

“Israel has deliberately starved the people of Gaza... I am not using an exaggeration. I'm talking literally starving a population. Israel is a criminal, is in non stop war crime status, now I believe in genocidal status, and it is without shame, without remorse, without truth, without insight into what it's doing”,

and adds:

“This is a murderous gang in government right now. These are zealots”,

does that not give the UK Government pause to reflect on the funding of UNRWA, and to call for a ceasefire and the recognition of Palestine, which 138 of 193 UN member states have done, rather than see it wiped off the map?

Mr Mitchell: I think almost nothing that the hon. Gentleman has just said could possibly be deemed helpful in trying to bring the two sides together, achieve a pause, get the hostages out, get aid in and achieve a sustainable ceasefire. Therefore, I am afraid I am unable to offer any reassurance on any of the points he made.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Last week, 287 children aged between five and 12 were kidnapped from their school in Nigeria. That comes on top of 8,000 Christians who were killed for their faith last year. What are we doing about it?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is right about these appalling events, and the high commission in Abuja has raised these matters. Our hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is responsible for freedom of religion or belief, regularly focuses on what is happening in Nigeria and makes representations, which also ensures that the Foreign Office is kept up to the mark in pursuing it.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Canada is to resume funding for UNRWA having received UN reports. Has the UK Government received such reports, are they being reviewed, and when will that review be concluded and decisions be made?

Mr Mitchell: We are asking that we have an interim report on both the key reports as soon as possible, and we will look at those reports as soon as they arrive and make our decisions accordingly. During the course of these questions I have adumbrated both those who are supporting the same position as the UK and those who

are restoring funding immediately. The hon. Gentleman will want to bear in mind that Britain has fully funded UNRWA for its share up until the next financial year.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Haiti is on the edge of collapse, and only 100 nautical miles away are the Turks and Caicos islands, for whose national security the UK has responsibility. Will the Foreign Office fulfil its role by requesting of the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office that we deploy HMS Trent with its defensive capabilities, deploy Royal Marine fast boats, provide assets monitoring in the sea lane, and increase the policing footprint in TCI? Too often we have acted too slowly, which in the past that has resulted in threats to remove TCI from our overseas family. Please can we act now?

David Rutley: I assure my hon. Friend that I was recently in TCI and I understand the situation there. We have seen a rise in the number of people making the dangerous journey by sea from Haiti to TCI. We have put in place 13 serious crime investigators and seven firearms, officers, and we are working with the Home Office and the MOD in building capability and capacity in this important situation.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I listened carefully, as I always do, to what the Minister said regarding calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, but it is now time to step up. It requires all warring parties to stop the rockets, the bombs and the bullets—exactly right—and

for the hostages to be released. Surely it would send a very strong signal if the UK Government now called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. He will have heard the five key priorities that the British Government have put on the table, and I am grateful to him for his agreement. Cross-party support is extremely helpful in driving forward an imperative about which Britain feels very strongly.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Will His Majesty's Government make the strongest possible diplomatic protest against the draconian new national security laws being imposed on the good people of Hong Kong, and does the Minister accept that Britain still has a moral responsibility to the people of Hong Kong, who have been loyal to this country for so many years?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and we continue to raise our concerns about breaches of the Sino-British joint declaration that we see, and about this new layer of legislation coming through. We consider that that continues to be in breach, and we continue to ask for those laws to be removed.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the alleged detention, beating and humiliation of 49 Palestinian medics at the Nasser Hospital last month needs to be investigated by the International Criminal Court—yes or no?

Mr Mitchell: This session ends with the same question with which it started, and as I set out, we believe there must be accountability and we have made that clear to the Israeli authorities.

Prisons and Probation: Foreign National Offenders

12.38 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about criminal justice in England and Wales.

Keeping our people safe requires a relentless focus on cutting crime, cutting reoffending, and making sure that those who pose the greatest risk are imprisoned for as long as necessary to protect the public. That is why it is welcome that crime has fallen significantly over the last decade, in particular with falls of over 50% since 2010 for offences of violence and burglary. In addition, the reoffending rate has fallen over the last decade from 31% to 25%. That has happened not by accident, but as a result of prioritising measures ranging from the tagging of acquisitive offenders post-release, to giving the police the powers they need such as stop and search.

At the same time, to take the worst offenders out of society for longer, we have taken action on sentencing, and those committing the most serious crimes are being sentenced to 40% longer behind bars. That is because, first, we acted to end the injustice of automatic release at the halfway point for the worst offenders. Instead of getting out at the 50% mark come what may, serious sexual and violent criminals must now serve at least two thirds of their sentence in custody. Rapists are now serving nearly three years longer on average than they did in 2010, and we are going even further by legislating to ensure that rapists service their whole term behind bars.

Secondly, we have increased sentence maximums for the worst offenders, such as those who cause death by dangerous driving or who cause the death of a child; and, as a result of our reforms currently before the House, those who kill in the context of sexual or sadistic behaviour will in future expect to spend the rest of their natural lives behind bars. Life should mean life for those who commit the most heinous crimes.

Thirdly, we have introduced a power to enable the Secretary of State to block the release of offenders such as Robert Brown, where release would pose an unacceptable risk to society.

Meanwhile, we are pushing ahead with the biggest prison building programme since the Victorian era. We are on track to deliver 10,000 new prison places by the end of 2025 and are committed to building 20,000 places overall. Today I can announce that we are going even further to make sure that we have the prison places we need to continue locking up serious and violent offenders for longer. I want to focus in particular on foreign national offenders, whom I will call FNOs.

The number of FNOs has increased over recent years to 10,500—around 12% of prisoners—in England and Wales, at an average cost to the taxpayer of around £47,000 per prisoner per year. These foreign criminals are not only putting a strain on the public purse but reducing the capacity of the prison system. We believe that they should, wherever possible, be removed back to their countries of origin, and we have made progress: last year the Government returned from prison and the

community nearly 4,000 foreign criminals, which is a 27% increase on the year before—and we are going further.

In October, I set out in the House our plan to reduce the FNO population. We have extended the early removal scheme from a maximum period of 12 months to 18 months, so that eligible FNOs can be deported up to six months earlier. Almost 400 have already been removed from the UK through this and similar schemes since January. That is a 61% increase compared with the equivalent period a year earlier. We have also signed a robust new agreement with Albania, which has restarted transfers of Albanian offenders—the largest single cohort in our prisons—and we are legislating in the Criminal Justice Bill to rent prisons overseas, as other European countries have done.

This is important progress, but we must build on it by making sure that even more FNOs are removed from the country and spurious barriers to their removal are quickly removed. I can tell the House that we will radically change the way that FNO cases are processed. We have created a new taskforce across the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, including the Prison Service, Immigration Enforcement, and the asylum and modern slavery teams. We have surged 400 additional caseworkers, who will be in place by the end of March, to prioritise these cases, and we will streamline the end-to-end removal process.

We are also expanding the number of FNOs we can remove—for example, by bringing forward legislation to allow us to remove foreign offenders with limited leave to remain under conditional caution, and amending our deportation policy so that we can remove those on suspended sentences of six months or more. We are making more use of the diplomatic levers we have to remove people back to their home countries, including by expediting prisoner transfers with our priority countries; concluding new transfer agreements with partner countries such as Italy; and being prepared to make use of the powers provided under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 to restrict visas for any country where no progress on FNO removals can be made. That will allow us to deport more FNOs directly from prison in 2024—more than double the 1,800 we removed last year and more than in any year since 2010.

Let me now turn to the unsustainable growth in our remand population since the pandemic and the Criminal Bar Association action. This is important. When covid hit, we were confronted with two momentous judgment calls. The first was whether to order mass release of prisoners. Public health advice in this country, as in many others, was to release thousands and thousands of prisoners, given fears that the pandemic would rip through the prison estate and take countless lives. We declined to do that, and in the event—although every death is of course a tragedy—the total number of lives lost in prisons was under 200, thanks to the excellent efforts of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service officers. Other nations took a different approach. In America, where I discussed the matter recently with my counterparts, tens of thousands were released; in California alone, the figure was 11,000. In France, nearly 13,000 were released. It is for each nation to take their own course, but I am clear that we made the right decision for public safety in our country.

The second judgment call was whether to heed the clamour to end jury trials. I believe that would have been a grave mistake, shattering a fundamental British freedom and dismantling the centrepiece of our justice system. The decisions that we made were right for access to justice, right for public protection and right as a matter of principle, but have contributed to the increase in the number of defendants held on remand while awaiting trial or sentencing by over 6,000 since 2019 to about 16,000 today.

Let me turn to what we are doing. On pre-trial detention, the Lady Chief Justice has confirmed that if bail applications are made to the magistrates court or renewed before the Crown court, the courts stand ready to hear them within the short time limits provided in the criminal procedure rules. We are also exploring at pace with the judiciary the roll-out of a remote nationwide pilot Crown court capable of hearing new bail applications. The pilot would monitor whether these additional measures result in an increase in the use of tagging and appropriate support packages in bail applications.

To support that, the Government will invest £53 million of additional funding to expand the bail information service—part of the productivity package announced by the Chancellor at the Budget—which will enable our court system to operate as efficiently as possible by increasing the court-based staff and digital systems that can provide critical information to the judiciary, making the bail process more streamlined. To support that work, a further £22 million of additional funding will be available over the next year to fund community accommodation. We will also increase awareness about the availability of tags—especially high-tech GPS and alcohol monitoring tags—to ensure that offenders can be monitored in the community where appropriate.

We will also extend the existing end-of-custody supervised licence measure to around 35 to 60 days. We will enable that to happen for a time-limited period and work with the police, prisons and probation leaders to make further adjustments as required. That will be only for certain low-level offenders. Where necessary, electronic monitoring will be applied to enhance public protection. Ministers will, of course, continue to keep use of this measure under review. The extension has been requested and supported by leaders in the Prison Service and the police.

All these measures rely on a probation service that focuses its resource on the most critical points of the justice system, especially when an offender is first released from prison. In 2021, the Government reunified the probation service, which brought together all probation functions into a single national organisation. We have invested £155 million of extra funding each year in the service and onboarded more than 4,000 trainee probation officers since then, and I will be taking steps to refocus probation practice on the points that matter most to public protection and reducing offending.

From April, we will reset probation so that practitioners prioritise early engagement at the point where offenders are most likely to breach their licence conditions. That will allow frontline staff to maximise supervision of the most serious offenders. Similarly, for those managed on community orders and suspended sentence orders, probation practitioners will ensure that intervention and engagement is prioritised towards the first two thirds of the sentence, as experience shows that that most effectively rehabilitates offenders. To be clear,

none of the changes will apply to those convicted of the most serious offences, including those subject to multi-agency public protection arrangements.

I express my deep gratitude for the efforts of all those working in the criminal justice system: prisons, probation and courts staff, the police, prosecutors, lawyers and the independent judiciary. They are exceptional public servants. The Government will do what is necessary to remove foreign national offenders from our country and we will do whatever it takes to ensure that the British people are kept safe from the most dangerous criminals. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.48 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Late in the hours of yesterday evening, the Government tried to slip out quietly an announcement that they will be releasing prisoners up to two months early to deal with the lack of space in our prisons. Let us be in no doubt that this is the most drastic form of early release for prisoners that the country has ever seen, yet in the Secretary of State's 11-page, 10-minute statement it merited just one paragraph. This measure will cause shockwaves and deep concern across our country and he seems to think that a quiet written ministerial statement published late last night and one paragraph today is good enough. It is not.

Prisoners will now be released not 18 days early but up to an unprecedented 60 days early. No other Government have ever found themselves having to do that on such a scale. It is nearly three times the number of days on licence seen under any previous scheme. Let me be clear that there are consequences. This scheme will seem wrong in principle to victims and the public—that people who have done wrong and have been sentenced under due process of law can be released as much as two months before a court intended. That means that people who have broken the law and, in many cases, pose an ongoing threat to the law-abiding public are directly benefiting from the Government's complete incompetence.

It is small wonder that the Government have refused all requests to be transparent about the scale and the impact of the scheme. That is no way to run the criminal justice system—or, indeed, the country—not least because when the Secretary of State announced the scheme last October, he was explicit that the power would “be used only for a limited period and only in targeted areas.”

He said that the scheme was to be

“a temporary operational measure to relieve immediate pressure.”—
[Official Report, 16 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 59-60.]

Last month we learned from a leak to the media that the scheme had been expanded to more prisons and, according to unpublished guidance to prison governors, activated for an “undefined period”. He will surely acknowledge that this will strike many people as a novel definition of “temporary”.

Now we learn that the scheme is due to be expanded very significantly—an unprecedented 60 days ahead of when a prisoner would ordinarily be released. I repeat the questions that I first raised all those months ago. How many prisoners have been released early under the scheme to date? Which prisons are using the early release scheme? Which types of offenders are being

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

released early under the scheme? Are domestic abusers and stalkers eligible for release under the scheme? Why has it been expanded to early release of up to 60 days? Why has the scheme been activated indefinitely? Will the Secretary of State finally commit to publishing all the relevant statistics about the early releases scheme on the same basis that prison data is published—on a weekly basis, rather than the wholly inadequate commitment to publish on an annual basis, not least because there will have been a general election before then?

The Secretary of State has acknowledged, at last, that all the changes put real and profoundly concerning additional pressure on our already overstretched and understaffed probation service. He tells us that there will be a reset for probation to ensure that it prioritises early engagement, but it is not clear what that means or what part of its vital work he is suggesting probation officers will not do as a result of today's statement. What is glaringly absent is any additional resource to support the thousands of cases that will now have their release dates brought forward.

It is wholly inevitable that rushing out such measures will increase the risk to the public. I hope the Secretary of State will have the honesty to admit that in his response. Again, what measures have been put in place to ensure that probation has the time and the resources to assess risk adequately and protect the public? Has there been a risk assessment of the expansion? If so, will he publish it? How will the Government ensure that inexperienced probation staff are not left unsupported to supervise dangerous offenders?

The Government tell us that they will free up more spaces in our prisons by cracking down on the number of foreign national offenders who are taking up space that we can ill afford to spare when they have no right to be in this country. The Secretary of State has not pointed out that the numbers that the Government deported last year are significantly lower than those they inherited in 2010—5,383 foreign national offenders were deported in the last year of the Labour Government. Meanwhile, thousands of foreign national offenders are living in the community post release for several years without being removed. We welcome any improvement that the Government intend to make on this pretty poor record, but if the public are to believe that any of these measures will make the necessary difference, the Secretary of State needs a more credible plan, such as a new returns and enforcement unit with up to 1,000 new staff—more than double his 400 announced today.

Unprecedented is a term that is far too often bandied around in politics, but these changes are, by any measure, truly extraordinary. The Secretary of State has not been transparent with this House or with the public. They deserve answers, and it is about time that he started giving them.

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Lady for her points. She addressed a number of issues, but not the fact that when Labour were in government, it ran a similar scheme for three years. Does she want to explain how many were released during that scheme? I am sure that she will welcome the opportunity to update the House. She talks about risk, and she is right to raise these important issues, but it is also important that we set them out clearly and calmly. First, unlike the Labour scheme in

which those who had been sentenced to under 12 months were released with no licence conditions, everyone will have a licence condition. We need to be clear about what that means. Under Labour's scheme, which ran for three years, there were no licence conditions at all. Under our scheme there will be licence conditions.

Secondly, Labour's scheme operated in a blanket way across every prison. Ours is targeted and calibrated. Thirdly, and importantly, under this scheme there will be the opportunity for a gold command veto, where the governor has concerns about an individual—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Lady could just listen for a moment. Those concerns will be escalated to a panel of senior officials, who will make a decision based on the offender's history, the proposed bail address and the conditions that could be imposed—not to contact, not to enter, to abide by a curfew or potentially to be tagged. If the governor has concerns about safety, that person will not be released. That safeguard was not available under the Labour scheme, which ran for three years. It is critical to prioritising public safety, which is our focus.

In the hon. Lady's response there was the eloquent sound of silence in relation to the specific questions that this Government and every Government around the world face: should we have let out thousands of prisoners? She has given no answer to that question, but it is important, because if she aspires to stand here, she will have to say whether that should have taken place. Not doing so has contributed to the pressures that we face, but it would have been the wrong thing to do, because it would have prioritised prisoner safety over public safety. We did not do it, and we were right not to do it. Principle has a cost, and we have taken a sensible decision.

The second thing that the hon. Lady did not address is whether we should have listened to those who clamoured for the end of jury trials. I do not think she is suggesting that we should have, but there is an inevitable effect to that. When we came into office, the number of cases in the Crown court was around 48,000. Pre-covid, it was 39,000, but as it has gone up, inevitably as a result of keeping the jury trial system, a higher proportion of people have been in custody awaiting trial. That is a matter of remorseless, arithmetic logic. There are an additional 6,000 people now. We made the right decision, but we have to take a sensible step.

The final point that the hon. Lady failed to address is what she would have done in these circumstances. She knows, as I know, that she would have taken exactly the same step. To seek to make political capital is beneath her.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his characteristically thoughtful and measured approach. Does he agree that it does no one any good service to try to reduce this issue to simplistic arguments? The truth is that dealing with prison capacity, where everyone has recognised for many years that there are real pressures, demands a careful set of checks and balances. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that those are in place? Does he also agree that we need to be honest with the public in saying that, however much we try, prison places are expensive and finite. Therefore, the system must make judicious and intelligent use of prison, which includes

locking up those who are dangerous and having alternative ways of dealing with and punishing those who are not dangerous to the community. Is that not the objective?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend makes an exceptional point. We have to proceed on the basis of evidence, not emotion. We choose to lock up the most dangerous offenders for longer, which is why those who murder in the context of sexual or sadistic behaviour should be in custody for the rest of their lives, because the threat to the population is so great. Where people can be reformed using technology, which was not available a long time ago, we should use that, not just because that works as a matter of common sense but because the data shows that it works.

On my hon. Friend's specific point, anyone who looks at this issue calmly and in an adult way will see that there have been pressures in moments in history. There was one in 1997 and another in 2007, when Jack Straw had a terrible argument with Lord Falconer about the use of cells in Inner London Crown court. Those of us who have been in the system remember that. The key is whether to deal with that in a sensible, calibrated and proportionate way. We will take every step to look after the safety of the public, and we will not score political points in the process.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last week, the Prisons Minister and I visited Wormwood Scrubs, where we found doubling up in single cells, with unshielded toilets, and overcrowding affecting people's time out of cell and access to work. The education service was described as poor, and food budgets are £2.70 a day. Staff told us that assaults on officers are not being prosecuted. What is the Lord Chancellor doing to improve conditions in our Victorian prisons, as that is vital for the welfare of staff, the rehabilitation of prisoners and the protection of the public?

Alex Chalk: First, I commend the hon. Gentleman for visiting his local prison, as doing so is extremely valuable and I am grateful for his feedback. He raised a number of issues and I would be happy to write to him, but may I just deal with one thing in particular? We ask prison officers to do an extremely difficult job; they need to be robust, but sometimes they have to be sensitive. To assist them in doing so, we are ensuring, first, that they are paid properly, and so we accept every last penny of the Prison Service pay review body recommendation. Secondly, we are rolling out body-worn video, so that they know that if a situation looks like it is escalating, the evidence will be there—that provides a powerful deterrent effect. Thirdly, and finally, we are reducing attrition. I hope he will agree that experienced prison officers are the ones who can make those tough decisions on when to be tough and when, metaphorically speaking, to offer that hand of support.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Clearly, there is pressure on the prison estate. I appreciate that some of the challenge to the Justice Secretary's statement today is about many thinking that we are not keeping in prison people who should be there, but there is also a problem of some people being sent to prison who should not be there. He will be aware of my police officer constituent who one minute was hailed a hero for apprehending a violent criminal and the next found himself in Wandsworth prison.

There is a slight irony, given this statement, that the Government intend to put further pressure on the estate through clauses in their Criminal Justice Bill proposing the imprisonment of beggars and rough sleepers. Given what he is saying today, will he consider supporting the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and supported by myself, my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and many others from across this House, that would remove the intention to imprison rough sleepers and beggars?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend assiduously raises matters on behalf of her constituents and is going to be such a loss to this House. She indicates in that question why she will be. Of course, I cannot comment on the specific circumstances relating to her constituent, because of the independent trial process. The Criminal Justice Bill contains Home Office measures, but I will ensure that the Home Secretary is aware of the points she has raised.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The number of cases disposed of by our courts is down by 200,000 from its pre-pandemic level—a reduction of 12%. What is the Secretary of State doing to eliminate that backlog? What impact does he think there will be on prison numbers in the event that he is successful?

Alex Chalk: That is a fair question. It is always worth remembering that more than 90% of cases are disposed of in the magistrates court, where we are getting through a very significant number. He makes a fair point about the Crown court, because we are prosecuting 32% more rape offences than before, so the plea rate is lower, because—guess what?—people do not plead guilty to rape in the way that they might plead guilty to handling stolen goods, for example. So we address that by putting additional money into the system, with £141 million going into legal aid, and by ensuring that section 28 is used, with pre-recorded video evidence and so on. We make no apology for the fact that we have to let the system take its course on these appalling crimes and we will do everything we can to increase resources so that people—victims and witnesses—get the justice they deserve.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I very much support the carefully considered moves announced today by my right hon. and learned Friend, which reflect the reality of the pressures on our prison estate and on our excellent prison officers, following the extraordinary impact of covid. I especially welcome the additional steps he has announced to remove more foreign national offenders. He spoke of a reset in probation, so will he set out in a little more detail how he hopes it will reduce reoffending and so cut crime? What we all want to see, of course, is fewer victims of crime.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. Probation is critical and I have made a point since coming into this role of speaking not only to senior probation officers, important though they are, but to probation officers on the frontline. That has been an incredibly instructive experience. One I spoke to in Luton and Dunstable told me that the measures we have taken to roll out 12 weeks' guaranteed accommodation were the most significant steps that any Government had taken in the 30 years he had been a probation

[Alex Chalk]

officer. The reset I referred to will follow evidence, not emotion. In other words, it will allow probation officers to calibrate and prioritise their resource to those parts of the licence period where reoffending is most likely to take place. That is common sense and it follows the evidence. Ultimately, measures such as that are why reoffending has gone down from 31% to 25%, thus saving a number of people from being victims of crime in the first place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for a comprehensive response, as always; he is certainly across his subject. It is great that action has been taken to ease prisoner overcrowding. An element of concern must, however, be expressed at the thought of criminals being released early, even though their crimes are being deemed “low level”. What procedure will be followed to ensure that those being considered for early release pose absolutely no threat to the public? What is the Minister’s plan should one reoffend upon release?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter because it is important that we in this House, no matter where we sit, ensure that a clear and accurate message goes to the public. The people who are out will be out on conditions. If a condition is breached—this is not necessarily about committing an offence—not only will they be recalled for the period of the end of custody supervised licence, but they could be recalled for the entire balance of their sentence. That is an important point to understand. We could be talking about a contact condition, a residence condition, a co-operate with probation condition or a “not to go to Strangford town centre” condition. These things are important conditions to ensure that the public are protected and society is kept safe.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I welcome today’s statement on foreign national offenders, but this is ultimately about law-abiding British people. Does the Justice Secretary agree that we should instantaneously remove any right to remain at the end of their sentences for those who abuse our hospitality by committing the most serious crimes?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this; people who come to our country and enjoy its hospitality should expect short shrift if they repay that with crime, because that is an offence against not just the individual, but our entire community. That is why we are taking robust action to deport foreign national offenders. I am afraid to say that this is action not shared by the Opposition; in 2020, a letter was sent to the then Prime Minister urging him not to allow a planeload of foreign national offenders to take off. Who signed it? It was the shadow Secretary of State.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is the Lord Chancellor alive to a principal concern and source of frustration among Crown court judges: the frequent delisting of cases at short notice, with all the consequences that then follow for delay and increasing numbers of prisoners on remand, occasioned by a growing shortage of criminal barristers? That, in turn, will lead to a reduction in both the quantity and quality of future judges.

Alex Chalk: I am so grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that issue, because ensuring that there is a vibrant profession is crucial, not only in order for the machine of justice to continue, but to provide the pipeline to which he referred. As for the specific issue of listing or delisting, as he referred to it, that is a judicial discretion—it is a matter for the judges. However, he is right about wanting to ensure that there is a pipeline, which is why we are investing more than £140 million into legal aid, so that instead of talented young professionals thinking, “I am off to the private sector to earn a fortune at the chancery Bar;” they will be there at the legal aid Bar, following in the footsteps of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, prosecuting and defending criminals so that we can ensure that justice is served in our country.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that under the new scheme victims will see justice prevail, while foreign national offenders will efficiently be processed to leave the country? That contrasts with what happened under the previous Labour Government, who had people who had already served their sentence languishing in prison beyond their sentence while the deportation court caught up with the process.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a matter of basic justice. The British people expect that those who offend against our country, as well as against victims of crime, should receive short shrift. That is why we are absolutely clear that if violent thugs who rape, murder, steal and rob are in our country from overseas, we will put them on a plane and get them out.

BILLS PRESENTED

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT (CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Wendy Chamberlain, Mrs Flick Drummond, Mr Tobias Ellwood, Richard Foord, Tim Loughton, Rachael Maskell, Jim Shannon and Munira Wilson, presented a Bill to require specified organisations and public bodies to inform children and young people of local, national and online support services available to them following a bereavement; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April, and to be printed (Bill 176).

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT AT WORK (PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Emma Hardy presented a Bill to require employers to ensure that personal protective equipment provided at work to people with certain protected characteristics within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010 is suitable for the wearer; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 June, and to be printed (Bill 177).

Public Sector Websites (Data Charges)

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

1.10 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require providers of electronic communications networks to allow their customers to access certain public sector websites free of charge; and for connected purposes.

It is a pleasure to present the Bill, which would make a significant difference to the financial security of so many struggling households up and down the country. As we all know, the cost of living crisis has squeezed the household finances of millions. The last thing our constituents need, when they are already worrying about choosing between heating their homes or putting food on the table, is to run out of data to access vital public services on the internet.

In October 2023, the digital inclusion all-party parliamentary group found that nearly 2 million households in the UK were struggling to pay for broadband—nearly double the number in the year before. Indeed, a Citizens Advice study in May last year reported that 12% of households surveyed said they have had to cut back or stop spending on broadband entirely during the previous 12 months. For those on universal credit, the situation is even starker. The study found that 16% of claimants said they were behind on their broadband bill, compared with just 4% of non-claimants. Some 14% of universal credit claimants who said they had to cut down on their internet usage due to cost, also found it difficult to manage their universal credit account as a result.

In an age when we are increasingly able to access public services via the internet, particularly via mobile browsers, we must ensure that we do not leave people behind during this digital revolution. Our reliance on the internet became acutely clear during the pandemic: NHS Digital recorded 1.2 billion visits to NHS webpages between October 2021 and September 2022, with 131 million visits to the vaccination booking pages. The increasing prevalence of public information and resources available online is a good thing—as a former NHS worker, I know it has the capacity to make our public services more efficient, more agile and better value for money for taxpayers—but being able to access the NHS website should not be constrained by someone's financial situation. Likewise, someone on universal credit should not have to worry about not being able to access their account because of their data allowance. Simply put, we know that those with the greatest need to access online services are often the ones facing the greatest barriers to do so.

During the pandemic, operators such as Vodafone, EE, Virgin Media, O2 and Three gave their customers free online access to the NHS website, covid information, the NHS app and online education resources such as BBC Bitesize and Oak National Academy. The operators recognised the huge surge in need and the barriers that some people would face as a result. This procedure is known as zero-rating, whereby accessing any of those websites would not consume a user's mobile data allowance. Indeed, since the pandemic, Virgin Media, O2 and Three continue to offer zero-rating to their customers

for various public service websites after seeing what a vital help it can be for the least well-off during the cost of living crisis. My Bill simply proposes that we continue the good work that some operators have already done by extending this precedent into a legal requirement for all network providers operating in the UK. By making the gov.uk and nhs.uk sites zero-rated, we can extend universal free access to the most vital services, such as universal credit, local authority services and NHS health information, to everyone no matter their financial situation.

Zero-rating public service websites is by no means a silver bullet, but it would help to ease one of the many financial burdens that households currently face. By giving users free access to gov.uk webpages, for instance, we could ease some of the financial pressure and stress for some of the most vulnerable in society. Many households rely on a mobile phone for all their internet access, but they are often dependent on expensive data top-ups to stay online. By removing costs from gov.uk and nhs.uk sites, households who visit these services will not have their data affected and will still be able to access them even when they are out of data.

In my constituency of Wakefield, we have a fantastic organisation called Wakefield Technology 4 All, which provides vital digital access support, as well as digital devices themselves, to so many households. A young woman who came to its support hub last year needed help to rebuild her life after multiple incidents of sexual violence. As well as having a tight budget to support herself and her children, she had to deal with having no carpets, no beds and no curtains. What she did have was a donated laptop from Wakefield Technology 4 All, but she struggled to find money for data. Accessing websites for Government services, the NHS and local council services would often be reactive and unplanned, and she would often find herself running out of data when she needed to access those vital services. During unimaginably stressful circumstances, she would have to rely on seeing someone face to face at another location, or simply do without the services until she was able to purchase more credit.

Many of the poorest and most vulnerable households have enough on their plate without the constant worry about how they will access crucial public services and information if their data allowance runs out. My constituents should not have to worry about the lack of data preventing them from accessing the vital public services and information they need.

With Bills such as this one, there is often the question of how, but this is a rare situation where it has been done before. As I set out, during covid and the ongoing cost of living crisis, some networks stepped up and introduced zero-rating. Clearly, deployable technology for zero-rating already exists. Zero-rating was described by a Three mobile representative during the pandemic as being as simple as “flicking a switch”. Indeed, some networks already offer zero-rated access to social media as a perk for their customers.

Compared to social media, the cost for operators to zero-rate access to domains such as gov.uk and nhs.uk is tiny. The Government services covered by the Bill are largely text-based, so the amount of data consumed is a minute fraction of what it would take to, for example, stream a 4K video on YouTube. Once domains are established, verified and shared with operators, it would

[Simon Lightwood]

be a seamless transition to ensuring that millions of the most vulnerable households are still able to access vital health, education, employment and benefit services, even when their data runs out.

My Bill will not solve the financial problems that so many are facing up and down the country; that is not the intention. It would, however, ensure that everyone can still access the essential services they need to get on in life, even if they run out of data. I pay tribute to all those who are working so hard, across this House and in the other place, on digital inclusion. In particular, I am extremely grateful to the digital inclusion all-party parliamentary group, which has worked tirelessly on so many aspects of digital inclusion. I also pay tribute to organisations outside Westminster, including Virgin Money UK, which I was able to visit in my constituency a few weeks ago. It is working with the amazing team at the Good Things Foundation to provide a national data bank, increasing access to the internet for its customers and some of the most vulnerable households up and down the country.

In closing, the Bill would give millions of households the security of knowing that they can always access the crucial public services they depend on, from health advice to information about their universal credit applications and accessing important local Government services. We still have a long way to go before we solve all the problems of digital exclusion, and the Bill does not try to fix all the myriad problems that come with it, but with the technology ready to go and the clear need for action, the Bill would none the less take us one step nearer to closing the digital divide for good.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered, That Simon Lightwood, Dame Angela Eagle, Stella Creasy, Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Kate Hollern, Fabian Hamilton, Nadia Whittome, Ms Marie Rimmer, Cat Smith, Naz Shah, Sarah Edwards and Dr Rupa Huq present the Bill.

Simon Lightwood accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 May, and to be printed (Bill 178).

Point of Order

1.20 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 24 January, the Procedure Committee published its report HC338, entitled “Commons scrutiny of Secretaries of State in the House of Lords”, which recommended that the Foreign Secretary should appear at the Bar of the House to answer questions. Today we had the second session of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions since the report’s publication, and there was no sign of the Secretary of State. If the Prime Minister bottles it and does not call an election in the next week or so, there could be three more sessions of FCDO questions before the summer. Have you, Mr Speaker, received any indication from the Government of whether they intend for the Foreign Secretary to come here and answer questions from Members of the House, and can you confirm whether the House authorities are in a position to facilitate that if and when he does appear?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his intention to make this point of order. The Procedure Committee published its report in January, and the Government’s response will be due towards the end of this month. I would advise him to wait for the response before considering how he might pursue the matter further. That is what I have been told by the Clerks.

Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 11 March).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2024-25.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

1.21 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): It is a privilege to open the final day of debate on the Budget—a Budget with a plan to grow the economy, a plan for better public services and a plan to make work pay. Today’s debate is focused on a theme close to my heart: improving productivity. As some Members know, back in 2010, before I became a Member of Parliament, I worked for my noble Friend Lord Maude on an efficiency and reform agenda that saved the Government £14 billion a year by 2014. It captured everything from buying printer paper collectively to managing Government projects better and digitising services. That agenda not only cut costs but improved productivity.

Ahead of the pandemic, and under this Government, productivity in the private sector increased by an average of 0.7% a year between 2010 and 2019. *[Interruption.]* As I am sure Opposition Members will be interested to know, that contrasts starkly with the decline in public sector productivity by an average of 0.2% per annum between 1997 and 2009. Our success was entirely due to hard work behind the scenes and a relentless focus on output.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Rather than cherry-picking statistics, will the Minister tell us what she thinks about the fact—confirmed by the House of Commons Library—that the UK has the lowest investment in the G7 and is the second worst performer in the G7, post-pandemic, in terms of economic growth?

Laura Trott: I will say to the hon. Gentleman that since 2010 we have grown faster than France, Germany and Italy, and we are predicted to do the same in the next five years.

It is no coincidence that between 2010 and 2019 the number of violent crimes and burglaries halved. Our reading standards in schools, which were previously behind those of France, Germany and Sweden, raced ahead. The latest technologies, such as the NHS app and virtual wards, are now used by patients across the country.

However, this is not a “once and done” situation. The effect of the pandemic on productivity was significant. Moreover, as Lord Maude has put it, the focus on productivity must

“never end. This will always be a work in progress. There never can be a steady state... The public, for whom public services exist, deserve nothing less.”

That is why this Conservative Chancellor is willing to invest once again to drive change.

The head of the National Audit Office has said that if we can improve public sector productivity, the size of the prize is tens of billions of pounds, and the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that raising public sector productivity by 5% would be the equivalent of about £20 billion extra in funding.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): While the Chief Secretary is on the subject of the OBR, may I ask her whether the OBR is correct in saying that the target public sector debt measure is forecast to increase, or whether her own personal calculations continue to suggest that debt will fall?

Laura Trott: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will see in the OBR figures that public sector net debt overall is expected to fall, and public sector net debt excluding the Bank of England is due to fall in the fourth and fifth year of the forecast. *[Interruption.]* No, that is just the overall public sector net debt figure.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): May I pursue the Minister’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)? Why have the Government chosen a debt measure that excludes the Bank of England?

Laura Trott: To put it simply, it is because we are more in control of that figure. The overall figure is falling, but public sector net debt excludes the impact of the Bank of England on the figures.

The rise in public sector productivity will help us to manage the size of the state in the long term, while also maintaining public service quality and delivering savings for taxpayers. That is why, 14 years on, in my role as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I am delighted to be leading our public sector productivity programme.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am pleased that the Minister is in charge of that programme. Perhaps she can explain a little more about it. Local government currently has a deficit of about £4 billion. In the productivity plan for local government, the Government highlighted the need to reduce waste on equality, diversity and inclusion. I have found no Government figure showing how much that will save, but the TaxPayers’ Alliance says that it will save £50 million over three years, towards the £4 billion deficit. Has the Minister a figure that suggests that the saving in that part of the productivity plan will be greater?

Laura Trott: Yes, the savings in the productivity plan will amount to billions of pounds.

Let me say a little about the economic context. The last few years have not been easy. The pandemic, Putin’s illegal occupation of Ukraine, energy price rises, and now conflict in the middle east have taken their toll on the economy, on businesses and on families. However, because of the difficult decisions that the Government have taken, the economy is turning a corner. Inflation has more than halved, from 11% to 4%; real wages have risen for seven months in a row; and unemployment is down, from a high of 8% in 2010 to 3.9% at the end of last year. Because we have stuck to our plan, we have been able to cut the double tax on work, putting £900 back

[*Laura Trott*]

into working people's pockets. On Sunday, the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies gave its verdict on our tax cuts for workers:

"genuinely putting a lot more money into the pockets of people".

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The right hon. Lady is referring to the 2p cut in national insurance. That cut has been wiped out by the freeze in income tax thresholds, and the average worker on £35,000 a year will still be nearly £400 a year worse off this year than last year. How do these figures match up?

Laura Trott: I am sure the hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the average earner will be subject to the lowest effective tax rate since 1975.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Laura Trott: I am going to make a bit of progress.

Sadly, the Labour party is putting this in jeopardy. Labour Members have no plan to cut taxes, and cannot name a single one that they would cut. Instead, they are trying to pull the wool over the public's eyes by pretending that they have refinanced their £28 billion a year plan to decarbonise. They themselves have said that their pledge costs £28 billion a year, and they are apparently not scaling their promises down. We all know what that means: more taxes for hard-working families. What the public and the House need to know is this: which tax will they raise to pay for the plan, and, if they are in government after the general election, will they stick to our spending plans as set out in the Budget? The British public deserve to know.

During this Parliament, total departmental spending has increased by 3.2% a year in real terms, and day-to-day departmental spending will grow at an average of 1% a year in real terms beyond the current spending review period. The Government are protecting the record increase in capital spending over this Parliament, which will deliver about £600 billion of public sector investment over the next five years. As announced in the Budget, we are also committing an additional £2.5 billion for the NHS in England in 2024-25, protecting day-to-day funding levels in real terms.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Is the Minister aware that thousands of people in this country would love to work and be productive, but cannot because they are living with cancer? Cancer is not only a threat to people's life, but it also limits their ability to earn a living. I am sure that she is aware that a third of people diagnosed with cancer wait two months for their first intervention that will help to cure them. Is there any room in the capital spending that she set out for large-scale investment in radiotherapy, as suggested by the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy? That would help to cure people more quickly and in a more targeted way, so that there is no collateral damage, and people can go back to work much sooner.

Laura Trott: I praise the hon. Gentleman for the work that he has done on this very important issue, and I know that the capital we are providing will help with issues such as the one he has highlighted.

We cannot just put more money into public services and hope for the best. I was delighted to read that the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) said recently that he was in favour of reforming public services, not splurging on them. Well, here's hoping that the Labour party breaks the habit of a lifetime. I genuinely hope that he will agree with some of the measures on productivity that we have set out today, because outcomes are determined by how things are done. By focusing on outcomes, not funding, we can deliver real value for the taxpayer. It is a trap to think that simply spending more buys us better public services. Simply spending more is also not sustainable.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): On the subject of unfunded spending commitments, we on the Treasury Committee learned from the Office for Budget Responsibility this morning that the Government have not told it about the £46 billion ambition to scrap national insurance contributions altogether, and because the OBR has not been told, it cannot forecast the economic impact that that may have. How does that bake in long-term economic stability for the United Kingdom?

Laura Trott: Unlike the Labour party's massive £28 billion unfunded tax commitment until 2030, our long-term ambition to cut national insurance and erase the double tax on work does not have a date on it. We have shown that, through careful stewardship of the economy over time, we can reduce people's taxes without cutting spending.

Simply spending more is not sustainable. If no action is taken, public spending is forecast to grow faster than GDP from 2030; that accounts for pressures that we cannot avoid, such as demographic changes. That must be managed, using all the tools at our disposal—and not by borrowing more, or increasing taxes on the British public. Instead, we have to assess how we deliver public services, and improve them to make the UK more productive and ensure the long-term sustainability of public finances. Yes, this is about money, but it is also about delivering the best services for the public, because productivity is not a theoretical concept; it affects us all, in each area of our everyday lives.

I want better outcomes for children, and teachers being able to spend more time with pupils, rather than filling out paperwork. I want the police to spend more time on the beat, not on forms. As a Member of Parliament representing constituents in Sevenoaks and Swanley, I want nurses and doctors spending time with patients, not having to look at computer screens. Better public productivity means better value for money, better support for frontline workers to do their jobs effectively, and better results.

In last week's Budget, the Chancellor announced that we are allocating £4.2 billion to investment in productivity. The package is broad and comprehensive, and includes £3.4 billion for the NHS—double its current budget for tech and digital transformation. The NHS says that that will unlock over £35 billion in the coming years—10 times the amount we will put in. At the next spending review, that will be the model for all our public services. The package also includes £105 million for 15 new special free schools across England, which I know will be welcomed across the House. That will create over 2,000 high-quality places for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and prevent local authorities' use of costly independent provision.

The Budget provides £165 million to tackle the shortage of children's home placements and to rebuild the children's home estate. That will reduce the need for expensive and unsuitable emergency provision that does not produce the right outcomes for the children who need our help the most. There is £334 million to cut crime by improving policing technology, and £17 million for modernisation of Department for Work and Pensions services, and replacing the paper-based system for benefits. As a former Pensions Minister, I know the impact that such modernisation has had on the state pension. However, this is just the start. I am also committed to driving forward work to embed productivity at every level across the whole public sector.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Laura Trott: No, I will not. I have been very generous with my time.

When I began thinking about this agenda in 2009, no one could have foreseen the technological changes of the last decade. Those changes are revolutionising the private sector, and we must embrace them in the public sector, too.

Our job is not yet done on the economy, but we are making progress with our plan to reward work and create growth—a plan that would be put in jeopardy under the Labour party. This Budget does what it says on the tin: it sticks to the plan—a plan that Britain needs, a plan that is putting money back in the pockets of British people, and a plan that is working. I commend this Budget to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, I inform the House that we have 46 speakers this afternoon. I urge Back Benchers to stick to a maximum of seven minutes to start with; we will see whether that needs to be reduced later. That would be extremely helpful.

1.36 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I am starting to worry about right hon. and hon. Members of the Conservative party—not just because there are so few of them here today to defend their Budget, but because of their state of mind. I am not sure whether it is confusion, delusion or denial, but whatever it is, they need an intervention from the public.

On Conservative confusion, the Chancellor called this a tax-cutting Budget, but the independent forecasts confirm that the tax burden is due to go up each and every year over the next five years. On Conservative delusion, the Chancellor called this a Budget for a long-term plan for growth, but in the middle of this recession, the growth forecast per person was downgraded once again, after seven quarters of decline. On Conservative denial, which is the worst of the three examples, the Conservative party came out of the Budget promising to abolish national insurance contributions altogether—an irresponsible, unfunded and massive spending commitment costing £46 billion a year, all without a plan to pay for it.

Alan Brown: The Budget bakes in post-election cuts of between £19 billion and £20 billion, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that there is a conspiracy of silence from both the Conservatives and the Labour party. The Labour party has committed to sticking with the Tories' spending plans. On the conspiracy of silence, will Labour keep the £20 billion of departmental cuts, or will it raise funds to offset that?

Darren Jones: Two short answers: first, we are not sticking to the Conservatives' spending plans and, secondly, the OBR forecasts Conservative party failure, not the success that the Labour party will bring to this country and the economy.

I know that Conservative Ministers do not like to think about their fourth Prime Minister since 2010, who only recently crashed the economy off the back of unfunded tax cuts, sending mortgage bills rocketing, but they really do not need to look back far in history to understand the risks of a £46 billion unfunded tax cut promise. They do not even need to ask their predecessors about the consequences of such risky behaviour, because the British people are still paying the price today for their economic vandalism through higher mortgage and rent costs every single month. Conservative Ministers need to look at themselves in the mirror and ask whether they have learned anything from the last 14 years in office. I have given just a few examples of confusion, delusion, denial and risk-taking with the economy, which prove that the biggest threat to the economy is the Conservative party.

Stephen Doughty: On the subject of confusion and the unfunded £46 billion commitment on national insurance contributions, my hon. Friend will note that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury would not give clarity on the date for her Government's promise, yet the Chancellor said in an email to Conservative party members that he wanted to make progress on that promise "in the next Parliament". Other members of the Government are saying completely different things. Is this not an example of the chaos that the Conservatives are in?

Darren Jones: That is yet more evidence of the Conservatives' ill discipline. Last time, they wanted to disregard the Office for Budget Responsibility, and announced unfunded tax cuts; now the former Chancellor supports these new, unfunded tax cuts, and yet again the Government are not giving the OBR the information that it needs to make policy forecasts.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman understand the difference between an ambition and a promise?

Darren Jones: I would like the hon. Gentleman to explain that to the public. Given that the Conservative party makes promises at every single election and fails to deliver them, I think the public have the same question in mind.

Moving on to the confusion about this being a tax-cutting Budget, the Budget documents confirm that the United Kingdom has the highest tax burden in 70 years, and that burden rises each and every year for the next five years under the Conservatives, so overall, taxes are going up, not down. Figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility show that for every 10p extra in tax paid by working people, the Conservatives give only 5p back.

[Darren Jones]

That is why the public see the measures as a pre-election giveaway by the Conservatives—but it is no giveaway at all, given that successive Conservative Chancellors have taken double what they now promise to give back.

This is bad news, and not just for those already paying taxes. Tax thresholds are being frozen for the next five years, which will increase the tax take overall by an additional £40 billion, so 3.7 million people, including pensioners, who are not paying tax at all will do so by 2028-29 under the Conservatives. The tax burden is going up; Conservative Ministers are taking more in tax than they say they will give back; and more people will pay tax after this Budget, so I have to ask: why are Conservative Ministers calling this a tax-cutting Budget at all?

May I gently point out that the Scottish National party is just as bad? In Scotland, the SNP has increased taxes on working people, so that even the low paid pay more in tax in Scotland than they would in England, yet the SNP campaigns against the windfall tax on the big oil and gas companies. Are SNP Members really putting oil and gas company tax cuts ahead of tax cuts for working people?

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind) *rose—*

Darren Jones: I was waiting for an intervention from the SNP. Is the hon. Gentleman an SNP Member?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am not in the SNP, but I do like a bit of accuracy and proof. The reality is that those earning under £28,000 are not paying more tax. The hon. Gentleman's reference is a straight lift from an article in the *Holyrood* magazine. It was a very good article otherwise, but on that little bit, it was not very accurate at all.

Darren Jones: I read the article on the BBC, which I can assure the hon. Gentleman is a pretty reliable source of information. If the SNP wants to tell teachers and nurses earning £28,000 a year that they are high earners, I encourage it to do so in the general election coming up this year.

Labour first called for a windfall tax on the profits of oil and gas companies in January 2022. The Conservatives finally agreed to introduce the energy profits levy in May that year, though there were significant holes in the Government's approach. Since then, Labour Members have been pressing Ministers to close them. Ahead of the general election, we have set out our plans for an energy profits levy if we win. We will increase the levy to the same rate of tax as in Norway, end the windfall tax investment allowances, and maintain the levy until the end of the next Parliament, with a statutory sunset clause, if there continue to be windfall profits. We have set out our plans now to give those operating in the North sea as much certainty as possible when making future investment decisions. To give further certainty, I can put on record today that we fully support an energy security investment mechanism, and we will therefore support Budget resolution 18 today.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about how this has been a high-tax, high-debt Government, but at

the same time they have been presiding over low living standards. Does he agree that the £17 rise in real weekly earnings under the Conservatives is in huge contrast to wages rising by £183 under Labour? While they have been presiding over low living standards without any plan to sort that out, we will have higher living standards and lower bills under Labour.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which I think reflects the mood of the public. When Conservative Ministers stand up and say that we have never had it so good, people at home look at their payslip and their bank balance and realise that is not the case.

Let us now turn to the delusion of this Budget being a so-called long-term plan for growth. The independent evidence is clear: this will be the worst Parliament on record for living standards. It is the only Parliament where living standards have fallen instead of risen, with real pay having gone up by only £17 a week under the Conservatives, compared with £183 a week under the last Labour Government, as my hon. Friend has just pointed out. The Chancellor could not bring himself to say the R-word, but the Budget documents confirm that, despite 22 Budgets or statements from successive Conservative Chancellors over these past 14 years in which they promised they would get the economy growing, we are now in recession—a recession that for working people has been felt for some time.

We have had seven quarters of downgraded growth per person extended by a further downgrade in the Budget last week. That is the longest period of stagnation since the 1950s, with an economy that has shrunk on a per capita basis since the Prime Minister took office and overall GDP forecast to increase only because of a dependence on migrant labour. That is quite the record for a Conservative party that promised to reduce migration and get the economy growing.

Tim Farron: The issue in rural communities such as mine is that growth is being hampered, despite there being demand, because hospitality and tourism businesses do not have a big enough workforce to support it. In the Lakes, 63% of hospitality businesses are not at capacity because they do not have the staff. Part of that is a result of silly visa rules, so will he look at those again? The other reason is the lack of affordable housing for local families. Would he allow local authorities, and give them the finance, to once again build social rented homes, so that we have enough homes to enable people to work in communities such as ours?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member is right. What we need is a country that creates the opportunities and jobs for people who need them in the areas in which they live, whether that is about affordable housing, delivering transport infrastructure on time and on budget—something the Conservative party seems unable to do—or ensuring workers have access to skills and training so that they can take the jobs available in their local communities. The Conservatives have consistently failed on those measures, which is why they are so dependent on migrant labour to keep the economy above a recessionary level in the Budget forecasts.

Turning to the denial of the Conservative party, its £46 billion a year plan to abolish national insurance contributions altogether is an irresponsible, unfunded,

massive spending commitment without a plan to pay for it. The public rightly look to their national insurance contributions as the bedrock of our welfare state, where working people and their employers all contribute towards funding our national health service and the state pension. It was originally designed as an insurance to give people the financial help they needed during illness and unemployment.

Given the Conservatives' pledge—confirmed again across the Dispatch Box today—to abolish national insurance altogether, without a plan to pay for the £46 billion annual cost, what do they propose to cut? Will it be funding for our GPs, driving patients to pay for private health care? Will it be the right to be seen in the local hospital? Maybe they will cut support towards the cost of social care, or end incapacity benefit or jobseeker's allowance. Maybe there would even be a reduction in the state pension itself. What is it? The public have a right to know—*[Interruption.]* I will happily give way to an intervention from Ministers if they can tell us how they are going to fund their £46 billion tax cut. There are no interventions.

The Conservatives must answer this question. After their previous Prime Minister and their previous Chancellor crashed the economy through a £45 billion tax cut, they are now celebrating the latest form of a £46 billion tax cut. How will it be funded? Surely not through higher taxes or higher borrowing, given that both are at record highs already.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives should come clean about whether their plan to abolish £46 billion of national insurance contributions will mean putting up taxes on working people, cutting spending on public services or borrowing billions, like the previous Prime Minister, and risking crashing the economy again?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is right. Ministers should answer this question and I am repeatedly giving them the opportunity to do so. What is the answer to the question? How will the Conservatives fund their £46 billion unfunded tax cut commitment? We can only assume, given that taxes are the highest they have been for 70 years and borrowing is the highest it has been for many decades, that further cuts must be coming from the Conservatives to our national health service and our state pension. The fact of the matter is that the Conservatives' plan to abolish national insurance is not just fiscally irresponsible but morally abhorrent. In contrast, the Labour party will never promise to do anything it cannot pay for—*[Interruption.]* I seem to have woken them up on the Government Benches. I encourage them to continue to try to answer the questions we put to them.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case on national insurance. Does he agree that the plan to abolish national insurance raises fundamental questions about the future of the state pension? Even if income tax were increased by 8p in the pound to pay for it, the question of eligibility for the state pension and other contributory benefits would be very difficult to address.

Darren Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee, for raising that important and, I might say, obvious question.

The public will want to know the answer. Why are Conservative Ministers not telling the Office for Budget Responsibility how they plan to pay for this £46 billion unfunded tax cut? When do they plan to do so? Why can they not tell the House today how they will pay for this £46 billion unfunded tax cut? The public will have to look at what the Conservatives are offering, and at their record in office over these past 14 years, and make a judgment call.

I started my speech by highlighting my concern for Conservative Ministers, given their obvious state of confusion, delusion and denial, but my real concern is elsewhere. My concern is for working people who are paying more in tax than ever before; for pensioners who are dragged into paying tax out of their fixed income for the first time; for families who are struggling with the cost of living crisis and seeing the economy going in the wrong direction; for our national health service that is now presumably at threat from the £46 billion unfunded promise to abolish national insurance contributions with no plan for how to pay for it; and for our country which, after 14 years of Conservative failure, is exhausted, on its knees and staring into the abyss.

We are all fed up with the weak leadership that the latest Conservative Prime Minister is offering our country. We are bored to the back teeth with the Conservative party's chaos and infighting taking priority over the country. We want to get our economy back on track and our public services back on their feet, to close the book on 14 years of Conservative failure and to get Britain its future back. I have only one ask of the Conservative party today: to set the date for the general election.

1.51 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): As this is day four of our Budget debate, much has already been said, so I will restrict my remarks to a few general comments before addressing some specific areas.

This has been a much more wide-ranging Budget than most commentators have noted, but the most positive thing that jumped out at me from all the data is the upgrading of growth forecasts. I completely recognise that economic forecasting has not been easy with all the uncertainty from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, but I think our economy is stronger than most forecasters estimate and is regularly underestimated.

The upward revisions to the OBR forecast are large, too, with growth up by 0.5 percentage points in the months since the autumn statement. The recently published business surveys are also heading in the right direction, all indicating increasing confidence. Indeed, the main message I receive from businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough is how hard it is to fill vacancies. The local unemployment rate, announced today, is 1.9%, which is a remarkably low figure, but it is matched in other parts of our country.

The growth in employment is a key reason our economy has been resilient. There are over 4 million more people on payrolls than there were in 2010, which is a significant achievement. Unemployment has been halved, and there are 1 million more businesses in the UK than in 2010.

As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said in her opening remarks, the UK's growth has outperformed that of the other major European economies—Germany, France and Italy—and is set to

[Andrew Jones]

do so for the next five years, but our productivity has lagged badly. Indeed, the “Economic Indicators” report published by the House of Commons Library last month shows that UK productivity lags German productivity by 16%, which is a very significant gap, yet we are still outgrowing Germany. That raises the question of what the impact would be on growth if we kept what is driving our economy while addressing the productivity gap.

I am, therefore, pleased to see the Budget’s focus on productivity in both the private and public sectors, which I pursued as a Minister, particularly in the Treasury—once a Treasury Minister always a Treasury Minister—but we should define what it is. Productivity is not about working harder; it is about working smarter so that there is more output from each hour worked, not more hours worked.

The best way to drive productivity is with investment. Another encouraging stat in the Budget is that business investment has risen to 10.6% of GDP and is continuing to grow, which is very positive. It is how our future wealth will be created, and it is also a 14% increase compared with the level of investment under Labour. With GDP growth creating a bigger economy and investment taking a bigger slice, the budget involved is measured in the tens of billions. The permanent expensing announced in the autumn statement is a huge factor, and I strongly welcome the commitment to extending it to leasing. This is all about making the UK more competitive and an even better place to invest and grow a business.

One area that has not received the attention it deserves over a number of years is public sector productivity. The delivery of good public services requires several components. One of them is budget, as the total amount spent matters, but it is not just the total amount spent. It is also about how well the money is spent.

There have been huge increases in public spending, so we need to ensure transparency and accountability. We also need to ensure that funds are directed to where there is the greatest return and the greatest need, and that taxpayers achieve value for their money. There is plenty to be done on that, particularly on infrastructure, where the Government are investing so heavily—that is a different speech, but I refer the House to the excellent work of the all-party parliamentary group on infrastructure, which I coincidentally chair.

It also requires the Government to make the right policy choices. For example, there is a less than 2% difference in per pupil funding between England and Wales, but English schools are rising up the international league tables for maths and science, and we are the best in the west for reading. Wales is sadly going down the league tables, and it is now ranked in the mid-30s. The financial difference is a world away from the ranking difference, and it comes down to policy choices.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is talking about education outcomes. I do not know whether he saw “Newsnight” last night, but a teacher in the city of Paisley in Scotland linked bad behaviour in the classroom to hunger. The teacher also spoke about the difficulty of getting good educational outcomes amid poverty. Is it not a fact that Department for Work and

Pensions policies that keep families in poverty, including the two-child cap, add considerably to the problems in Wales? It is a matter of poverty, not education.

Andrew Jones: I did not see “Newsnight” last night, as I was here until very late. I was working away, as ever. Our benefits system has not held back the educational progress being made in England so, without having seen the programme, I suspect that other factors are involved.

The productivity of our public services remains below pre-pandemic levels, which suggests that the full value of budget increases is not being realised. It was, therefore, good to hear the announcement of a public sector productivity plan in the Budget. This important initiative has the potential to be a game changer. The National Audit Office suggests that a 5% increase in productivity is equivalent to a £20 billion budget increase.

The Budget detailed investment to upgrade IT in both the justice system and the NHS. The Chancellor revealed that 13 million hours are lost by doctors and nurses to outdated IT. The sheer scale of that is phenomenal, but not in a good way.

Governments of all colours have struggled with NHS IT for years, but the world is digitising. AI will change things even further and faster, and it is right to embrace these changes and secure the benefits they will bring. It is not just about the systems but about the processes used, and there is an attitudinal element as well. We have to think about how output will be achieved. In the world of government in the UK we tend to measure, then trumpet, inputs rather than outputs. That does not happen in the private sector. Moving that thinking into the policy and delivery teams so that they think more about outputs is critical in the longer term.

The most encouraging parts of the Budget tackle investment and productivity. Progress on those will create more wealth and better health for our future, which is why I will be supporting this Budget.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have a feeling it might be helpful for me to put the clock on Members. We will start with an eight-minute time limit, after the SNP spokesperson.

2 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I can say without fear of contradiction that the UK faces three big challenges economically and socially: we have an energy security crisis, we have a climate crisis and we still have a cost of living crisis that needs to be tackled. This Budget barely changed course on any of those three measures.

Since 2010, the Conservative party has adopted 11 different economic strategies and had seven Business Secretaries, seven Chancellors of the Exchequer and five Prime Ministers, sometimes within weeks of each other. After 14 years of Conservative government, it is laughable that the present incumbents would present this as a Budget that will encourage investment and create long-term growth.

The fact is that the UK has long had a productivity problem. Figures show that the UK’s productivity is around 20% lower than that of France or Germany. UK workers work some of the longest hours in Europe, and

return some of the lowest levels of productivity. A number of very lazy assumptions are made, often on the centre right of politics, around what contributes to productivity or the lack of it. Who could forget the wisdom of the right hon. Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) in the book “*Britannia Unchained*”? They said that

“the British are among the worst idlers in the world. We work among the lowest hours, we retire early and our productivity is poor. Whereas Indian children aspire to be doctors or businessmen, the British are more interested in football and pop music.”

Those lazy prejudices, with the idea that everybody should work harder and enjoy fewer protections in the workplace, seem to underpin a worldview about how we get to productivity. However, the simple truth is that the only way to make a genuine improvement in productivity is to improve the quality of physical and human capital by investing in people. The Government have a massive, pivotal role to play in that. It is not good enough for the Government just to say that they want to tackle productivity issues; they have to put in place the long-term policies to do so. Despite it being nearly an article of faith in some sections of the House that cutting tax is the way to get there, if that comes at the expense of public investment and investment in social services, we will not achieve productivity.

The Chancellor has opted to use £20 billion of potential headroom by cutting national insurance by 4p in the last few months. Yet the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the Chancellor’s Budget will leave public services facing savage cuts equivalent to £20 billion a year by 2028. As the ISF director, Paul Johnson, has warned, there is almost “a conspiracy of silence” around the billions of pounds in tax cuts that the UK Government have prioritised and the consequences of them.

We know from the shadow Chancellor, who is no longer in her place, that if Labour is to alter course on that, either taxes or borrowing will have to go up, or spending will have to be cut in different places. I take issue with the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson on that subject. I am proud that the party of which I am a member is in government in Scotland. It has ensured that taxes are lower for over half the people in Scotland than they would be if they lived anywhere else in the UK, putting money back into the pockets of hard-working people who need it most. I am proud of that. If that is where the Labour party wishes to draw the battle lines for the election, bring it on. I am very happy with the choices we are making.

If those tax cuts are to be reversed—the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) was nodding away gleefully, implying that they were—then the question must go back to his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, or perhaps he can help us out—*[Interruption.]* He is nodding again, which is good. I look forward to some answers, and I will happily take an intervention. What parts of the enhanced social settlement in Scotland would the Labour party seek to take away? Is it people’s bus passes? Michael Marra MSP threatened to introduce tuition fees again. Would Labour reverse the Scottish child payment that is taking over 100,000 Scottish children out poverty? *[Interruption.]* I, too, was looking for an intervention, but I am clearly not getting one. The hon. Member for Bristol North West is chuntering, but would he like to intervene?

Darren Jones: I am happy to be welcomed to intervene, but the debate is about the Conservative Budget here in Westminster. If the SNP has questions to answer about its performance in Government, it should do so in Scotland.

Richard Thomson: That was absolutely ridiculous—a complete waste of time. The reason I brought it up was that the hon. Gentleman brought it up; clearly his memory is very short.

Scotland needed much more money for investment in infrastructure, the public sector and public services, but the UK Government have let us down again in this Budget. Any attempt at boosting productivity—that is the subject of this debate, although I did not hear a great deal of mention of productivity from either Front Bench—will run headlong into the effects of the austerity that has been prevalent since the financial crisis of 2008.

We know from first hand the impact that austerity has had on public services across the UK. As a result of those spending choices, investment levels in the UK remain the lowest of any country in the G7. Research by the UK in a Changing Europe group has found that investment is 10% lower than it would have been if we had remained in the EU. and that our GDP is already 5% lower. If the Government want to increase productivity and drive investment, it is clear that they to do more to recognise the vital role they have to play through their capital expenditure.

Capital expenditure is what maintains our infrastructure. It is what builds houses, replaces hospitals and schools, maintains roads and, crucially, drives and encourages private investment. It is utterly bizarre that as a consequence of their spending decisions here, the UK Government will be cutting the Scottish Government’s capital budget in real terms by 10% over the next five years.

Another key area where the Budget does nothing to shift the dial is research and development, as I have said before. The UK lags behind our European competitors when it comes to overall levels of investment in research and development, but London and the south-east are taking the lion’s share of even that reduced amount. Wales and the north of England lag behind. Scotland holds its own, but if the Government genuinely want to level up—not words we hear paired with each other terribly often these days—they need to shift the dial and start to address inequalities inherent in the way the Government carry out business as usual.

Let me turn to energy. The decision to continue the energy profits levy can only be described as a slap in the face for all the bold and brave Scottish Conservative politicians who were boasting about how they were going to personally oppose it and get rid of it. However, the Labour proposals to increase its level further risks killing the goose that laid the golden egg. I am a big fan of the way the Norwegians have run their oil and gas sector. Scotland and the UK would be in a much better place if we had done the same, but the UK basin is closer to the end of its life than much of the Norwegian basin. Simply saying everything will be alright on the night if we tax at the same level as Norway puts investment decisions on a precipice. I caution the Labour party to think about that carefully if or when it forms the next Government. Increasing taxes beyond their current level in that industry risks putting tens of thousands of jobs on the line.

[Richard Thomson]

Finally, we are all quite bored with weak leadership, but does leadership get any weaker than a party taking its one and only identifiable policy—investing £28 billion in renewable energy—and throwing it on the fire because its leader is absolutely terrified of losing political ground to the weakest and worst Conservative Government any of us have the misfortune to remember in our lifetime?

It is absolutely vital not just for the country, but particularly for the north-east of Scotland, to get the energy transition right. Labour is absolutely correct to say that it will have a pretty dismal economic inheritance from the current UK Government, but, my goodness, what a dismal legacy Labour will leave for the Government who eventually replace it if it continues on the current path. That is why Scotland needs to be away from both the Labour and Conservative Front-Bench teams and making decisions for ourselves as a fully sovereign independent country.

2.10 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate today. The points that have been made so eloquently from the Government Front Bench—and will no doubt be raised by other colleagues throughout the rest of this debate—cover in detail the contents of the Budget. I was particularly pleased for Warner Brothers, Leavesden, in my constituency, for the benefits that were provided to ensure that the film industry would thrive in this country. But I wish to concentrate today on productivity, and I will do so by keeping my speech short and by focusing on one particular area of passion for me, which is the support given for technology within the NHS.

The NHS chief executive has acknowledged that significant investment to fund new technology will unlock tens of billions of pounds of savings, but there are particular areas that we need to look at when considering that investment. I refer in particular to the role played by digital and other technology in the health arena. On several occasions, I have been proud to visit the virtual wards and the virtual hospital that the team at Watford General have been developing. That work has been truly groundbreaking. It meant that especially during covid, when this initiative started, patients were able to be looked after in their own home with their family around them rather than being on a ward. From an NHS perspective, that freed up beds and nurses' and doctors' time. From the patient's perspective, they had the comfort of being in their own home while knowing that the technology was there to support them and ensure that they were being monitored and watched with the best possible devices. I have also seen amazing work at Watford General on robot-assisted surgery. As I understand it, this can both lead to quicker healing time and ensure the precision of the surgery. I had the opportunity to use one of the machines a while ago, and its level of accuracy was absolutely incredible.

However, the area on which I wish to focus is the role of artificial intelligence. I have a few asks of the Minister, but I am aware that he may not be able to respond to them, because I appreciate that they fall more within the remit of the Department of Health and Social Care. When we look at digital health, it is important to make sure that we see the benefits of what may come, as well as the benefits that are already here.

Crucially, we need to make sure that, when it comes to the use of AI in healthcare, we are mindful not only of the benefits and opportunities, but of the risks that it might bring. Increasingly, as I see it, one of the risks concerns the digital divide. I ask that, when we put this investment into technology and the NHS, we do not have a growing divide between those who have the ability to use the technology and those who do not. I also ask that, when we are developing these tools, we do not just cut off the ability to provide face-to-face support for those who want it, or stop those who want to go in and see a receptionist face to face. We should use the extra time that is available as a result of some people using technology to provide others with access to face-to-face appointments.

Furthermore, there is a great opportunity here to develop a data donor scheme. I have proposed that before, but I am not sure whether I have done so from these Benches. At the moment, when somebody sadly passes away, they may be able to save other people's lives through organ donation. However, many of us have Apple watches or Fitbits that collect data every day, which would no doubt be invaluable to AI, or to GPs and clinicians who diagnose and treat various conditions. There is great scope within this investment to look at a data donation scheme. Imagine if each of us could anonymously donate data on our heartbeat or our health attributes when we have taken a new drug and share it with the NHS, so that it could be used as part of clinical trials and research. That could transform the way that we look at curing cancer and improving the health of the nation, but it could also help us to identify potential risks that we may not have seen before. This investment, along with the £100 million that has been invested in the Turing Institute, will provide a great opportunity to look at how we can use AI in a better way.

Another important area is how we educate the public in the use of AI and data. One thing that I am conscious of, and that I have spoken about from these Benches before—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has just reminded me of my productivity pledge—yes, I am trying to keep to it. We need to make sure that people know when they are using this technology, especially given the rise in chatbots and AI tools that pretend to be human when they are not. It is essential that the public know when such tools are being used. Any Government or any NHS system should have a very clear watermark, note or reminder to let people know that they are not speaking to a human being, but that they are actually using AI. That will help to demystify the use of technology, make people feel more comfortable, and ensure that we inform those who do not want to use it for good reason.

I hugely welcome this Budget. The tax cuts have been essential, and all of us on the Government Benches are keen to make sure that we reduce taxes. I am also keen on all the benefits that we have seen. But we need to make sure that we make the most of technology, see the benefits of it and help the nation to become healthier and happier for it.

2.16 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I think it is pretty accurate to say that this will be the last Budget speech that I make in this House. I have just worked out that this Chancellor is the 14th since I came

into the House in 1979, and that this is the 50th Budget that I have sat through. There should be some sort of medal for that.

I am always tempted in these debates to go back to my origins as an economist at the London School of Economics. I think that was a harder and tougher place to learn economics than Pembroke College, Cambridge—at least from what I have heard from those on the Front Bench today. There is a tendency among those of us with such a background to look at the detail. I want to look not so much at the detail today, but at the two broad issues that have been totally missing in this vital Budget. Many Conservative Members were hoping for a post-Budget boost. Well, I always used to counsel my colleagues that we can never know how a Budget has gone down until the Sunday papers are out, but in this case do we need time to reflect for long? We have heard that 10% of the population believe that they will be better off after the Budget, that 20% think they will be far worse off, and most tellingly, that 58% of the public feel that the Budget will make no difference to their lives at all. So there is no Budget bounce here.

However, I do not want to talk about that; I want to talk about the two big issues that were not even mentioned. The most important things for all human beings on this planet are global warming and climate change. The Chancellor did not mention the words climate change in his whole speech. There was nothing in that Budget that would give hope to those of us who have been campaigning for years to stop the global warming that will destroy human life on this planet. Nothing in this Budget will help us to meet that terrible existential challenge.

I sometimes get teased when I point out that I was born during the blitz of London, around the same time that this place was bombed and destroyed. I did not know my father for six years, because he went off to serve in the war. Those of us who come from that generation look at our defence spending and preparedness with horror. I said yesterday that former Ministers and Back Benchers from the Conservative party—the party of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher—have pointed out that there is a serious cut to the defence budget smuggled into the Budget. Those comments are from the Government's side. Those two issues were not confronted in the Budget.

People in this country are not short-termists, although they want a better life and lower taxes, and to drive greater productivity. We all remember the productivity driver, George Osborne, so I say to Government Members: do not talk to us about productivity failures. The fact of the matter is that there is nothing in the Budget about getting manufacturing going again or about linking our wonderful university researchers with small businesses to tackle climate change, develop hydrogen power and look at the ways in which clever human beings can and will ensure that this planet is safe to live on.

Whoever is in government must wake up to the fact that that ghastly man, the leader of Russia, is not going away and will persist in undermining our institutions, not just in terms of arms and by encroaching on territory across Europe, but through his pernicious ability to use social media and other means of undermining democracy in this country and worldwide. I grew up passionately influenced by the democracy of the United States. When

I was a student, I emigrated to the United States, basically because that was the only way I would not get deported for working as a student. I admire and love the United States as a champion of freedom and democracy, but our greatest ally is in deep trouble. The ghastly ex-President Trump—a man who does not believe in special relationships with anyone, especially our country—looks like he might come back again. He does not believe in the relationship with NATO and in standing up to the foes of democracy in China and Russia.

We should be ashamed if we do not talk about those two issues in the Budget debates and if the Government do not make the wherewithal available, first, to confront climate change and global warming and, secondly, to secure the defence of our country.

As I say, this will be my last Budget speech. I have loved speaking in this House. Everyone knows that I love interjecting at Question Time. These are serious times, and I hope we all remember that the big issues—climate change, the future of our planet and the defence of our country—are hard to tackle because they are expensive. Some on the Labour Benches sometimes do not grapple with that fact, but we must be honest: if we want this country to be secure and have great defence, we have to pay for it. All of us in this House must learn that lesson.

2.24 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I will deal with just two aspects of productivity, as that is the theme of today's Budget. I will first talk about the VAT threshold. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy, both nationally and locally. They not only provide jobs that hard-working families depend on but are the key to turbocharging productivity across the UK and levelling up our regions and nations. That could not be more true than in my constituency, where SMEs are responsible for the lion's share of business activity and employment. The past few years have been particularly challenging for SMEs, as they have had to navigate various things such as the covid-19 pandemic and the commodity shortages and inflationary pressures brought on by the war in Ukraine. I have therefore been fiercely vocal about the need to do all we can to support them.

I know the Government have been working hard to protect and support businesses as much as possible through these times, recognising the need to fulfil our responsibility to get the economy back on track. I therefore welcome a number of the announcements in the Budget—in particular, the decision to increase the VAT registration threshold to £90,000 from 1 April 2024. As the Chancellor said in his speech, I have been pressing for that as it will support businesses with the administrative and financial impact of VAT charges. It will ensure they can earn more before paying VAT and spend more time working. Hairdressing and hospitality sector businesses in Loughborough raised that point with me, and I in turn brought it to the attention of the Chancellor and Business Ministers. The increase in the threshold will mean that those businesses can earn more money before any VAT is due. That will not only mean that hard-working business owners will get the opportunity to earn more before tax but that self-employed trades will be able to complete more work before attracting VAT charges to their contracts.

[Jane Hunt]

As the Chancellor said in his Budget speech,

“the way to improve public services is not always more money or more people; we also need to run them more efficiently. We need a more productive state, not a bigger state.”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 846.]

The announcement of the public sector productivity programme to reform the delivery of frontline public services and improve productivity is welcome. The Government said that alongside that programme a £230 million pilot will be established to

“roll out cutting-edge technology such as live facial recognition, automation and the use of drones as first responders.”

They also said:

“The government will establish a Centre for Police Productivity to support police forces’ use of data and deliver this technology, maximising productivity and the use of AI.”

Again, I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that we do not always need more money. I would be interested to hear from him whether the remit of that centre will extend to looking at ways to reduce the reaction burdens placed on police officers due to data protection requirements.

As I have said a number of times in the House, the Data Protection Act 2018 contains no provision to facilitate the free flow of personal data between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. When the police are preparing a case file for a charging decision, they have to analyse the information gathered by investigating officers in order to identify every item of personal data, decide whether it is necessary for the CPS to consider each item when making its decision, and redact every item that does not meet that test. Those obligations delay and obstruct the expeditious progress of the criminal justice system, and in some cases add to the likelihood that the victim will withdraw their support. Much of that data is never even used by the CPS if it decides not to charge or the defendant pleads guilty before trial. Nationally, about 25% of cases submitted to the CPS are not charged. The Police Federation of England and Wales has estimated that, on average, a staggering 365,000 policing hours are consumed in complying with redaction obligations. That equates to an annual cost to the taxpayer of more than £5.6 million.

The Government have previously highlighted their support for the use of technology to reduce that burden. However, that would go only so far and would still require police officers to oversee that work. The best solution would be to change the law so that the redaction of personal data by the police could occur after, rather than before, the CPS has made a charging decision. In that way, only cases that are to go forward for prosecution will have been worked on. That practical solution would prevent the waste of time by police officers, who can then spend more time on the beat—something that my constituents asked for in a recent crime survey that I undertook in Loughborough. The Government have been clear that it is necessary to reduce administrative burdens on public sector workers and boost productivity. This change, unlike rolling out new technology, would cost nothing to implement but would save a substantial amount of taxpayers’ money and get police officers back on the frontline supporting communities and tackling crime. Those are the two aspects that I wanted to look at.

2.29 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I want to focus on investment, or the lack of it, in public services. Good delivery of public services depends in large part on the state of local government. The sector faces a £1.6 billion funding gap in 2024-25 and services are crumbling, yet there was no mention of specific council measures in the Budget. Given the state of local services up and down the country, I was disappointed that the Government did not announce any plans to adequately fund the services that people rely on every day. Councils continue to transform services, but given that the core spending power for 2024-25 has been cut by 23.3% in real terms since 2010, it is unsustainable to expect them to keep doing more for less in the face of unprecedented costs and demand pressures.

It is also unsustainable to put further pressure on local council tax payers, who are again being asked to pay more for less, with money being taken out of their pockets. This year saw the sixth one-year settlement in a row for councils. Keeping councils on that financial drip-feed led to the steady weakening of local services.

Social care is suffering significantly, as services experience an unprecedented increase in demand and costs. Three of the most impacted areas for rising costs are children’s social care, where budget pressures are up by 13.6% in the last year; home to school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities, where budget requirements are up by 23.3% in 2023-24; and adult social care, where increased demand means that budgetary spend is up by £2.5 billion, or 12.8%, in 2023-24.

If such services cannot be delivered effectively locally, pressure inevitably falls on the NHS. I recently met the East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust to discuss the most prescient issues after being contacted by constituents who had waited for hours on trolleys and in rooms without receiving attention. In recent months, the trust has experienced an increase in people regularly attending hospital. Worryingly, demand has exceeded capacity, resulting in patients facing exceptionally long waits and a suboptimal experience.

We had a great headline when the East Lancashire Hospital NHS Trust secured capital funding for an additional 27-bed ward at Royal Blackburn Hospital this year, but £3.9 million of revenue is required to enable it to be staffed, and there is no indication as to where that money—or, indeed, the staff—is coming from. It is yet another Tory headline when our services are actually crumbling.

Last Wednesday represented a vital opportunity for the Government to take action and put palliative and end of life care on a more sustainable footing and ensure that everyone affected by terminal illness receives the best possible care and support. As our population ages, too many people are dying in pain, in poverty and alone, and 84% of Marie Curie’s caring services staff have cared for patients who are struggling with the cost of living. We need a sustainable and long-term funding solution for palliative and end of life care. This is a core component of our health and care system that is so often neglected.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the brilliant East Lancashire Hospice in my constituency, which continues to provide exceptional care through these very difficult times. However, many people are not

so lucky. Shamefully, one in four do not get the end of life care and support that they desperately need—150,000 people every year. Last year, the Government released £1.5 billion in additional funding to integrated care boards to account for inflationary pressures. Once again, that made a great headline, but there was nothing for the hospice. East Lancashire Hospice received an uplift of 0%, which equates to 10% in cuts. Once again, this has proven to be another empty headline devoid of any substance.

As we all know, the long-term financial sustainability of the NHS is dependent upon investment in wider public services, which heavily influence the determinants of an individual's health. Investment is essential in public services that shape health outcomes from birth, such as education, transport and housing. Those services are crying out for investment, but the Government have turned a blind eye.

The Government have shown clearly and starkly where their priorities lie. This Budget confirms that the Tories have failed public services after 14 years of economic failure. The Budget prioritised short-term election promises over the future of local government, the NHS and our public services. We were promised a Budget for long-term growth, but what we actually received is a Budget that reflects long-term decline under this Conservative Government.

2.36 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Since the Chancellor delivered his Budget last week, I have given a lot of thought to the subject of productivity and how we address it. There are three key ingredients that create the most fertile environment for productivity to grow: aspiration, skills and secure housing.

Aspiration can be nurtured in many ways, but a significant part of that must be to reward work by ensuring that people keep as much of the money they earn as possible. This is a core Conservative value. In recent years, the Treasury has been right to put support for families and businesses first. The obvious examples of that are support for business through grants, and support for employees through the furlough scheme during the pandemic. Alongside that, there has been additional money for the NHS and for schools—both vital public services for any household.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am sure that many of my constituents will be delighted and relieved at the cut in national insurance. It is right that individuals keep more of their hard-earned money. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must continue to look for responsible ways to ensure that those who are working hard and contributing to our economy keep as much of their wages as possible?

Derek Thomas: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I also think it is perfectly reasonable to have an ambition that we can work towards making a commitment.

Support for household energy bills has also been essential, but obviously it has put pressure on the nation's finances. These measures hinder the Government's ability to cut taxes, but productivity is compromised if the burden on business and our workforce is too great. It is good, then, that the Government are now able to further address the pressure on household finance further. This year's cut in pay-as-you-earn taxes for the average worker

from 32% to 28% means that households in west Cornwall, on Scilly and across the nation will benefit by keeping more of what they earn. This is a helpful tool to support the aspiration that Conservative Members want our constituents to enjoy.

The increase in the VAT threshold for small businesses is something that I have been keen to see ever since I was elected. Personally, I would like it to be increased to £120,000 as soon as possible. I see the drag of VAT on small businesses in my constituency, which are curtailing their business in order to avoid the cliff-edge threshold. The increase to £90,000 is welcome and will encourage small businesses to stay open for longer, especially in hospitality in coastal communities such as Penzance and on Scilly. Not only will the business stay open longer; owners will also be able to offer more secure employment and look to grow their business—both of which will benefit Government coffers and drive aspiration.

To support aspiration, we also need to support skills. Wherever we look, we see a shortage of the skills we need: in food and farming, renewables, house building and retrofitting, engineering and manufacturing, health and social care, tourism and hospitality, education, and many more areas. I listened carefully to the speech made by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), including his comments about climate change. Addressing climate change is about changing the way we do and make things, so the Chancellor was right to announce in his Budget a further £120 million to support the expansion of low-carbon manufacturing, which will support the creation of jobs and skills that have not even been invented yet for our school leavers. Also, to further address the climate change issue, the Chancellor has committed £427 million to support investment in agriculture, productivity and innovation. That will secure a farming sector that has provided skilled and local jobs to people across Cornwall and on Scilly for generations, and will continue to do so.

For too long, British business has missed out on an untapped pool of talent, so it was good to hear the Chancellor set out measures to offer new training opportunities for out-of-work older people and confirm the continuation of the “train and progress” element of universal credit, which will also give people a fighting chance to get the skills they need and will help meet the workforce shortages I described. As I say, for far too long, we have not allowed many people to access the work they can do, and have missed out on that pool of talent.

Finally, Conservatives have for years believed in the power of home ownership to give people the opportunity to take a stake in their community, raise children in a secure home, and invest in and improve that home using local skills and local suppliers. The various measures that the Government are taking to make the housing market fairer for people who want to live and work in our communities are very welcome. Owning a home helps to drive productivity: there is nothing quite so tangible and motivating as the sense that hard work can enable someone to provide a safe and secure home for them and their loved ones.

As the Government support councils and social landlords to create the homes we need, will they take a close look at how accessible so-called affordable homes are to local constituents such as mine? For example, properties advertised in Cornwall as three-bedroom affordable

[Derek Thomas]

homes are marketed at £335,000, and two-bedroom so-called affordable homes are marketed at £265,000. Few people in my constituency are in a position to afford that, and they are effectively abandoned into a rental market that is in great demand.

Productivity is achieved in a low-tax, high-skilled society where a home of your own is within reach. I welcome this Budget's direction of travel, and ask for much more of the same.

2.42 pm

George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB): As I was saying, Madam Deputy Speaker. Even in Parliament, you cannot be a maiden twice, but I hope you will permit me a moment of my eight minutes to pay tribute to my predecessor, Tony Lloyd—as he was when I first met him at the Labour party conference more than 40 years ago. He, a young, left-wing engineering union delegate; me, even younger, from the Transport and General Workers' Union. We became fast friends then, and remained so through all the decades. We marched together against nuclear weapons and against the repeated massacres in Gaza at the hands of the Israeli occupation forces. We voted in the Lobby together against the renewal of Trident submarines. Tony Lloyd was a significant figure who should never be forgotten in this House, and certainly will not be forgotten in the Greater Manchester area where he was born and where he practised his sincere political artistry over so many years.

The Labour party, of course, is not the party today that it was back then, as I will say in this speech and, I hope, in later speeches—if God spares me and you allow me to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. The only thing that unites the entire town of Rochdale is antipathy towards the Labour council in the beautiful, new, refurbished town hall. That is something we intend to change just a few weeks from now at the local elections, but notwithstanding the poor odour of the Labour party in the town, everyone respected and admired Tony Lloyd—Sir Tony Lloyd, as he was to become. I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to begin my address in this way on the seventh time I have been elected to Parliament.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury was bright and breezy, but frankly all the spices in Rochdale could not give flavour to what can only be described as an absolute nothingburger of a Budget, and the response from the so-called Opposition in this House was equally vacuous. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), bridled when the SNP accused him of accepting the Tories' spending limits, but he had no right to bridle, because everything that is being said by the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), accepts the economic orthodoxies of the Conservative Government.

Look where those economic orthodoxies have led us. The Minister talked breezily about children getting help where they need it, and about busy doctors and nurses in the NHS. What about us in Rochdale? We have a new infirmary that is like a ghost town. In Rochdale, you cannot give birth; no one in Gracie Fields's hometown will ever again be able to say that they were born in Rochdale, unless unfortunately they were born in a taxi

on their way to Bury or Oldham. We do not even have a postcode; our postcode is OL, a subdivision of Oldham. This town, which was once one of the most prosperous in England, is now one of the poorest, abandoned not just by the Government but by the Mayor of Greater Manchester. I have no animus against the Mayor—quite the contrary, at least until recent weeks—but he has to understand that he is the Mayor of Greater Manchester, not just Manchester. What about the towns around Manchester that get a raw deal?

Imagine a town where you cannot be born and cannot die—they have also taken away the A&E service. My campaign, in which I garnered more votes than the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Reform UK put together, proved my point, which is that out in the country, most people wish a plague on both their houses—on both the Conservatives and Labour. “Two cheeks of the same backside” is the most popular phrase I have ever coined, because it so aptly describes not just the general political situation, but the debate on this Budget. You cannot even be banged up in Rochdale; if a person gets arrested there, there is not even a police cell there that they can be taken to. In the campaign, an old lady in a care home fell ill—took a turn. The ambulance took 45 minutes to reach her, and then did not know where it was going to take her. Her relatives, gathered around anxiously, did not know where she would go. The ambulance driver had to find out which A&E in the Greater Manchester area they could take her to. What if it took her 45 minutes to get to A&E? I have no idea what might have become of her.

We are a town that has been abandoned by the state, and is increasingly abandoned by the Mayor of Greater Manchester. Half, or 50%, of the children in two of the biggest wards in the parliamentary constituency are officially living in poverty—half! What was there in the Budget for them, despite all the Government's chuntering, joshing and japing, which was matched by that of the Opposition? What was in the Budget for those poor children who needed help, though no help was forthcoming? Levels of child poverty in Rochdale are among the worst in the entire country.

My goodness, I have 14 seconds left; how time flies. I just want to say that having given both parties a good spanking on 29 February, I have my boots on to give them a good kicking any time I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

2.50 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I think we have probably all learned a bit more about Rochdale, and I am sure that we all at least agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Rochdale (George Galloway) about his predecessor, Tony Lloyd.

When I asked my constituents what they wanted, ahead of the Budget, their answers were very clear: taxes cut, help for small businesses, action to grow the economy, and support for our NHS. This Budget delivered against their priorities, despite the challenge the economy has faced in the last few years from the pandemic and the illegal war in Ukraine.

As a Conservative, I want lower taxes, and I want people to keep more of the money they earn. Now that there is the opportunity to reduce taxes, I welcome the further cut in national insurance, which will benefit 29 million people across the country. It will mean that a

nurse's income rises by over £1,000. A typical teacher will be better off by £1,200, and a self-employed plumber by £846. Importantly, given that we have vacancies in the economy, the measures are predicted to get the equivalent of a further 220,000 people into work; that will give more people the benefits of a job, and help to grow our economy.

Although inflation continues to fall and the target of halving it has been more than met, there is rightly further support with the cost of living. In my rural constituency of North West Norfolk, driving is a necessity, not a luxury. Maintaining the 5p cut to fuel duty and freezing rates for the 14th year in a row will help drivers as they fill up. In April, the national living wage will increase by almost 10%. That comes alongside a boost to support for private rents for those on low incomes. From talking to constituents ahead of the Budget, I know how important the household support fund has been in helping people across Norfolk. I argued for its continuation, and I am delighted that the Chancellor has provided an extra £500 million of targeted support to help with essentials, including food and energy.

In earlier speeches, it has been suggested that pensioners have been forgotten by this Government. Let's just correct that, shall we? Last year, the state pension was increased by 10.1%. In April, protected by the triple lock introduced by this Government, it will increase by 8.5%. Inflation is set to near its target of 2% in only a few months' time. That represents a boost of £900 for pensioners. In addition, nearly 12 million fuel payments and pensioner cost of living payments are being made this winter to protect the most vulnerable. There is also pension credit. I have encouraged all my constituents and others to check whether they are eligible for it, and we have seen a big uptake as a result. Pensioners can be reassured that the Government have their back, and we will continue to provide dignity for them in retirement.

Reducing tax is also important. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and I—and a number of other Members, it would appear—wanted an increase in the VAT threshold for small firms. The threshold is a barrier to growth, and having talked to companies in my constituency, I know that they were closing their doors to avoid going over the threshold. That issue is estimated to affect about 44,000 firms bunching just below the threshold, so increasing it to £90,000 a year will help more businesses, and it means that we have the highest threshold in Europe.

On changes to furnished holiday lets, which I am sure hon. Friends from Cornwall will come on to, it is important that we get the detail right, so that we support local people who wish to buy and rent homes, but also continue to support our leisure, hospitality and tourism businesses. Growing such businesses and the economy means investing in places, and the £20 million of additional funding for King's Lynn is very welcome. It will support projects to boost the high street, improve transport and connectivity, and boost heritage and regeneration. That comes on top of the £50 million of regeneration funding already secured through the town deal and the levelling-up fund. That is a further commitment by this Conservative Government to creating more opportunities in Lynn and across west Norfolk.

As well as reducing taxes, we need to cut regulation. Since 2010, we have had a record of success in removing much of the thicket that was introduced by the Labour

party when it used regulation as a proxy for taxation to control businesses. While we are talking about making our economy more productive, there is a need for a renewed focus on regulation to ensure that it promotes growth, competition and innovation. As a member of the Regulatory Reform Group—founded by my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who has just left his place—I was pleased to see the focus in the Budget on this agenda. Extending the growth duty to Ofcom, Ofwat and Ofgem, and greater benchmarking to hold regulators to account and improve performance, will benefit us all. Companies and wealth creators should be well aware that the Labour party has plans to go in a different direction. It will put in place many measures that will frustrate them, produce more inflexibility in our labour market, and make it harder for them to grow and take on staff.

Finally, public sector productivity may seem like a very dry topic, but getting back to pre-covid levels would save taxpayers £20 billion a year. With health taking an increasing share of our national wealth, we need to make the NHS far more efficient, and the £3.4 billion being invested in technology and other reforms will help achieve that. By embedding those gains across the wider public sector, we can control the size of the state. Simply spending more and more money—ultimately, that has to be paid for by taxes and borrowing, as the Labour party proposes—is unsustainable, and will not lead to better public services.

To conclude, this Budget delivers tax cuts for working people, helps motorists to keep costs down, boosts small businesses, supports families, and invests in the NHS and in improving public services. It is a Conservative Budget that I am proud to support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To ensure that I can keep the time limit relatively high, I am reducing it to seven minutes. I hope that will mean that we do not have to reduce it drastically later.

2.56 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Seven is my favourite number, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild).

It is a fact that when we speak in the Budget debate, which is the bread and butter of our work, we may not get the hearing we want. We have to live with the sad fact that the song “Murder on the Dancefloor” will be streamed more than our speeches, or maybe just my speeches. I refer hon. Members to a line from that song: “better not steal the moves”.

However, it seems the Chancellor did, because he abolished non-dom status—a move that had been trailed for some time by the Opposition. I suppose imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

I say to the residents of Walsall that, yes, we can work within the fiscal envelope, but our choices will be different. What did the Chancellor actually do to solve the problems of the country? Nothing. He said nothing about hedge fund managers having made £53 billion in profits for investors. Why is that not harnessed for society? The water companies pour effluent into our rivers. They broke the law, and awarded themselves £10 million in

[Valerie Vaz]

bonuses and £14 million in incentive payments, but they want to charge us £156 extra to plug a financial gap. What would we do? We would end self-monitoring and force companies to monitor every single outlet, so that they cannot cover up illegal sewage dumping.

The Chancellor mentioned a new tax on vaping—we have seen vape shops proliferate on the high street—and the freezing of alcohol duty, which helps pubs, but he said nothing about the high street. Those working on the high street worked during the pandemic and beyond, and they still face abuse in work, but there is nothing for them. They are on low pay or in insecure work. He could have given them the real living wage, based on the cost of living. There was nothing for the high street that would help retailers compete with online businesses.

What about local government? Schools are struggling with dilapidated, toxic buildings or a lack of staff. The staff are paid less than they would be for working for an online company, so when they leave school, they go and work for that company. Special educational needs pupils are being failed. Councils still have to bid for money. Walsall Council cannot even respond to fly-tipping, manage trees or invest in a rat-catcher. That is a public health issue and affects people's lives. People need to know the connection: the Government cut the grants to local authorities, and the council is forced to raise council tax just to stand still. There may be a cut in national insurance, but people will have to pay for it through increased council tax.

As a lawyer and a member of the Law Society, I know that the legal system is shaky. It is the quiet and calm place where disputes are settled. It is there to keep communities safe and it is worth £60 billion. There is a dearth of duty solicitors. Legal firms are small and medium-sized enterprises, and they are struggling to attract staff. Will the Minister work with the Law Society and support firms to increase civil legal aid so that they can give people the right advice to prevent their becoming homeless, as well as giving opportunities for legal apprentices to make their way in careers in the law?

What about the NHS? The Government are only funding additional roles. NHS Facts and Stats states that England does not have a shortage of GPs, but rather a practice funding shortage, with a 20% reduction in pounds per patient since 2016. What would Labour do? The shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has said that we would deal with waste: the £1.7 billion spent on hospital beds because patients cannot be discharged; the £3.5 is paid to recruitment agencies because the Government have failed to train enough staff; the £626 million spent by the Department of Health and Social Care on management consultants. Further, £1 billion could be saved through bulk buying equipment. We have not even started on the personal protective equipment fiasco! We would work in partnership with businesses in the private sector, just as we announced yesterday for the national wealth fund, so that for every £1 the public sector spends, £1 is raised in the private sector from the green finance initiative.

From the international situation, our constituents are numb to just getting by with the cost of living. We say to them: "We believe in you. We will give you the skills and your rights at work. We will do what is needed for

public services and support you with a safety net as needed. We believe in you and support you to live safe, happy, productive and secure lives."

3.1 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): We have heard it said many times in this Chamber that the first duty of any Government is to protect and safeguard the lives of their citizens. That premise is almost exclusively quoted during debates relating to the defence of the realm, yet it can just as easily be applied to our discussions about investment in targeted public health measures. If a person is only as productive as their health permits, it must follow that the productivity of UK plc is determined by the state of the nation's health. In a country where nearly 26% of the entire adult population is classed as obese, with around 6.4 million people still smoking, and more than 100 million work days in the private sector alone lost to sickness absences each year, we can no longer afford to ignore the threat that preventable diseases such as cancer and diabetes pose to the UK economy and the impact that they undoubtedly have on national productivity.

I welcome the headline measures in the Budget aimed at boosting productivity, including the changes that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made to child benefit that will see more than 170,000 families gain around £1,260 in child support. With the further 2% reduction in national insurance, the average person in work will now be better off by more than £900. I am immensely proud to be a member of a party that is serious in its ambition for the UK to become smokefree within a generation. That is clearly demonstrated by measures to increase tax on tobacco products, with the result that on average the price of a packet of cigarettes has now topped £16.

The Chancellor is also set to introduce a new duty on vaping products to discourage more adults from becoming hooked on harmful nicotine products. Together with other measures announced by the Government, that will end the scenes that we currently see outside school gates up and down our country, in which children, some as young as nine years old, are being drawn to vaping by the rainbow range of colours and flavours targeted specifically at them. Vaping products should only ever be used as an aid to stop smoking, not as a fashion accessory or as confectionery.

We could, however, have gone further in tackling preventable diseases—something that I and many other survivors of skin cancer across the House, including the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), have been lobbying for. Cancer Research UK estimates that almost 90% of skin cancers are preventable by using sunscreen with a factor of 30 and above. Research commissioned by Tesco showed that 57% of UK adults think that high-factor sunscreen is too expensive and they cannot afford to buy it. VAT revenue on sunscreen is in the region of £335 million, yet skin cancers are anticipated to cost the NHS alone £465 million every year. When we factor in the additional cost to business associated with days off and lost productivity, the Exchequer could realise a huge net benefit.

Businesses in my constituency have highlighted Erewash's roads, which come under ever increasing pressure from the sheer volume of traffic trying to access the M1, as a major barrier to raising productivity. I am leading the

campaign to secure and integrate an additional motorway junction between junctions 25 and 26. That would not only help to ease congestion on critical routes through Ilkeston, Stanton by Dale, Sandiacre, Risley and Long Eaton, but would greatly improve access for HGVs transporting freight to and from the New Stanton Park development. That type of major infrastructure project can be realised only with financial backing from the Treasury, so I urge the Chancellor seriously to consider that proposal when he returns to the House later in the year for his autumn statement.

I thank the Chancellor for including Erewash in the latest round of investment to level up the midlands and the north. Erewash is already incredibly lucky to play host to a number of cultural events each year, including the Ilkeston heritage and classic vehicle show, Long Eaton carnival, and the charter fair. In addition, cultural hubs such as the Duchess theatre and Erewash museum, and local landmarks such as the iconic Bennerley viaduct, are responsible for bringing thousands of visitors to Erewash, and providing a welcome boost to the local economy. Having secured that new £5 million investment, we must now use this exciting opportunity to build on and expand existing cultural facilities, invest in new projects to bring our communities together, and preserve more of our cultural heritage for future generations. Guidance issued by the Government to local authorities in relation to that investment states that they must consult their Member of Parliament about how the money can be best used. I believe that it is time for our role in the consultation process, and for those types of schemes to be put on a more permanent, statutory footing.

Finally, although a lady should never reveal her age, I must nevertheless declare an interest as someone of pensionable age. Many will remember Labour's pension raid, which is estimated to have cost investors around £230 billion while at the same time increasing the state pension by a mere 75p. As former Chancellor George Osborne said:

"It will be up to us to rebuild a pension system that has been comprehensively, single-handedly destroyed by Gordon Brown".

And so we have. The Chancellor's commitment to maintain the triple lock means that the state pension will be uprated by 8.5% from April, building on the 10.1% uprating for the current year. Indeed the state pension has risen by 31% since 2019.

To conclude, this sensible, balanced Budget is sticking to the plan that targets productivity, supports those who have worked their entire lives and provides further investment in communities such as Erewash. I look forward to supporting the Budget in the Lobby.

3.8 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I start with a confession, Madam Deputy Speaker: this speech may be familiar to anyone who heard my Budget speech last year, because it is pretty much the same one. The reason is that despite a year passing, the UK Government are no further forward—another Budget, another Red Book. I note that this year, under the heading "Agriculture" in paragraph 4.24 of the Red Book, the Government touch upon drainage boards, and investment in water and flood management. I plead with them: manage it as nature would. Trap the water in the hills. Promote

capture and slow release. Encourage and support councils to plant green areas in the appropriate places. Do not think that we can concrete our way through this problem.

In my constituency of Inverclyde, with the help of Clyde Muirshiel park, local farmers and the Yearn Stane project are re-establishing peatland, which will reduce flooding, create an environment for nature to flourish, and be accessible for people to walk and cycle. This is being done by helping nature to do what it does best, and undoing the damage that was caused by draining the land for grouse shooting all those years ago. Under the heading "Green industries"—paragraph 4.51 of the Red Book—the Government are throwing some sizeable chunks of money at lowering carbon emissions, but there are two errors in this rather small section. First, it mentions nuclear as a "critical part" of the Government's plan to decarbonise power. It is worth noting that building Sizewell C will create 6.24 million tonnes of carbon equivalent CO₂; that is one hell of a price to pay for a build that is not needed.

Secondly, if we want to decarbonise our energy sector, stimulate agriculture, reduce plastic waste, reduce landfill, improve our environment and increase agricultural yield, why is there absolutely no mention whatsoever of hemp? This is where my speech starts to sound familiar, but I was told very early in my time here that there is nothing wrong with repetition. I want this Government to help an industry that employs local people, could generate huge profits, pay its taxes to the Exchequer and help to offset the environmental damage that we are doing to our precious planet. That industry would be a win-win-win scenario. What better way to grow an economy and help the local community, if not by creating jobs so that people have a disposable income to spend locally, and benefit the local community and all associated supply chains?

Hemp: the evidence has been available for centuries—indeed, it was promoted and even enforced by King Henry VIII in the 16th century. Back then, a quarter of all arable land was dedicated to growing hemp, but there are still people who walk among us who hear and fear recreational cannabis when we say "hemp". That is born out of ignorance. The most recent example has to be when the UK Home Office took actions to stop the export of products to the UK from the Jersey-based firm, Jersey Hemp.

Jersey Hemp has worked for three years to ensure it meets every UK Government compliance standard, and the UK Government went behind its back to the Jersey authorities to stop Jersey Hemp operating. After months of legal action in the UK courts, the Home Office has finally admitted that it acted unlawfully in relation to Jersey Hemp. I am limited in what I can say, but no amount of compensation will help Jersey Hemp, which has been wiped out by the actions of the UK Government. I only mention that case because it is symptomatic of the UK Government's lack of vision and lack of understanding when it comes to the hemp plant.

In the 16th century, hemp production was encouraged to manufacture rope and canvas for the King's Navy, but now we can make clothing, shoes, biodegradable plastic, insulation panels, food, paper and biofuels. The Government are currently spending billions retrofitting homes through the ECO4 and ECO+ schemes, but they are using products made from petrochemicals, which release harmful VOC—volatile organic compounds—

[Ronnie Cowan]

emissions into the air of the buildings. Why not allow local farmers to grow hemp and supply the local contractors with carbon-negative natural fibre alternatives at scale? What would be a better use of public money?

In fact, there are 50,000 known uses for the hemp plant. Finding markets for hemp would not be a problem; growing it is. It will sell, it will be profitable, and the Government could reap the benefit. However, because of the inflexibility of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, companies can have their bank accounts seized and assets frozen, and that fear is stopping investment. The ignorance has permeated the stock exchange and, as a result, it has been dismissive of approaches from the business sector and myself.

The Government should be leading the charge, not cowering in the corner. They should be promoting the fact that hemp absorbs 22 tonnes per hectare of atmospheric carbon during its four-month growing cycle, and produces four times the biomass of the same sized area of forest, making it a far more sustainable source material. Hemp does not need pesticides, insecticides or fertiliser to grow in the UK, and it has natural antimicrobial properties, so it passively cleans the air in buildings. Hemp has high capacity for moisture absorption, allowing for a controlled atmosphere within buildings, and hemp construction materials act as a long-term carbon sink. A £60 million investment would create a facility capable of growing 32,000 acres per year. That would sequester over 207,000 tonnes of CO₂ per annum; that is the CO₂ photosynthesised by the hemp in its four-month growth; it does not include the carbon sequestered into the soil, or the net effect of replacing high embodied carbon products from international supply chains and their emissions. As a bonus for farmers, hemp regenerates the soil it grows in, so it would work well in crop rotation. It increases winter wheat and spring barley yields by 16% to 18% when they follow hemp in rotation, and it cleans groundwater.

The barrier to the industry raising the funding it requires is licensing. To make it a success, the Government only have to open their mind to the reality of what hemp is and distribute licences appropriately. The industry will take care of the rest. Hemp is not a plant for the past; it is a plant that can pave the way to a cleaner, greener future, and its benefits are clear for all to see, if we are prepared to open our eyes and to hear the possibilities. If raising taxes is what it takes—if that is the trigger required—then so be it, but we should not wait too long. It is a year since I made a similar speech, and in that time other countries have been pressing ahead while we are being left behind in our nuclear bunkers.

3.15 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It is a pleasure to contribute to the Budget debate. Before I talk about a few specific issues, I promised a constituent—a victim of the infected blood scandal—that I would raise the question of compensation if it was not mentioned in the Budget speech. As far as I am aware, it was not, so I ask the Minister to let my constituent know in the wind-ups when compensation will be paid.

I understand that the recommendations for that to happen were made 10 months ago, so my constituent and I—and, I am sure, many others—will be grateful for an answer.

I regretfully say that it comes to a pretty pass when a Conservative Government have to plunder the Opposition's policies in a Budget. I am talking about scrapping the non-dom tax status and extending the windfall tax on oil and gas companies. The latter is especially nonsensical for a number of reasons, not least because we want to reduce our reliance on foreign imports. If I am correct, the tax amounts to about 70%. Which company is going to bid for a licence when it is simply punished for providing the country's energy? All this when only today the Government announced that they are to build new gas power stations in order to keep the lights on. Net zero is an admirable aim, but it risks impoverishing the country; we need a pragmatic approach to the change.

While I am talking about the country's essential requirements, let me say that there was also no more money in the Budget for our stretched and depleted armed forces. There was a whisper that defence spending might rise to 2.5% of GDP if and when that was possible, but that is simply not good enough when we live in such dangerous times. I wish we would stop plucking spending targets out of thin air. As I have said before, we should let our three services work out what we need to support and, if necessary, fight alongside NATO; cost it; and then decide what we can afford.

The Chancellor's key rabbit was a further reduction in national insurance, which has not endeared the Budget to pensioners, who do not pay the tax—although, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) said, they do still have the triple lock, which is generous. Instead, pensioners risk paying more tax on income as the threshold at which the higher rate of tax is paid is frozen; freezing thresholds is, in effect, a stealth tax. According to the OBR, which the Government refer to on many occasions, that would see millions of new taxpayers as their income rises above £12,570 a year, nearly 3 million workers being dragged into the higher rate of 40%, and 600,000 taxpayers paying the additional rate of 45% as their income passes £125,140 a year. This is hardly Conservative doctrine.

When I heard the Chancellor speak of the importance of lower taxes and allowing people to keep more of their hard-earned money, I was expecting a bombshell of an announcement during his speech—for example abolishing inheritance tax; lowering income tax, which I would have personally chosen, not national insurance; lowering corporation tax to encourage growth; simplifying the tax system; less state and less regulation; reforming business rates; and curbing many of these bloated quangos, if not scrapping them all together, and returning control to elected Ministers.

With our party staring down the barrel of a gun, it was time to be bold and courageous. I totally accept that the Chancellor is dealing with unprecedented times. No doubt disease, wars, a vast debt and an increasingly unstable world all played a part in his cautious approach, but where have we made the savings? Why do we think—like the Opposition—that the state has all the answers? The key to a successful economy and growth is a thriving private sector, whose taxes pay for the public sector.

The more bloated the latter, the more punitive the Government have to be on the wealth creators, the risk takers, the innovators and our very future.

The Budget has its good points, but they are tinkering at the edges. Even the small reduction in property capital gains tax and the tiny rise in the VAT registration threshold will neither ignite the property market nor boost small and medium-sized businesses. After 14 years in this place, I find it remarkable that Labour is quiet on its spending priorities. I ask why, and I fear it is because if Labour wins the election, it will simply endorse ours.

What we needed was crystal-clear blue water from the Budget. Instead, we are pursuing the socialist way and punishing those who earn more by working hard for their families, all to pay for a bigger state that is both unaffordable and runs contrary to every single Conservative value.

3.21 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Chancellor's final Budget has confirmed what the British public and my constituents in Nottingham South have long known: we are all paying a heavy price for 14 years of Tory failure. That is failure to grow our economy, failure to raise living standards and appalling failure to deliver the quality public services that people need and deserve. We have all been left living in a lost decade because of a succession of chaotic Conservative ideological projects that have harmed economic growth, scared off private investment and widened inequalities across our nation, from austerity to a no-plan Brexit and the kamikaze mini-Budget of September 2022.

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister claim that our country has turned a corner. Perhaps we have, but it turns out that around that corner was yet another Tory recession and the highest tax burden for 70 years. Households in my constituency of Nottingham South will be on average a further £870 worse off because of the Budget and other recent economic announcements from this rudderless Government. For every £10 that the Government are taking from our hard-working families in higher tax, they are giving back only £5. Forget robbing Peter to pay Paul—the Tories are giving with one hand and taking twice as much with the other, while expecting us to thank them for the privilege.

Many of my constituents were already having to make daily difficult decisions to make ends meet because of the sky-high inflation and rocketing rents and mortgage payments unleashed by the last Prime Minister's irresponsible and economically illiterate mini-Budget. Now, because of the failure of this Prime Minister and his Chancellor to get our economy growing again, raise living standards or actually cut the tax burden, my constituents will have to try to make do with even fewer pounds in their pocket.

The Conservatives are inflicting yet further pain on my constituents, because the combination of £1 billion-worth of cuts to Nottingham City Council, the failure to fix the crisis in social care and spiralling homelessness has pushed our council over the edge. To fill that black hole made in Westminster, the council has been forced to agree devastating cuts to local services, including the arts, culture, libraries, community protection, youth services and more. This ill treatment comes as no surprise to us in Nottingham, because successive Tory Governments have failed to make the important investments needed

to help our great city grow, cancelling first midland main line electrification and then phase 2 of High Speed 2, and refusing to invest in the Broadmarsh project to regenerate our city centre and create more than 6,000 much-needed jobs. We in Nottingham have been a target for Tory cuts since 2010, but I am proud that I and others stood up to the Government to force them to deliver on the extensions to Nottingham's tram network, the upgrading of the A453 and the scheme to insulate and retrofit thousands of homes across Nottingham South.

Unlike for the Conservatives, sound public finances and economic stability are non-negotiable for the Labour party. A future Labour Government will not play fast and loose with our economy by carrying out ideological Frankenstein experiments like the Prime Minister's £46 billion unfunded plan to abolish national insurance. Instead, we will stick to our tough fiscal rules. Our spending plans will be fully costed and fully funded, including a loophole-free windfall tax on the extraordinary profits of oil and gas multinational giants. We will root out waste, corruption and those abusing taxpayers' money by setting up a new office for value for money, halving Government consultancy spending, and appointing a covid corruption commissioner, to ensure that all of our taxpayers' hard-earned money is spent wisely.

A future Labour Government would end Tory short-termism and instead work with private business to encourage stability, investment and reform to build the world-leading industries of the future in Britain. We would reform our sclerotic planning system, support our working people to develop the skills they need to thrive, and make work finally pay with a genuine living wage and a new deal for working people.

The Conservative Government have broken their promises to the British people. We are all paying more and getting less because of repeated Tory failures. If this was a private contract, the Government would have been taken to court for misrepresentation under the Trade Descriptions Act long ago. Instead, the Prime Minister, who lost his last election test to his predecessor and her snake-oil economics, is steadfastly refusing to let the British public have a say on his and his party's record of chaos and national decline. He should do the right thing and call a general election for 2 May to let the people of Nottingham South and Britain elect a Government who will put them first.

3.26 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The measures announced in the Budget by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor promote a pragmatic and sensible approach to growing the economy, improving productivity and ensuring that more people keep more of their earnings. We still carry the economic scars and fallout of the once-in-100-years pandemic and the energy crisis caused by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Let us not forget that covid shut down major parts of our economy and the Government spent more than £400 billion protecting hundreds of thousands of businesses and millions of jobs.

I note the Chancellor's comments in his speech last week that the UK's post-covid recovery is among the strongest of the G7, ahead of France, Germany and Italy. Russia's war in Ukraine has led to a serious energy crisis. I am proud that the Government chose to support

[*Nickie Aiken*]

households with increased energy bills, providing £40 billion of financial support. This Conservative Government were able to spend that money because they spent the previous nine years rebuilding our economy after it was ravaged by successive Labour Governments. Let us not forget that when we took office, the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury told us that there was no money left.

Thankfully, we are now witnessing a steady recovery, following two major economic shocks in the last four years. Economic recoveries do not succeed overnight, but this Conservative Chancellor is doing the right thing by ensuring that our public finances are on a strong footing, and that the recovery is sustainable and aimed at growth and improving productivity. He is also doing the right thing by putting more money back into people's pockets. Following this Budget and the autumn statement, we have seen a 4p cut in national insurance in just five months. Some 27 million working people will keep an average of £900 more of their earnings.

One tax loophole that I was pleased to see closed was the abolition of the furnished holiday lettings tax regime, eliminating the tax advantage for landlords who let short-term furnished holiday properties over those who let residential properties on a long-term basis. I have campaigned for reform of the short-term lets industry for over a decade. In the Cities of London and Westminster, 10,000 short-term let properties are stripping out the long-term rental market, leaving young people struggling to pay rising rents in the capital, as they are in regions such as the south-west.

I also welcome the Chancellor's recognition of the importance of culture in our economy, with his unveiling of the package that will provide the creative industries with over £1 billion in additional tax relief over the next five years. That is a vital sector not only in my constituency but to the wider economy. It employs 2.4 million people across the UK and contributed to £125 billion to the UK economy in 2022 alone. The relief will make a huge difference to the creative industries.

Our public services play a vital role in the life of our nation, schools, council, police and fire service and, of course, our beloved NHS, supporting us from the cradle to the grave, but we must never forget that these are all funded by taxpayer money. Thus, it is imperative that we strive for the best value for money and focus on efficiency. I fully support the Chancellor's public sector productivity programme. Currently, productivity remains below pandemic levels, and we must close the gap. Modernising and streamlining our public services will mean better allocations of resources, leading to better outcomes for those who use these services.

Our medical professionals are best placed to improve a patient's experience and outcome. I saw that at first hand on a visit to Barts hospital in my constituency. Barts-based Dr Debashish Das and colleagues from across London's cardiac units have designed a shared platform to monitor remotely more than 5,000 patients who are awaiting heart surgery. This doctor-led initiative has significantly reduced emergency surgery, improved patient outcomes and saved the NHS money. That sort of project must be encouraged, not only in the NHS but throughout the public sector.

As a former councillor, I know full well how we must improve productivity and reduce costs. In 2010, as cabinet member for children's services, I led Westminster's merger of children's services with Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and Hammersmith and Fulham. It was a landmark move and the first of its kind in the United Kingdom. It not only led to improved outcomes for our children but saved tens of millions of pounds for the taxpayer. We must see more of this type of project, and freedom and flexibility must be given to the public sector to improve productivity.

There is one measure missing from this Budget, which would benefit the economy if implemented: the reinstatement of tax-free shopping. Since the tax incentive was lifted, international visitor spending has fallen in the UK and risen in European cities such as Paris, Milan and Madrid. An Oxford Economics report predicts that reintroducing tax-free shopping could attract more than 1.6 million extra visitors to the UK, stimulating an extra £2.8 billion in tourist spending overall. I remain at a loss to understand why the Treasury does not accept the arguments to reintroduce tax-free shopping for overseas visitors, and to go further and extend it to EU citizens. Reintroducing tax-free shopping would boost the economy for the retail, hospitality, hotel, leisure and culture sectors, and also for the manufacturing of luxury goods. It is a no-brainer.

Thanks to the responsible and prudent management of the economy under this Chancellor, we are seeing green shoots of a sustainable recovery. That is fair and sensible.

3.34 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Is that it? That was my first thought on hearing the Budget last week. Is that it for my constituents, many of whom are struggling to make their wages, which have not risen in years, stretch to cover the ever increasing costs of their food, bills, rent, mortgages, transport and council tax? They are paying more for less. The ongoing austerity years have brought nothing but pain. UK GDP growth has been revised down, and Government debt and interest spending has reached the highest level since the 1960s. Even higher earners are on track for the biggest fall in their disposable income on record. People are working harder just to keep their heads above water. Treats that were once affordable, such as going out for meals and annual holidays, are out of the question these days for many of my constituents.

For the first time in modern history, most people will be worse off than they were before the Government were elected. Yet there was nothing in the Budget to help lift out of poverty the 3.8 million people, including 1 million children, who are now so poor they are considered destitute. Pensioners have been ignored and will be largely worse off. There was nothing in the Budget for young people who see no prospect whatsoever of having a secure and affordable home. The housing crisis is so bad it is now also a public health crisis. There was nothing in the Budget for defence spending, despite the increasing threats we face.

We have record waiting lists in the NHS. Is it any surprise that long-term illness is both the most common and fastest growing reason for people being outside the workforce? There have been some very difficult factors

that have contributed to the weakness of our economy, such as the invasion of Ukraine and the pandemic, but far too many unforced errors have been made: the Liz Truss Budget catastrophe, which my constituents are still paying for; the £140 billion that Brexit is costing our economy—Brexit cost my constituents, on average, £2,000 each last year.

The last time taxes were as high as in 1948. Despite the fact that the country was recovering from the second world war, the Labour Government of the day delivered the national health service: world-beating healthcare, free at the point of use for everybody. In this Budget, there is no public services spending planned for the next five years. The 40 new hospitals promised in the manifesto, on which the Prime Minister and the Chancellor were elected, are nowhere to be seen. Departmental expenditure limits have been left largely unchanged. That means my constituents will not see built under this Government the new in-patient mental health bed facility that is so desperately needed. The economy is about political choices, and Labour will always choose to look after the NHS and education.

The Tories stole Labour's idea to abolish the non-dom tax status, but instead of investing in the NHS as Labour planned, they have used it to pay for a national insurance cut. Even that unfunded promise is

“not worth the paper it is written on”,

according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and it cannot be paid for without Government borrowing, stealth tax rises and/or a further squeeze on public spending.

The Budget was a damp squib, with no plan on how to get us out of the economic mess the Tories have got us into. I am pleased to see the changes to the child benefit thresholds, but why did it take the Government so long to help struggling families? Tinkering around the edges is not going to kick-start the economy or bring the growth and productivity we desperately need to improve our public services and put money back into people's pockets.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I remind Members not to refer to current Members by their names, but to do so by their constituency or office.

3.39 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): One of my mother's favourite phrases was that anything can be proved with statistics. It seems to me that Budget debates always follow that, as they are something of a statistical salad from which Members can pick out their favourite morsels to support any individual argument.

What is often more important is not to pick and choose statistics to advance an argument, but to look at trends. The reports that I think every Member receives on a regular basis from our big banks and financial institutions—NewDay, Barclays' Insights reports, Lloyds and others—tell us a great deal about what is going on in the financial lives of the people we serve. Broadly across the country we see a clear trend that people are in a position to save more from their day-to-day incomes. Spending on consumer activity is increasing quarter on quarter, and is particularly strong among constituents

on a household income of between £20,000 and £40,000 a year—those on lower incomes, but in employment. That is part of a generally improving—although not rapidly improving—trend.

It is against that backdrop that I welcome in particular the fact that the Budget focuses its support primarily on the lowest income households, including pensioners through the triple lock. It incentivises work, but not just for the benefit of people earning their own income. It recognises the benefits of having a job—for mental and physical health, and for tackling child poverty. It also encourages investment. We have heard a great deal of debate about manufacturing. The introduction of full expensing, and the commitment to retaining it, will be hugely important in raising productivity over time and will help us to address our biggest national challenge, the demographics of a reducing workforce, while helping individual businesses. On a recent visit to the Sharmans Pharmacy in my constituency, I was shown its new pharmacy dispensing robot. It increases rapidly the ability of that pharmacy to fill prescriptions for people who come in. It increases the efficiency of workers and their ability to engage with customers, and it represents a degree of confidence on its part that an investment in an expensive piece of technology will help to increase its profit margins, secure jobs and provide a better service to people who come through the door.

Against that backdrop, and although we have seen amazing progress, with on average an additional 800 jobs per day since the Government took office in 2010, we still face a very significant recruitment challenge. I hear from businesses in my constituency, day after day, that securing workers with the skills to fill the jobs that enable us to grow and increase productivity remains a challenge. I will provide the Government Front Bench with the thought that, just as with the Windrush generation, when we went out and specifically sought to recruit people from across the world to fulfil the roles we needed—it did not always end well, but on the whole it was enormously significant and positive—we might need a similar kind of deal with a friendly nation today, and to make a decision to take control of economic migration and establish links with countries from which we can source the skills we need and with whom we have an affiliation, to provide the stability our economy needs, and in particular the public sector workers we require in the NHS, dentistry and so many other areas of our national life.

To develop the theme of productivity, all across the public sector we hear interesting examples of how different public services are looking to improve productivity. From the Royal Navy, we have heard how future generations of warships will require one third of the number of sailors that the current technology demands. Across the NHS, we see examples of how new technology—I declare an interest; I am married to an NHS doctor—is improving the efficiency of both the delivery of services and the speed with which they can be provided. In that context, it is striking that, while people can be cynical about capitalism, there has been a 50% improvement in cancer survival rates over the past five decades as a result of the wealth that has been generated and invested in this technology.

I very much encourage the Government, as they look at where the productivity gain can most be found—echoing the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for

[David Simmonds]

Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and having spent a lot of my time in local government—to focus on the areas of our public sector where we have seen the most impressive gains in productivity. It is clear from, for instance, our experience of the better care fund and what has happened in relation to public health that local authorities have consistently achieved not only some of the most impressive efficiency savings in any part of the public sector, but also the greatest productivity gains. That is because they contain accountable, elected politicians like ourselves, responsible to their communities, who are willing to run things as if they were running their own businesses. One example is the investment in jet patchers enabling potholes, which are a real pest for many of our constituents, to be fixed very rapidly. The decisions on that investment were made in local government years before anyone in central Government got around to identifying the potential benefits of the technology.

Mr Betts: Is it not therefore disappointing that while the Government have assumed 5% productivity increases in the Budget, they are also assuming that central funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be cut by 2.3% a year in real terms for four years? Even if a 5% increase in productivity were achieved, it would fill only half the gap caused by the cuts in local government funding that are projected in the Budget. That is no way forward, is it? Moreover, the Budget made absolutely no mention of public health or integrated care.

David Simmonds: The hon. Gentleman has enormous knowledge of the local government world. I think he would also acknowledge the complexity of the local government finance world and, in particular, the opportunity created by the freedoms relating to council tax increases. As we know from other debates in the House, that is not distributed across the country as evenly as we would like, but it will nevertheless enable local authorities that have built up significant financial balances specifically to manage effectively some of the economic shocks that we know are out there in the system.

Let me end with a brief defence of the value of capitalism. In this Chamber we often debate the need for greater regulation—ten-minute rule Bills, for instance, are often intended to address injustices, and that is entirely right—but if we are honest we will admit that, notwithstanding the grandeur of the Chamber and the status of Members of Parliament, the Government do not exert as much control over the day-to-day life of our economy and our national life as some of our debates imply. We need to recognise that free markets, capitalism and people's ability to invest and seek returns have helped to deliver that doubling of cancer survival rates, as well as the incredible improvements in educational attainment. It does not always work, of course. The private finance initiative remains a significant burden, but it was a worthy attempt to do the right thing which has turned out to have some significant downsides.

We should consider the improvements in our national mental and physical health and to the rates of absolute poverty that have been driven by investment and the creation of 4 million additional jobs since 2010, which have transformed our constituents' lives beyond almost

anything else that we have done in this Chamber. It is for that reason that I have confidence in the impact that the Budget will have, and in the benefits that a Conservative Government are bringing to all our people.

3.48 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This Budget has failed to address the acute challenges that our country is facing. After 14 years of Conservative rule we have appalling levels of poverty and inequality, and vital public services have been brought to their knees, but instead of being presented with a Budget to inspire hope that the conditions in which so many people are living could be turned around, we were treated to the sight of a blasé Chancellor with a pitiful offer.

More than 14 million people in the United Kingdom are living in poverty, including more than 2 million pensioners and 4 million children, and a million of those experienced destitution in 2022; but the Chancellor threw them crumbs in the form of a measly six-month extension of the household support fund. Does he think that after September there will, by some miracle, no longer be people who need help with the cost of food and utilities? It is an insult.

In February, the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown said:

“In years to come...people will be asking how it was that government walked by on the other side when thousands of children were suffering abject deprivation, and failed to support them in their hours of need.”

This is a damning indictment of this Government. The Chancellor's treatment of pensioners was shameful as well. Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, has said that they will be “substantial net losers” from the Budget. He explained:

“Well over 60 per cent of pensioners now pay income tax. Income tax changes will leave most of them £650 a year worse off by 2027, and over £3,000 a year worse off if they are higher rate tax payers.”

Why is the Chancellor punishing pensioners in this way?

The Chancellor had the audacity to claim that the Government have a plan for better public services, despite knowing full well that Conservative Governments over the past 14 years have inflicted brutal cuts and that more are planned for the years ahead. Torsten Bell, the chief executive of the Resolution Foundation, said:

“The £19 billion of cuts to unprotected public services after the next election are three-quarters the size of those delivered in the early 2010s. The idea that such cuts can be delivered in the face of already faltering public services is a fiscal fiction.”

Yet again, the Tories are heaping the misery of austerity on the country.

Local authority funding has been decimated under the Conservatives. Figures from the House of Commons Library show that Wirral saw a 28.6% real-terms drop in settlement funding between 2015-16 and 2023-24. In Wirral West, we have lost Woodchurch swimming pool and leisure centre, as well as council-run libraries in Hoylake, Pensby, Irby and Woodchurch. In Wirral overall, we saw a 54% drop in real-terms spending on services for young people between 2012-13 and 2022-23. There have also been cuts to emergency services: we now have around 380 fewer police officers in Merseyside than we did in 2010; and we have about 270 fewer firefighters. In Wirral, there are no legal aid contracts to support

people on housing or social security matters, leaving people without access to justice. Where was the funding to address the devastating impact of years of austerity? Communities in Wirral have been left high and dry by the Tories.

The underfunding of the NHS continues, despite the fact that waiting lists are at over 7.6 million, leaving people suffering in pain, with thousands stopping work as a result. I would like the Minister to explain why the Government have gone back on their commitment to expand the provision of fracture liaison services. The Royal Osteoporosis Society's "Better Bones" campaign calls for £30 million a year for universal fracture liaison coverage. That would save the Exchequer money in the long run, keeping people healthy rather than seeing them join NHS queues and become reliant on social security.

We still see no realistic plan to address the crisis in adult social care. Last year, research by Age UK found that 1.6 million older disabled people have unmet care needs and that 36,000 fewer older disabled people are receiving care than in 2017-18. Skills for Care, the workforce development and planning body, estimates that an average of 9.9% of roles in adult social care were vacant in 2022-23—equivalent to approximately 152,000 vacancies. The Government also continue to ignore the more than 7 million adults in England who are functionally illiterate, which is a form of deprivation that goes unanswered. According to the latest report from the IFS, total spending on adult skills in 2024-25 will still be 23% below 2009-10 levels.

This is a Budget from a Government who lack any ambition to serve the majority across the country. The Conservative legacy is one of decimated public services and appalling levels of poverty and inequality. It is time for them to step aside. It is time that we have a Government who will give an immediate injection of funding to public services and ensure that no one suffers poverty.

3.53 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is quite right to focus on improving the UK's economic activity, where, as we have heard, we should be doing much better. We have a flexible labour market, and it is vital that we do not imperil it, but we also need a long-term strategy for investments in skills and infrastructure so that our economy can move into top gear, we can compete globally with the highest-performing economies, and we can bring prosperity to all corners of the United Kingdom.

There are measures in this Budget that are particularly welcome and which will help improve our economic performance. The 2p reduction in national insurance contributions and the increase in the child benefit threshold remove barriers to work. It is also vital that we secure investment for the businesses of tomorrow. The £1 billion for the renewable electricity auction allocation round 6, the £270 million combined Government and industry investment into research and development projects in the automotive and aerospace industries, and the £120 million for the green industries growth accelerator will all help to achieve this.

In almost every Budget, it is important to be wary of and to guard against unintended consequences, and there are two that I will briefly highlight from last

Wednesday. First, I understand the rationale for extending the sunset clause on the energy profits levy, but there is real concern that this will deflect and deter investment for the industries of tomorrow: offshore wind, carbon capture, and hydrogen. These industries are vital to enhancing our energy security, bringing jobs to coastal communities and delivering our net zero targets, and I am concerned that, as the levy proposals stand, they could deter that vital investment. For my part, I shall be studying closely the provisions of the spring Finance Bill, and I would urge the Government to re-engage with industry at every opportunity.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member's point about offshore renewables is very important. Does he agree that we must ensure, as a nation, that we construct those floating wind turbines in the UK rather than overseas?

Peter Aldous: Yes. If we look at the offshore wind sector deal that was signed in 2019, we can see progress in building local supply chains, but I share the hon. Gentleman's doubt to a degree. There is still a lot more work to do, and on the manufacturing side of things I would agree with him that that could take longer than for other aspects of those local supply chains.

Secondly, I likewise acknowledge why the decision has been made to abolish the furnished letting concession. There are areas of the country where holiday lets are badly distorting the local property market, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who is no longer in her place. She made that point clearly, but there are many other areas of the country where holiday lets are not distorting the local property market. They are a vital part of those local economies, which are often in rural areas where there are limited other job-creating opportunities, and restrictions and limitations on the opportunity to diversify a business. Many such properties are also subject to planning conditions that prevent them from becoming available for full-time occupation on the open market. It is therefore important to be cognisant of the full impact of this proposal before proceeding. I see that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) is listening. We need a full impact assessment of that proposal before it advances.

To remove the stubborn productivity gap, it is vital to invest in skills and infrastructure. With such initiatives as the local skills improvement plans and lifelong learning, the Government have rightly recognised the importance of providing people of all ages with the opportunity to acquire the skills that are needed for the many new and emerging industries that are coming forward. Further education colleges and trainers currently face obstacles in recruiting staff, recovering VAT and supporting those who need to catch up on their learning following covid. It is therefore disappointing that no measures to address these challenges were announced last week.

Investment in infrastructure is vital if the east of England is to realise its full potential. It is therefore vital that funds are made available straightaway so that work on the Ely and Haughley junction rail improvement can begin without further delay. There were welcome announcements on this in the autumn statement, but

[Peter Aldous]

there is local concern that the Government might be reverse ferreting on this issue. I hope that my concerns can be allayed.

This winter, the Norfolk and Suffolk coast has taken a battering that it has not seen for a very long time. In my constituency, in Lowestoft, Pakefield and Kessingland, this has undermined investment in the town centres, the ports and the tourism industry, including its vital leisure parks and caravan parks. Schemes have been prepared to protect these people and their property, and it is vital that they get under way as quickly as possible.

The Government are right to stick to the plan to halve inflation, to grow the economy and to reduce debt. As I have said, I believe that the Budget's welcome initiatives will help to achieve those goals, but all around the UK, and particularly in East Anglia, we need to press ahead with strategic investment in both people and infrastructure—in flesh and blood and in concrete and steel.

4.1 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is important to note that, had pre-2008 levels of growth been maintained, GDP per head would be 39% higher than it is today. People are poorer, and so is the state. We are on a long road of stagnation, decline and diminished capacity. It is a disaster for our constituents.

It is easy to tell a story that this is simply symbolic of the dying days of one political party in government, and that it will all be changed by a new Government, but that new Government need a sense of direction and a sense of purpose built around national renewal in a divided and disillusioned country. New management alone will not cut it. We need a transformation that goes well beyond fiscal and monetary tweaks, and that moves into the real economy. A transformation that asks why living standards are declining when employment is at record levels.

The dignity of work has to be at the centre of our agenda. The scourge of in-work poverty bears witness to the failure of the economic model that has now been in place for almost half a century. Full employment, education and training are vital but, without an industrial strategy, it alone will not get to the heart of the matter.

National renewal requires what every Government since Margaret Thatcher's Government have found unthinkable—an industrial strategy that engages the energy of the public sector and the private sector in partnership with the people of this country. We must think the unthinkable, look beyond finance and the City of London, and look out to the country. We must think about regional banks, vocational colleges and a form of corporate governance that can sustain a partnership between place, workers and capital. The debacle of the Post Office this year is indicative, not anomalous. The model of managerial sovereignty without accountability has well and truly failed. It has left public services, like our NHS, broken, with millions suffering on waiting lists. It has left local government bankrupt and unable to do its important job. Economy, society and Government are rudderless, in decline and diminished.

The British people are capable of inventing, designing and making their own future. We must not be afraid of change and the renewal of our economy, society and politics. That was the task of a Labour Government

in 1945, 1964 and 1997. In each of those Governments, Labour won working-class communities to its cause. Those communities have endured neglect, abandonment and contempt for too long. They are not the source of decline, but the key to renewal. They have been despised and patronised, and we cannot understand the Brexit vote or the election of this Tory Government without understanding their disdain or their rejection of the political class now. Labour must put their needs—a decent wage, a decent pension, safe and secure communities—ahead of any progressive demands that often dominate the politics of the left. It is the vocation of Labour, as a party of government and as a movement, to do that. It is vital that Labour rediscovers its own vocation, as well as the virtues of vocation in the economy. The stakes are high indeed.

4.7 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). No Budget is delivered in a vacuum. To make an assessment of the Budget, we need to consider its context and backdrop. Given some of the comments from Opposition Members, particularly the shadow Minister, I wonder whether they have been asleep for the past few years.

During the past few years, our economy has had two of the biggest shocks we will ever live through. The Government have had to step in to support jobs, businesses and households, and have spent almost half a trillion pounds to do so. It was absolutely right to provide that level of support, which amounted to around £6,000 for every person in the country, through the pandemic and the energy crisis. We were able to deliver that support only because of our careful management and rebuilding of our country's finances when we first came into office in 2010. If we had not done that, we would not have been in a position to deliver that support. Having spent that money, it now has to be covered and we have to balance the books. That is the context in which this Budget has been delivered.

In the light of that context, the Chancellor did an incredible job delivering a Budget that was able to cut national insurance by 2p. Thousands of people in work in my constituency will welcome that because they will be up to £450 a year better off, on top of the 2% we delivered at the beginning of the year. Once again, we have been able to freeze fuel duty, which will be hugely welcomed, as will a number of other measures, particularly the extension of the household support fund for another six months, which is necessary to continue to support those most in need to recover from the impact of the last few years. Raising the VAT threshold will also be hugely welcomed by many small businesses that I represent. I simply ask the Treasury to index link it, so that it goes up every year, on a regular basis, rather than having to wait for it to be hiked up again.

There was much to be welcomed in this Budget. There was one thing in particular that I welcomed. In fact, I was deeply honoured to get a mention from the Chancellor, as he addressed the issue of the inequality in the tax system between residential landlords and short-term holiday lets. That is an issue that I have been asking to be addressed for a long time. I respect the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) when he said that we just need to be careful.

What we need to do is to focus on outcomes. We want more properties available to rent in tourist areas. I know that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who is a former tourism Minister, understands the sector incredibly well and I trust him as much as anyone to get this measure right. We need to ensure that we are focused on delivering the outcome and not just taxing people who are not able to put their property on the rental market. I think this is an important step to addressing some of the housing issues that we face in tourist areas.

Although I got one thing that I wanted to see in the Budget, there were other things that I was hoping to see that we did not get. The tourism sector has had a huge amount of support over the past few years, and rightly so, because it is such an important part of our economy. I have the honour of representing the constituency that I am told is most reliant on the tourism and hospitality sector, and it is still facing some huge challenges. More support for the sector, whether through cutting VAT or addressing the high business rates that companies pay, would be very welcome, and I will continue to press the case for that. I was also disappointed that the opportunity was not taken to address the issue of renewable liquid heating fuels, which are being taxed unfairly for those who are off grid for mains heating supply. I will continue to make the case for that.

Productivity is an ongoing challenge in Cornwall. Our wages are typically about 30% below the national average and our productivity reflects that. There are some understandable reasons relating to our geography and demographics, but there are also some huge opportunities for us to become less reliant on seasonal jobs and businesses. There are opportunities in the space sector, lithium extraction and renewable energy. I came into politics to try to create good career opportunities for young people growing up in Cornwall. This exciting opportunity to create well-paid jobs, to raise the average wages available in Cornwall and to give those young people the careers of the future is something that we need to grasp. I urge the Government, who have already done much to support these sectors in Cornwall, to continue to ensure that we provide those job opportunities to enable young people in Cornwall to aspire to a good career in the sectors of the future. We need to close the challenging productivity gap that we face and make the most of creating the well-paid jobs of the future.

In the context in which we find ourselves, I believe that the Budget was hugely positive and delivered what the country needs. We are seeing inflation fall and growth returning to our economy. It is time to stick with the plan and continue delivering what the country needs.

4.14 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): There are things to welcome in the Budget when it comes to helping people struggling with hardship and debt, but they are more about tinkering than about providing solutions to the underlying problems. I welcome the extension to the household support fund, which is distributed by local councils and is a crucial lifeline for desperate families, but it is only for six months. That is wholly inadequate given the scale of the problem.

Increasing the repayment period for households on universal credit that take out budgeting advances from 12 months to 24 months is clearly helpful, especially

for those struggling to make ends meet or coping with an emergency, but that still leaves millions of people on universal credit subject to unaffordable deductions from their benefits to repay other Government debts. Those deductions from an amount of money that is frankly too little to live on in the first place cause real hardship.

We have to put those small changes in the context of a cost of living crisis that is affecting millions of people. StepChange says that two in five people are currently struggling to keep up with household bills and credit commitments, and its advisers regularly speak to clients struggling to meet even the most basic needs, such as getting a healthy meal and keeping the heating on. They are also increasingly seeing people on negative budgets, which means that they do not have enough income to meet their necessary outgoings, let alone put towards paying off their debt. A new report published today by Christians Against Poverty highlights that and the fact that many people lack credit, but I am not sure the Government recognise the problem as well as those charities do. That is why people need more help with the fundamentals, such as council tax and energy bills. Where is the much-needed council tax support scheme and a social tariff for energy? Those changes would make a real difference.

We also need major changes to the kinds of debt solutions that advice agencies can offer. The announcement of the scrapping of the up-front £90 application fee and the uplift to the vehicle value to qualify for debt relief orders is a start, because debt relief orders were a real barrier to those in financial hardship who had to find £90 before they could even deal with their debts. The statement on financial vulnerability is welcome, but it is estimated that an extra 556,000 debt relief orders will be applied for—a 75% increase on 2023. The statement asserts that individuals will be put in contact with free debt advice where appropriate, so my question to the Chancellor is: where will the extra money come from to pay for the additional debt advice? The free advice sector is already overloaded. Debt advisers are working beyond their capacity and suffering burnout, and many are leaving the sector, despite their commitment to it. More and sustained funding is urgently needed.

Enough with tinkering around the edges. We need a system of simple and straightforward debt solutions, and we must ensure that people, including those on negative incomes, are always able to access the solution that best suits their needs. One part of the solution has to be to reduce creditors' reliance on bailiffs, whose fees, which rose substantially last year in the middle of a cost of living crisis, are simply added to people's debts, making them less and less affordable. Bailiffs are often part of the problem, not the solution. We have to encourage creditors—including public sector organisations, the Government and local authorities—to embrace a fairer and more effective system that prioritises affordable payment plans over the seizure of goods.

Of course, we need to prevent people from falling into debt in the first place, so we must look at the issues more holistically. The causes and solutions are complex. Many people affected by debt have multiple categories of debt, spanning lots of regulatory regimes. That complexity is replicated across Government and Whitehall, and laws and regulations span several Departments. For example, the regulation of “buy now, pay later” firms,

[Yvonne Fovargue]

which is far too delayed—I was really sorry to see that it appears to have been kicked into the long grass—is the preserve of the Treasury. Bailiff fees are an issue for the Ministry of Justice, and prepayment meters are the responsibility of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. The Department for Work and Pensions looks after deductions from universal credit, and rent arrears are dealt with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—and that is not a complete list. Actually, all those Departments need to work together, and any policies need to have a financial inclusion impact assessment. That would stop many of the policies that are pushing people into more hardship and debt.

This may sound a little strange, but I am looking to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill to regulate e-scooters that use lithium-ion batteries, which will come under the Department for Transport. This is a financial inclusion matter, because it is often the cost of living that causes people to search for cheap bargains online that turn out to be anything but and are actually dangerous.

I will not pretend to have all the answers to the complex issues, but I do know that we have to have a joined-up approach to solving them. Far too many people in our country are struggling with what seems like hopeless debt, and they gain little from the tinkering and short termism of this Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Angus Brendan MacNeil.

4.20 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): Tapadh leibh, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am using Gaelic like Cillian Murphy did at the Oscars—the Celtic tongue is everywhere these days. May I also welcome members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, who are watching our proceedings?

I will start with a quote:

“I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone—if possible—Jew, gentile, black man, white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other’s happiness, not by each other’s misery.”

That is from the last speech of Charlie Chaplin’s film, “The Great Dictator”, filmed in 1940. Too often nowadays, 84 years later, we are seeing the misery of others among us in the UK, where food banks and child poverty are far too commonplace. The hon. Member for Rochdale (George Galloway), who is no longer in his place, mentioned two wards in his area where 50% of children live in poverty. He also mentioned his predecessor, which was very worthy.

Young people in our countries cannot get houses. Their rents drain their savings for a deposit and leave them trapped. On “Newsnight” last night, a teacher in Paisley, Scotland said that there was a link between pupil behaviour in the classroom and hunger and perhaps even nutrition. How can we make society more productive when educational outcomes are blighted by DWP policy and spending choices?

The roots of this go back to 2008—perhaps not the crash but certainly the response to it and the fixation of then Chancellor George Osborne on austerity. He really did misunderstand the debt to GDP ratio. He thought only of debt, leaving the UK like a farmer saving money

on seeds in spring, not investing, and then wondering why there was no harvest in the autumn. He had a short-term political slogan, which some here might remember: “long-term economic plan”. As ever, however, there was no plan. This is the autumn, there was no investment and the harvest is scarce.

The Resolution Foundation pointed out in December that the average worker in the UK is earning £10,700 less than their equivalent in a host of developed countries in Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia. This has been compounded by Brexit taking GDP down by about 5%, and talks of a trans-Pacific partnership gave nothing back because that is trade with paperwork and bureaucracy and only a 0.2% to 0.8% gain in GDP. Members talk of people keeping their hard-earned cash, but it is harder-earned cash as a result of some of the choices that have been made in the UK. Filling out forms does not productivity make.

In Iceland, the crash was over by 2013, which was 11 years ago. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Iceland and have met the Central Bank of Iceland several times. It now complains of too much growth in its economy and its head banker has his head in his hands. Things are so different in the UK. Ireland seems similar to Iceland, as do Norway and Denmark. The countries surrounding Scotland are very different. Their populations will grow by 2050, but if Scotland is still in the UK, its population will decline. My constituency will experience that decline most of all. It is unnecessary and will be as a result not of destiny but of choices. It is not about geography or demographics; it is about policy.

In “The Guardian” last week, Gary Stevenson, a former City trader, wrote that

“the budget is for ordinary people. The mega-rich look on and laugh...traders know the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer.”

The blight is all over society. Sky News reported over autumn that parents were stealing infant formula milk, such was their desperation. Reports are being written and commissioned on food insecurity in what is known as a G7 country.

The basic facts about the UK’s finances are that it has borrowed every year bar 11 since 1945, and has not paid back much of that money; it has been in surplus for only 11 years, and has paid back about 1.7% of the debt attributed to it. Those are the facts, but maybe they do not tell the whole story, because the world has not ended. However, they undermine the fiscal rules that various parties and Oppositions have, which are not actually necessary and are causing the misery of others. In my view, the UK has had two pivotal moments that have led us to this point—moments of quantitative easing, or if you like, the printing of money. As the American economist J. K. Galbraith said, the process by which money is created

“is so simple that the mind is repelled.”

Those moments were, of course, after the crash and around the pandemic.

The problem is that rather than people being helped with their mortgage, as they were in Iceland—that would perhaps be called flood-up economics, the opposite of trickle-down economics because it works—in the UK, the poor have lost out hugely, and the rich have accumulated the money that was created by the Government on a whim. As Gary Stevenson said in his article in *The Guardian* last week:

“The next year, 2011, I placed a bet. It was a bet that the hundreds of billions of pounds of economic stimulus being poured into the UK and US economies would not reach the people who needed it. It would settle in the pockets of the richest, who would use it to buy the homes of the poor, and the economy would never recover. That year, I was Citibank’s most profitable trader in the world. They paid me \$2m and asked me to do it again. It was around about then I realised the whole economic system wasn’t working.”

That is why we are where we are, and why the Budget is what it is—nothing very huge, and quite delusional, as has been said before. It also explains why councils and devolved Governments are short of money.

It is worth remarking that devolution only works one way in the UK. We get told in Scotland that we have two Governments, but devolution does not work like that. It works depending on England’s needs: when England’s one Government decide that they need to spend on something, there are consequential for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. If Wales needs money for health, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland do not receive consequential. That is a fundamental problem with the UK. I would also say to the SNP, and to the SNP Government in Edinburgh, that there is so much they could do to change the situation. They have the power in their hands to call an unscheduled Holyrood election whenever they want, and put the matter of independence before the people. If they did so, I am confident that Scotland would choose to leave all I have described; we would be an independent country and could have a different demographic outlook, particularly for Na h-Eileanan an Iar. These matters are very important, and Holyrood should think about doing that and doing it soon.

4.27 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I apologise in advance, Mr Deputy Speaker, for my rather croaky voice today. I was vocally cheering on the historic double win on the weekend: the Commons and Lords rugby team’s win over the Dáil and Seanad, and of course, England’s dramatic victory at Twickenham.

Turning to less happy matters, this Budget does absolutely nothing to remedy the economic malaise we have had over the past 14 years. Some £20 billion will have been slashed from vital public services by 2028, paired with tax cuts that overwhelmingly favour the very richest in our society—just another round of austerity from the architects of inequality. It is the worst decline in living standards since the second world war, the worst growth since the great depression, and the worst wage crisis since the battle of Waterloo. What an awful record that is. It is economic incompetence of utterly historic standards.

This malaise did not emerge suddenly and recently; it is not solely the result of the pandemic or the war in Ukraine. It is the cumulative outcome of a decade and a half of misguided economic decisions and governance by successive coalition and then Conservative Governments. When the former Prime Minister, the now Baron Cameron of Chipping Norton, announced the beginning of a new “age of austerity” back in 2009, few of us could have predicted the sheer devastation that the Conservatives were about to unleash on this country. A report from the Progressive Economy Forum reveals that between 2010 and 2019, austerity measures drained a staggering half a trillion pounds from the UK’s public spending coffers.

The impacts of those cuts have been devastating. The introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 increased the number of children living in relative poverty by 600,000 in just seven years. Bizarrely, British children are now 7 cm shorter than their European counterparts, clearly because of the malnutrition, scurvy and rickets that now plague our children’s future—it is utterly unbelievable, but these are facts put out by scientists.

As we all know, food bank usage, even in many Conservative constituencies, has skyrocketed. According to the Trussell Trust, emergency food parcel usage rose from 61,000 in 2010 to 1.9 million in 2020. Rates of increase in life expectancy have nearly halved, and more than 330,000 excess deaths in Great Britain have been attributed to this great age of austerity. That austerity has proved to be not just economically devastating, but, sadly, fatal for hundreds of thousands in this country.

These policies were not just confined to the coalition Government. Between 2015 and 2019, a succession of Conservative Prime Ministers committed themselves full-throatedly to the devastating austerity politics of the last five years. The most egregious was the implementation of the two-child benefit cap in 2016-17. That particularly awful example means that 42% of children living in families with three or more children now live in absolute poverty. The two-child benefit cap has impacted on 1.5 million of our nation’s children.

Despite politicians’ promises of austerity leading to an improved economy, our public finances have clearly not improved. Since 2010, the real economy has grown by only 1.2% a year, and we have the weakest growth among G7 countries. The simple fact—and this needs to be said loud and clear—is that you cannot cut your way to growth in any modern economy. We have witnessed the worst growth in GDP per head since records began. The real average wage for most Britons has remained unchanged since 2007, which is the biggest fall in living standards since records began. Productivity, which is closely linked to levels of investment, has stagnated for the longest period in modern capitalism. Productivity is now lower than in France, Germany and the United States.

A decade of austerity left the UK exceptionally vulnerable to the pandemic. When that hit, the years of pay caps and freezes wreaked havoc on safe health and social care staffing. They hindered recruitment and saw a spike in staff turnover, and as a result both sectors were perilously understaffed even before the pandemic hit. The cuts to social security, benefit freezes and restrictive reforms shattered our agreed safety net in this country. Those soaring poverty levels fuelled higher covid risks, leaving my constituents much more vulnerable to severe health consequences.

Slashing funds gutted the provision of health and safety regulators, which left enforcement in a shambles. Amid the pandemic, inspections and notices hit rock bottom, despite rampant workplace infections. This categorically led to the death of NHS workers on the frontlines. Emerging from the pandemic, public services were left in tatters, as they are still, and they desperately need financial support, but it was not brought forward in the Budget last week. The situation was only worsened further by the former Prime Minister’s acts of economic self-destruction, which plunged the pound to historical lows, allowed mortgage interest rates to skyrocket and put six major pension funds at risk of total annihilation.

[*Sam Tarry*]

This track record of the decimation of our country has left classrooms falling apart, NHS waiting lists at near record-breaking length, household unsecured debt going up through the roof and our public institutions on their knees. This is the result of only one organisation and one group of people: it is the result of 14 years of uninterrupted Conservative and coalition economic mismanagement. The Institute for Government has warned that our public services are stuck in a “doom loop” of recurring crises, due to more than a decade of short-term policy making and harsh austerity.

This Budget was a missed opportunity for laying a different progressive pathway forward for our economy—one that empowers and properly funds public services, and puts working people and our fragile planet at the very heart of it; one that invests in people and their skills, whether that is at university or for vocational workers; and one that invests in our workplaces and our people. Until we have a Government who are prepared to do that, as well as to stand up for the ordinary people of this country, and have a serious long-term investment plan for infrastructure and a long-term investment plan for sectors in our industries, our country will stagger onwards on a treadmill of economic decline.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sarah Olney will be the last speaker to have seven minutes, and we will then go to six minutes. Hopefully we can keep it at six minutes, if my maths is any good—I will be in the Chair then anyway, but we will see.

4.34 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): After years of economic chaos, unfair tax hikes and now Rishi’s recession, this desperate Budget is yet more evidence that the Conservative Government—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The ruling was made earlier: we must not make reference to anybody’s Christian name or surname if they are current, serving Members. The hon. Lady is incredibly intelligent and I am sure she will find another way of making the point that she wishes to make.

Sarah Olney: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise.

For millions of families and pensioners facing soaring mortgage and rent payments, skyrocketing energy bills and eye-watering food prices, the proposals announced by the Chancellor last week will barely touch the sides: no real help with the cost of living; no plan for economic growth; no real support for our NHS and public services; and no end to this Conservative barrage of stealth taxes. Is this really the best the Government have to offer? Thanks to this Government, the British public have endured the biggest fall in living standards since the 1950s, and more and more people across the country, including in the Chancellor’s constituency, are rightly saying that enough is enough. Instead of more empty promises, what they want is a general election as soon as possible, to get this tired Government out of Downing Street and get our country back on track.

In a veiled attempt to deceive the British public, the Chancellor seems desperate to convince people that he is cutting taxes. However, over this year and next, someone on average earnings will still be £383 worse off due to the Government’s freeze on the tax-free personal allowance. On top of that, they are already enduring higher energy bills, food costs, and rent and mortgage payments, all thanks to this Conservative Government. Meanwhile, the Government have left our public services stretched to breaking point. The Liberal Democrats have been calling on the Chancellor to end this crisis, particularly in our NHS, which is on its knees.

On doorsteps across the country, people tell us time and again how they cannot get a GP appointment, an ambulance on time, or see an NHS dentist. This is clear in places such as Molesey and Thames Ditton, where people are increasingly concerned that they are unable to see a doctor, and with GPs saying they have been left in the lurch by the Government. Despite the hard work of local doctors, the situation in Surrey has become dire after the Government slashed funding for GPs in real-terms by £9.2 million. That is also putting a huge strain on local hospitals, including St Peter’s Hospital in Chertsey, and Kingston Hospital in my constituency, which are paying the price for this Conservative Government’s failure properly to fund our health service.

The crisis facing our hospitals is also being felt in south London, where St Helier Hospital has been left to crumble, with no sign of the investment promised by the Government. A&E and maternity services are now at risk of closure, which could see up to 50,000 residents displaced for healthcare should further funding not be given. The situation in our health service is so bad that it is now hurting our economy, with more than 2.8 million people unable to work due to a long-term health condition.

The increase in economic inactivity since the start of this Parliament is estimated to have cost the taxpayer around £3 billion this year alone, and all because this Conservative Government have failed to fund our NHS and social care properly. Instead of properly addressing the crisis, the Chancellor merely plugged a hole that he had blown in the NHS budget in the first place. That is why the Liberal Democrats have called on the Government to deliver serious investment for our NHS, recruit more GPs, fix our cancer services, bring down waiting lists, and help people get the quality care they so desperately need.

I was, however, glad that the Government made positive steps on the issue of child benefit—something of great importance to my constituents in Richmond Park. The raising of the threshold at which child benefit can be accessed is welcomed by the Liberal Democrats, as is the proposed consultation on introducing a household-based system to determine eligibility, rather than basing it on individual incomes. I pay tribute to the work of my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue and introduced a Bill on that subject a couple of weeks ago. I encourage the Government to go further to review how the high-income child benefit charge works, to ensure that hard-working families do not continue to incur excessive fines through no fault of their own.

I was also glad that the Chancellor listened to the concerns of the theatre industry, particularly those of the Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre, regarding theatre tax relief. Current higher rates of theatre tax

relief have played a pivotal role in enabling UK theatre to be world-leading and innovative, which will enable bigger, bolder programming that helps nurture talent pipelines and reach more audiences. I now urge the Government to keep working with our creative industries, both in theatre and in other sectors, to help enable them to grow and continue to display the outstanding talent that we have in the UK.

Liberal Democrats welcome some measures in the Budget, but it simply does not go far enough. The Chancellor could have stood up last week, proposed a fair deal for the British people and taken steps to get our economy growing again. Instead, he gave us more of the same: another underwhelming set of announcements from this Conservative Government, who are out of touch, out of ideas and nearly out of time. He could have cancelled this unfair stealth tax and raised the tax-free personal allowance; he could have reversed tax cuts for the big banks and put in place a proper windfall tax on fossil fuel giants to help fund our public services; and he could have presented a serious strategy to stimulate economic growth by reforming business rates and developing an industrial strategy, as was done by the Liberal Democrats in government. Instead, he chose to appease his Back Benchers in a desperate attempt to save his party and maybe even his own seat.

It is clear that the British public will not be fooled by the Chancellor's deception. Right across the country, voters are sick and tired of this Conservative Government, and are ready to vote for change at the next general election.

4.40 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I was a teenager when the Conservative party came to power. As that Government took office, they told us that they had to cut funding for public services, blaming "benefit cheats" and "welfare scroungers", but they reassured us: "We're all in it together", they said. Of course, that is not how it turned out, as those paying attention at the time knew it would not. Fourteen years of Tory Governments and austerity have decimated our communities. Public services have been cut to the bone. Schools and hospitals are crumbling—often literally. Youth centres, women's shelters and libraries have closed in their thousands. Local councils have lost billions in Government cuts, and dozens are now on the brink of bankruptcy.

Workers' wages are lower than they were in 2008, and living standards are set to face the worst decline since the second world war; nurses are using food banks; teachers and doctors are leaving the profession they love in droves; the social security system has been gutted, and the number of children living in poverty is up 600,000 since the Tories came to power; and, while rents have rocketed, the number of people sleeping on the streets has increased by 120%.

Austerity was a political choice and we were never "all in it together". Since 2010, the wealth of the richest has rocketed. In the last decade, UK billionaires have seen their wealth go up threefold. Fossil fuel giants have never had it so good. While the super-rich amass ever greater fortunes, people in my constituency are struggling. More than one in three children growing up in Coventry South are in poverty, with more than 3,000 affected by the cruel two-child benefit limit. The Central England Law Centre, which is based in my constituency, and Unite the Union warn that they are seeing increasing

levels of conditionality being placed on people, including parents with young children and people with health problems. Over £1 billion has been cut from Coventry Council's budget, with cuts filtering down and impacting services.

In particular, I want to highlight the impact on Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre—the only specialist sexual violence support service in Coventry—which has provided an invaluable service to Coventrians for more than 40 years. This year, strained budgets have meant that the council plans to end funding for the service, forcing the centre to close its waiting list, leaving survivors of sexual violence—overwhelmingly women—unable to access the support they need. That is just one example of the consequences of Tory cuts to local government. With this Budget, those cuts are set to get worse, because once the Government's commitments to other areas are factored in, it entails yet more austerity. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, this Budget means cuts worth £20 billion a year by 2028—again cutting local government, justice and Home Office budgets.

It is no surprise who benefits the most from the giveaways in this Budget: the national insurance change benefits the richest households 12 times more than it benefits the poorest, while cutting capital gains tax will help those with huge property portfolios but will do absolutely nothing for the parents in my constituency choosing between heating and eating.

Morally, politically and electorally, this should be the Government's last Budget. The inheritance for the next Government will indeed be dire, but we should learn from the past and rise to the challenge. In 1945, when Labour came to power from the rubble of war, we built the NHS, we built the welfare state, and we built millions of council homes. We redistributed wealth and power and transformed our country for the better. That should be the lesson for the future: making the super-rich pay their fair share, investing in our communities and building the green infrastructure for the future. We have done it before. We must do it again.

4.44 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I will start by talking about housing, because it is the issue that I receive the largest amount of correspondence on. In 2019, the Conservative Government committed to build 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. We are now well into 2024 and the Government do not look anywhere near reaching the target, nor does the Budget contain measures to improve progress in that regard. In Stockport borough, Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors voted against participation in the Greater Manchester spatial framework in 2020, depriving Stockport council of funds and co-ordinated support to build more houses. Now, a Liberal Democrat-controlled council is building far fewer homes than are needed, and progress towards a local plan for housing has been painfully slow.

In January this year, the waiting list for social housing in Stockport borough was 5,995 households. Sadly, as of this week, the figure stands at a staggering 6,400 households. In Stockport, 2,300 households filed applications for homelessness assistance in 2022-23: a 22% rise on the previous year. In November last year, 137 households were in temporary accommodation, with 29 families in hotels. The council's forecasted spend on temporary housing is due to top £500,000 this financial year.

[Navendu Mishra]

I am also concerned by the increase in buy-to-rent developments in Stockport, which are where a wealthy institutional investor will buy the entire property—often an apartment block—with the properties only available to rent rather than to buy. I have tabled a number of written parliamentary questions on the matter due to the impact that such developments have on increasing average rental rates in the area and the negative impact they sometimes have on our community fabric. I will continue to press on that, because I do not think that the Government have a grip on the housing situation. As I said, I continue to receive large amounts of correspondence from constituents struggling with housing issues on a daily basis. The harsh reality is that the Conservative Government have failed the people of Stockport and those across England when it comes to comes to housing.

I also want to talk about cuts to local schools in my constituency. Data released recently by the National Education Union showed that the Government's funding decisions have resulted in 70% of maintained schools in England facing real-terms cuts since 2010. That includes 66% of maintained primary schools and 88% of maintained secondary schools. In my constituency, 84% of schools have less funding in real terms than they did in 2010 due to Government cuts. That equates to a loss in per-pupil funding of £392 and a total change in school spending power of £3.2 million for all the children in my constituency. The worst affected primary in my constituency, Bridge Hall Primary School, has suffered a loss in real-terms per pupil funding of £1,752 and a loss in overall spending power of almost £340,000. The worst impacted secondary school, Stockport Academy, has seen a loss in real-terms per pupil funding of £1,528 and a change in its overall spending power of almost £1.5 million. After 14 years of cuts, an extra £12.2 billion is needed to restore school spending power to 2010 levels, repair crumbling school buildings and tackle the SEND crisis that our children are facing.

I also want to mention the rise in prescription charges and the impact that has, often on low-income people and deprived communities. The prescription charge exemption list is outdated and unfair and does not reflect the reality of many people living with long-term medical conditions. The Prescription Charges Coalition is calling on the UK Government to review that outdated exemption list, with support from the Health and Social Care Committee to achieve that change. While the extension of the household support fund is welcome, 80% of those surveyed by Parkinson's UK in 2023 did not even know it existed. What steps are the Government taking to inform those who need it most and to ensure that people with such conditions have that support?

Finally, may I mention the good work of the Campaign for Real Ale in supporting local pubs? I have a fantastic range of pubs, hospitality businesses and brewing institutions in my constituency, but sadly we have lost 25% of the pubs in my constituency since 2010. As I am sure you are aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, our pubs make up a big part of our community fabric, and when a pub closes the implications are much wider than just the range of establishments available. The Government have sadly failed to deliver the long-term change needed to the business rates system that unfairly penalises bricks-and-mortar businesses such as pubs.

I have tabled a number of written and oral questions on this issue since my election in 2019, but sadly I do not see any change in Government policy. We have an award-winning distillery in my constituency: Stockport Gin. I recommend you try it, Mr Deputy Speaker; it will soon be stocked in the Strangers Bar. Robinsons of Stockport, an iconic brewery business going back to the 1940s, and others have been campaigning for reform to the business rates system. I hope that the Government will pay attention, because losing valuable institutions like our long-standing pubs is a loss to the community and the nation. I will end it there. Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I look forward to you buying me a pint—of anything, quite frankly.

4.50 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The communities of West Ham needed hope from this Budget, but it has delivered absolutely nothing but continued despair. The Government cannot grapple with the dire state of the economy, public services or housing, nor can they understand the depth of poverty that our people are living in. This Government are not capable of acknowledging the real need for change. Perhaps if they understood just a little, they might ask who is responsible, and they would have to reflect on their last 14 years.

Let me talk about West Ham and the change desperately needed there. Newham has the highest rate of homelessness in the country. According to Government statistics, one in every 20 Newham families are trapped in overcrowded, mouldy, insecure temporary housing. Nationally, homelessness in temporary accommodation is up 10% in a single year. People sleeping rough on our streets—the absolute worst of homelessness—is up 27% in just one year.

What about the kids whose lives are blighted by temporary accommodation? They lose their home every six months and have to move school. They have nowhere to do their homework and have to travel miles on buses because they want to keep the one stable thing in their life: their school place. That is up by 12% in a single year. In Newham alone, 8,596 children are without a safe and secure home. Temporary accommodation costs are rocketing for Newham Council and are set to increase by a whopping £17.5 million in the coming year because the council has the growing pressure of accommodating 30 to 40 new homeless families every single month. Long-term council assets are having to be sold to pay temporary accommodation bills. That is utterly unsustainable.

This Government refuse to face reality. The council services that my constituents rely on day to day, from street cleaning to libraries and public safety, are being degraded because this Government think it is right for the cost of spiralling homelessness to fall on my local residents. It ain't just a local problem. It is caused by decades of Government failure to invest in social homes and to tackle poverty. Our councils are forced to sell off social homes and then are massively constrained on what they can do with the meagre receipts that they get back.

How did the Budget respond to this worsening crisis? It did so by ending the scheme that enabled councils to do the right thing and use more receipts from the sale of

social homes to build replacements. At a stroke, this Government have cut £200 million from the funding for new social homes in this country, at a time when those homes are needed more desperately than ever. The horrifying scale of the housing crisis has grown ever larger, but the Budget shows, yet again, that the Government simply do not care. They are more interested in salting the earth after 14 years of destruction than they are in any kind of solution.

I have focused on homelessness today, but, as we know, the problems our communities face are far wider, and are being neglected or ignored by this Budget. Across the board, my constituents are paying higher taxes and getting worse and worse public services in return. Almost half of patients needing treatment locally are waiting more than 18 weeks, and 6% are waiting more than a year.

The Government have not even managed to repair the damage caused by the wrecking ball that was the former Prime Minister: mortgages are still through the roof; prices in the shops are still rising; and people simply cannot afford to pay their bills. The OBR expects this to be the only Parliament on record in which living standards fall over the full five years. That should be truly shocking, but our collective expectations of the Government have fallen so low that it is normal. We desperately need real change for Newham and for our country. The Budget does nothing to offer that change. Our one solitary hope is that it will prove a bitterly fitting end to 14 years of Tory failure, division and decline.

4.56 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This Budget has been delivered as we mark nearly 14 years of Conservative economic failure. The Institute for Fiscal Studies' headline is:

"This will be the biggest tax-raising parliament on record".

So many individuals and families across our country are suffering as a result. They are suffering from continually rising food prices, and increases in the cost of general household bills, insurance, general services, private rents and mortgage payments. People are also having to wait longer for public service appointments.

The OBR has stated this will be the worst Parliament on record for living standards, and that is shameful. Furthermore, the UK's productivity levels are concerning. A lack of productivity can make it harder to grow the economy and that has severe consequences. End Child Poverty has estimated that more than 8,000 children are experiencing poverty in Lewisham East, and that is coupled with a homelessness and housing crisis. According to Shelter, more than 7,000 people across Lewisham are homeless and nearly 4,000 children are living in temporary accommodation. A child's background and upbringing have a strong influence on their future achievements, but now many who live in the private rented sector are having their health impacted by the poor condition of their homes. To see that, we need only look at the tragic case of Awaab Ishak, who died aged two from a respiratory condition caused by exposure to mould at his home. A Citizens Advice report last year found that 1.6 million children live in privately rented homes with damp, mould or excessive cold.

Families are also finding it harder to provide for themselves. Families should not have to use food banks; that should not be part of our society, but it is on the increase. Although we have amazing organisations

locally and others such as the Trussell Trust, we see that the demand is increasing—we see that at the Lewisham food bank, but it should not be the case.

In addition, the Government are starving local authorities of resources, making it harder for them to help people, despite their trying their best. Since 2010, the Government have taken millions of pounds out of Lewisham Council's budget, and I know that it is not just my local authority's budget that is experiencing that. Many local authorities have found themselves on their knees and have had to be bailed out by the Government. I am glad that my local Labour party does a monthly food collection to help young people to access warm and nutritious food, but that alone will not solve the cost of living crisis and it will not end the recession. That is why I am pleased that Labour, if elected, will provide free breakfast clubs in every primary school. That will help to drive up attendance and standards so that young people can work towards their goals and ambitions. Additionally, Labour has a long-term plan to grow our economy and improve productivity to deliver more jobs, more investment and more money in people's pockets. It will not be an easy or quick task.

The Budget was the Chancellor's last attempt to show that the Conservatives can be trusted with the economy, but nothing could be further from the truth. The only thing the Budget shows is that we need a general election.

5 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): This Tory Government want to cut the benefits bill to fund tax cuts. They are going to target those who are economically inactive, which includes a large percentage of disabled people, causing them extreme fear and distress. Studies at Lancaster University show that when disabled people are forced into work, they generally gravitate towards the gig economy for flexibility. They are then poorly paid and unable to qualify even for derisory statutory sick pay. That forces them back into inadequate but better paid sickness benefits. Job coaches with minimal training are not the best people to assess work capability. They may be well meaning or they may be incentivised to get people into work, whether it is suitable or not. That is a fear I hear over and over again from disabled people and organisations.

The spring Budget is totally tone deaf and signals yet more Westminster austerity for public services that are already on the brink. Our public services simply cannot endure austerity 2.0. It is deeply concerning that the Tories and Labour seem indistinguishable from one another: Labour is using the same economic tropes that the Conservatives used back in 2010 to justify their damaging austerity programme. Experts also say that the tougher sanctions regime that was introduced has backfired, with more people receiving sickness and disability benefits as a result.

The OBR's economic outlook report states that under current plans there will be a reduction in money spent per person on frontline services that disabled people are utterly reliant upon. Nothing the Chancellor announced last week can mitigate the damage caused by Westminster austerity, the infamous Tory mini-budget and Brexit, which has caused irreparable damage to the UK's economy that both the Government and Labour refuse to acknowledge. A coalition of disabled people's organisations, the Disability Poverty Campaign Group, announced

[Marion Fellows]

that it was deeply concerned, and even angered, by the spring Budget—anger is an understandable emotion emanating from the disabled community, as they have been consistently failed. Their relentless calls for additional targeted support since the beginning of the cost of living crisis have been ignored. They are also having doubts about what will happen under a change of Government.

Carers were left similarly disappointed. Helen Walker, the CEO of Carers UK, said:

“A staggering 600 people a day are giving up work to care, many as a result of the lack of social care. The lack of long-term sustainable funding for social care is heaping ever more pressure onto families. It’s simply unacceptable. As well as being financially disastrous for families, employers end up shouldering extra cost”. All the while, levels of poverty have increased, and financial hardship and debt have risen to record levels. The six-month grace period for the household support fund is not enough. It must be made permanent and therefore give Barnett consequential to the devolved Governments across the UK. In last year’s spring Budget, the Government reiterated their promise for an energy social tariff. Aye, well, we are still waiting.

The implementation of a social energy tariff would lift tens of thousands of financially and physically vulnerable people out of poverty, giving some relief to the many disabled people who need energy-intensive equipment to manage their conditions. National Energy Action has shown the way towards its affordability, while the Data Communications Company has pointed out that much of the existing smart meter infrastructure could be used alongside DWP data to target the tariff at those most in need. It beggars belief that the Budget has ignored that, and I hope that my private Member’s Bill, the Social Energy Tariff Bill, will keep it at the forefront of the Government’s mind. I am not giving up on this fight.

How can the Government expect to boost growth and productivity when living standards drop and millions of householders across the country cannot heat their homes or feed themselves? The Chancellor had an opportunity to support households, businesses and the vital public sector, but he did not take it. He failed entirely to help the most vulnerable, and to encourage growth and therefore prosperity for those who need it most. In Scotland we treat people with disabilities with dignity, fairness and respect, which are totally lacking under the DWP regime. Westminster is not working for Scotland under the Tories, and it will not work for Scotland under a Tory-like Labour Government either. Scotland’s values are not reflected in Westminster, and 50% of its population agree with me that it is time for independence.

5.6 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Let me associate myself with what my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for West Ham (Ms Brown) said about the scale of the hardships being faced by so many residents of the London boroughs that all three of us represent.

In his Budget speech, the Chancellor said that the Government would

“continue to explore how savers could be allowed to take their pension pots with them when they change job.”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 843.]

I am pleased that the Economic Secretary is present, because I was relieved that the Chancellor did not commit himself to pursuing that particular course at this stage. The proposal is driven by the laudable aim of consolidating pension schemes to gather resources to invest in the economy, which is an important part of tackling the productivity challenge of which we have spoken today. However, many of the responses to the Government’s consultation on it opposed the particular model on which the Chancellor had consulted—the “lifetime pension pot” model—because it would substantially increase costs and complexity for employers, whose support in pension provision has been important to the progress that has been made. At the very least, adopting this model would have the damaging effect of ending the cross-party consensus on pensions policy that has been so important to the progress of auto-enrolment over the last 20 years.

A major trade body, the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association, said that there was “no evidence” that the lifetime provider model would help savers, but that it had

“the potential to significantly undermine the successes of AE”.

It warned of a

“sharp increase in marketing and product costs which will ultimately be borne by savers.”

It also suggested alternative ways in which to tackle lost and small pots, and to deliver the consolidation that is, undoubtedly, very important. The Association of British Insurers said that the model would “re-engineer auto-enrolment”, and warned that

“We must not lose sight of the great success of automatic enrolment, while acknowledging that there are key reforms already underway...that need to be completed.”

The TUC described the proposal as a “gimmick” and a “dangerous distraction”, likely to

“lead to higher charges and lower retirement incomes for most workers, with the lowest paid the greatest at risk of getting ripped off.”

Lane Clark & Peacock, where the former Pensions Minister Steve Webb now works, said that the model was “fundamentally flawed”. I was therefore relieved that the Chancellor was not rushing ahead with the proposal.

I wish we had seen more progress elsewhere. The Work and Pensions Committee has reported a widespread consensus in favour of the 2017 auto-enrolment review recommendations. The legislation received Royal Assent last September, but we now need a consultation on how it will be implemented and when. If the Minister is able to tell us when that is likely to happen, it would be of great interest. We also highlighted the

“consensus that many people need to increase their pension contributions if they are to have an adequate income in retirement.”

We said:

“The middle of a cost of living crisis is not the time to ask people to pay more into their pension. However, if they are to do so in the future”—

as they need to—

“work to prepare the ground needs to start now to build consensus”

on the need for the change that must come. It would be good to hear from the Government about when they will get on and move auto-enrolment to the next stage.

I, like other Members who have spoken in the debate, welcome the Chancellor's extension to the household support fund. It has been crucial in supporting families through the cost of living crisis and in enabling local councils to reach those who most need help, but as we heard from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), there is a strong case not just for extending the fund for six months but making it permanent.

Local welfare assistance replaced the old social fund in 2014. Money was transferred to local authority budgets, but it has increasingly been squeezed out in subsequent cuts. If the household support fund does end in September, a significant number of councils will end local welfare assistance altogether in their areas. The Government support local provision, but they need to fund it as well, and one important advantage of the household support fund is that a large number of councils have been able to support families with no recourse to public funds when other help is not available to them at all. I very much hope that the campaign to make the household support fund permanent will be accepted by the Government.

5.11 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Over the last 14 years, the Conservatives have clearly failed to act for the common good. Budgets are about choices, and they have consistently made the wrong ones.

We have the highest tax-raising Parliament since world war two. The Resolution Foundation says that the tax increases since 2019 will cost £3,900 per household, and that incomes will be lower at the next general election than in 2019. The year 2022-23 saw the biggest drop in year-on-year living standards since the Office for National Statistics began its work in the 1950s. Taxes are going up, not down, despite the protestations of the Tories. I have heard no apology for the fact that only a third of the Tories' tax cuts in this Budget are funded by identified tax cuts elsewhere, with the majority coming from borrowing. We have heard nothing from the Conservative party about that fact. If the Minister wants to dispute it, perhaps he will take it up with the Resolution Foundation.

The Tories also made the wrong choice with their announcement that it is their desire to prioritise cutting national insurance and abolishing it completely. Given the state of our public services, that leaves them having to find £40 billion, which, in the absence of knowing how it will be funded, the Institute for Fiscal Studies described as a prospect not worth the paper it was written on. We still have the Conservatives' irresponsible recklessness: the "Tory efficiency" in public services that they talk about is for the birds. How will we find those sorts of cuts to our crumbling public services? It is a return to the austerity that we had between 2010 and 2015, which brought our services to their current state. The Resolution Foundation says:

"The idea that such cuts can be delivered in the face of already faltering public services is a fiscal fiction."

How did we get to this state? Nothing in our public services is better today than it was in 2010. We are a better country than the one the Tories have brought us to being.

Another choice that the Tories are making is to put up council tax. My council tax has gone up over 50% since 2010, and the fees and charges that are being imposed on local people are stealth taxes forced on them by the Government because they have starved local authorities of resources.

Budgets are about choices, including in education. Every school in my constituency has lower per-pupil funding than it had in 2010. My borough has had £33 million lower funding overall since 2010, which is £867 per pupil. These are the amounts needed to restore funding to 2010 levels. Why are the headteachers and governors I speak to in my constituency worrying about costs when we hear from the Government that they have never had it so good? It is about choice, and the Government have consistently made the wrong choices.

Before I finish, I want to make reference to the contaminated blood scandal. Justice for those infected and affected has been delayed unacceptably by the Government. Sir Brian Langstaff made it quite clear how compensation could be paid, and he published the details in April last year. We are nearly a year on, and we are no closer to those people being paid compensation. In fact, the Government are putting steps in place to delay compensation to beyond the general election. The only way these people will get justice is if there is a Labour Government, and the sooner the Prime Minister calls that election, the better for them and the better for the country. We need a Government who will make decisions in the common good and ensure that everyone benefits from the growth that we need in our economy. We are certainly not going to get it from the Conservatives.

5.16 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I want to use my remarks today to focus on the west midlands, my home. We are the birthplace of the first industrial revolution and the co-operative movement. We are the home of Britain's second city, Cadbury's chocolate and J. R. R. Tolkien. We are the inventors of the pacemaker, the balti and the world's leading brain cancer drug. It is where, in the '50s, my family and thousands like them travelled halfway across the world to make our home. We are a diverse, young and dynamic region. The west midlands has immense potential, but for the past 14 years we have been let down.

The headline of the Budget last week was that this would be the first Parliament in modern history where living standards have fallen. That is the grim culmination of 14 years of economic mismanagement under this Government, with taxes rising, living standards falling, growth stalling and empty promises. The Prime Minister may write off his recession as a technicality, but working people in the west midlands know better. They feel worse off because they are worse off. As the OBR revealed last week, GDP per person is set to shrink this year, having shrunk last year too.

This is also the longest period of no growth since records began in the 1950s. According to the Centre for Cities, since 2010 the average person in the west midlands is £4,320 poorer than if the economy had grown at the same rate as it did under Labour. In Stoke-on-Trent, that means that the average person is £7,360 worse off under the Tories, and in Coventry the average person is nearly £9,000 worse off. That is this Government's legacy, and giving people £5 back with one hand after taking £10 with the other is not going to fool anyone.

At the heart of the problems facing our broken economy is Britain's productivity crisis. Increasing productivity is critical for our success as a nation, for growth and for living standards, but our productivity levels are now lower than at any time since the industrial

[Preet Kaur Gill]

revolution. Our shadow Chancellor knows that productivity is a key driver of higher wages, and that is partly why we have made growth and productivity the first mission of the next Labour Government. Under Labour, London and the south-east will not be the only engines of growth. We will spread good jobs and productivity growth to every part of the country to make everyone better off. Yet there was no proper plan for growth in the Budget last week. The forecasts reveal that the growth we might expect in the next five years depends largely on the Chancellor having revised up net migration by 350,000.

As the Productivity Institute has shown, low investment, regional inequality and a lack of long-term, joined-up government are key drivers of the Tory low productivity and low growth doom loop. But where was the plan to address that in the Budget last week? Where is the long-term mission to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7, with good jobs and productivity growth in all parts of the country? Where is the industrial strategy to guide the partnership between Government and business to transform challenge into opportunity? And where is the joined-up skills strategy to bring together businesses, training providers and unions to meet the jobs market of tomorrow?

The chaos of the past few years has damaged business confidence and investment. Short-termism has been a hallmark of this Government, who have lurched from crisis to crisis. We know that businesses cannot operate like that, which is why Labour has set out a long-term industrial strategy.

The west midlands should be at the cutting edge of these frontiers. I recently visited the precision health technologies accelerator at Birmingham's life sciences campus, bringing together the University of Birmingham, business and the NHS to create more than 10,000 jobs for our region. There is a revolution taking place in medical science, technology and data, and it has the potential to transform our healthcare. We should be at its forefront but, under this Government, Britain's life sciences sector declined from second to ninth in the global life sciences league table for inward foreign direct capital investment in 2022—that is a £900 million drop. The UK's share of global pharmaceutical research and development halved between 2012 and 2020.

At a stroke, the Prime Minister's decision to attack Britain's net zero targets trashed Britain's reputation as a place to invest in developing the clean energy of tomorrow. The outcry from industry shows how self-defeating this was.

Far from scaling back our ambition, Labour will increase it. We will deliver a cheaper zero-carbon electricity system by 2030 through our green prosperity plan. We will bring much-needed investment into the west midlands, worth hundreds of millions of pounds, through our battery power fund. There will be a gigafactory in the west midlands and investment in green hydrogen manufacturing to make the clean power of the future. We will reform our planning system and create jobs for construction workers, so that we can upgrade our region's old, draughty housing stock. And there will be more than a thousand local power projects through our local power plan.

The reality is that people in the west midlands need change. Change from a Government who have left them thousands of pounds worse off, who have brought public services to their knees and who have left the economy in tatters. We are in a make or break decade for our economy, and the choice at the next election will be clear: five more years of the same failed approach or a decade of national renewal with Labour—good jobs in every part of the country, a world-leading green investment agenda and a life sciences sector that will create the jobs and technologies of tomorrow. Only Labour will give the west midlands its future back.

5.22 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It has been my privilege to represent Dulwich and West Norwood for almost nine years. Prior to my election to this place in 2015, I had served since 2010 as a local ward councillor in the constituency, having been elected on the same day that the coalition Government came to power.

For my entire time as an elected representative so far, I have seen Conservative-led Governments making my constituents poorer, and undermining and diminishing the services on which they rely. As a newly elected councillor in 2010, I remember how shocked we were to receive the local government budget settlement that stripped millions from the council's budget. We worked through it creatively and prioritised the services that mattered most to our residents. We protected libraries, ensured the streets remained clean and continued delivering services for vulnerable children and adults.

We had no idea just how much more was to come. Both the local authorities that serve my constituents have lost more than 60% of their central Government funding. Those losses are in no way adequately replaced by the increases in council tax—a regressive tax that takes proportionately more from residents on lower incomes—that the Government forced our councils to make.

The single biggest practical issue affecting my constituents is housing. I have far too many constituents living in temporary or overcrowded accommodation, unable to access the genuinely affordable homes they need, or in accommodation that has damp and mould, with profound implications for their health.

This Government's political decisions have deepened the housing crisis year on year for more than a decade. The coalition Government's decision to slash two thirds from the budget for building new social homes stymied the development of exactly those homes that make the biggest impact on the housing crisis. Their decision to impose unfunded restrictions on social rents has taken £1 billion from the budget of Southwark Council alone over 30 years, funding that would have been spent on repairs, maintenance and delivering new council homes.

The decision to change the definition of an affordable home—making a mockery of the term “affordable”, because 80% of market rent in London is nowhere near affordable for residents on average incomes, still less so for those on the lowest incomes—meant that far too many of the homes that have been built in London on this Government's watch have made no impact at all on those who are suffering the worst effects of the housing crisis. The Government's failure to ban section 21 evictions, even though they had promised to do so, leaves thousands of my constituents at the mercy of their private landlords

and without any security at all. The Conservatives' political decisions on housing are unconscionable. They are also contributing to the pressures on other areas of our public services.

The Government want to talk about productivity, so let me set out the impact of the housing crisis on productivity. GPs working in my constituency tell me about the mental and physical health impacts of the housing crisis. Hospital doctors tell me about the impact of poor housing on discharges. Youth workers tell me about the impact on the ability of young people to do their homework or to relax at home, and how that drives them out of their home to places where they are less safe. Social workers speak about the intolerable pressures on families created by the housing situation, and how hard that makes it for some parents to care for their children safely. Across the country, people are looking at their own lives, at the state of their town centres and neighbourhoods, and at their ability to access the services they need. It is as plain as day that after 14 years of Conservative-led government, nothing is better than it was in 2010.

I turned to the Budget in search of any sign that the Government understand just how bad things are—the terrible state of things on their watch—but there was just one brief announcement on housing: £20 million for community-led housing. There is nothing wrong with community-led housing, but that public investment amounts to less than £140,000 for every housing authority in England, or less than £16 for every household on the housing waiting list. It is not a plan to solve the most pervasive and pernicious crisis in housing since the second world war. It does not touch the sides. It simply reveals how out of touch the Conservatives are with the day-to-day reality of life for millions of people across our country.

My constituents have had enough of their lives getting worse under the Conservatives. They have had enough of a Government who do not understand their lives and have no ambition for our communities. It is time for them to step aside and make way for a Labour Government who can begin the work of rebuilding the appalling damage that has been done.

5.27 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The speeches delivered from the Government Benches today have been a metaphor for this Government: they are out of ideas, out of time and out of touch. That says it all. Anyone listening to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury would have thought that everything in the country was rosy and we were in some sort of sunlit uplands. The experiences of my constituents in Cardiff South and Penarth are anything but rosy. Individual constituents who come to my surgeries are struggling to make ends meet because of sharp increases in their mortgages or rent, stagnant or declining wages, and the high price of food, fuel and the everyday goods and services they need.

Those struggles are the reason we see such amazing community responses. I spent last Friday at Splott Community Volunteers in my constituency, who provide warm hubs and a series of other advice and support services. Demand for those services is through the roof because of the experiences people are having in the economy and in society. I also visited the Salvation Army last Friday, which is doing fantastic work on

housing and homelessness in my constituency. Why are people finding themselves homeless or in a housing crisis? Because of the shambolic record of 14 years of this Conservative Government.

I recently met businesses of all shapes and sizes in Grangetown, including the small and medium-sized enterprises that are the lifeblood of our economy. They told me that they want to see certainty, leadership and a solid environment for investment, but they have had exactly the opposite over the past 14 years. We have seen chaos and a revolving door of Ministers. Businesses have not had the confidence to make the investments they want to make to generate jobs and opportunities in our communities. They are coping with high inflation, which means their cost base has gone up substantially, so their ability to grow and generate more jobs and opportunities is limited.

What have we seen? We have seen debt up, taxes up, interest rates up and inflation up, yet we have seen the economy stagnating and now in recession. That is on top of the austerity and cuts in our public services and, indeed, to Wales, leaving us unable to invest what we want in our NHS, our education and our police, which has had a huge impact on the ability of the police to deal with antisocial behaviour and crime. Thanks to the Welsh Government, we have seen investment in police community support officers, in new schools and in new health facilities, but think of how much more we could do if we had a Labour Government in Westminster working with a Labour Government in Wales and our Labour councils making a difference.

The Chancellor's latest Budget simply lifted the lid on 14 years of Tory economic failure. When we lifted that lid, there was no rabbit, there was no hope. Many of us were left asking, "Is that it? Is that all they have to offer?" Again, the Conservative Benches are a reflection of that today. Instead, we saw more unfunded tax cuts—we all know where that got us last time. We have heard today of the £46 billion-worth of unfunded national insurance cuts, and also of the total chaos in the Government's messaging about when those would come in—another stark reflection of where we are. Yet again, working people are left to pay the price of an underperforming Britain, with a high-tax, low-growth economy. Let us consider just how different things could be.

I am very clear about what Cardiff South and Penarth needs from what my constituents tell me. We need investment in our green transition. Places such as Sully and Dinas Powys have already seen the impact of flooding and climate change. A response is needed to that not only locally, but nationally and internationally. That is exactly why I am proud of the Labour plan to invest in our green transition, in green steel, in renewables, in nuclear, and of course in the high technology and green solutions that are being generated by our fantastic higher education sector. I am very proud of our university in Cardiff, which is doing fantastic work on this and putting some of those green ideas into action for our country.

I want to see support for our creative industries. We have seen huge investment by the BBC and other film and TV production firms locally, such as Netflix, but in other areas we are seeing that market contracting, which is having a big knock-on effect on smaller creatives and those who are commissioned to work on those bigger productions, so we need to invest in our creative economy.

[Stephen Doughty]

Thirdly, we need to see crucial infrastructure investment. I have argued time and again for investment in the south Wales main line. We are seeing a really bad performance on the Great Western Railway. We all want to see St Mellons Parkway station built on the edge of Cardiff—my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), is nodding in agreement—but we will need to invest in those relief lines and that critical infrastructure to make sure that we can deliver growth through our infrastructure investments.

We need to see a proper reflection of Cardiff's status as a capital city in the funding for our police. I raised this issue recently with the Minister of State for Crime, Policing and Fire. It is good to know that he is now talking with our police and crime commissioner and chief constables about this issue. We need to see that investment to reflect the challenges that we face as a capital city.

Crucially, we need to see certainty for businesses to be able to invest. We have seen some great success stories recently: Rolls-Royce coming into invest and our legal and financial services sector in Cardiff doing very well, but we also need an industrial strategy, tax certainty and a climate of leadership and ambition for this country, which we simply have not seen from the Government or in this Budget.

5.33 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I wish to start my contribution with something of a personal anecdote. Just over nine years ago, in January 2015, an almighty storm struck the north of Scotland. At that time—before I joined you, Mr Deputy Speaker, in this place—I was living with my wife and my elderly mother, who, at 91, was in the last year of her life. She was bedridden, and had to be cared for, and I was her carer. In that storm, at 3 am, the electricity went out. That brought it home very forcefully to me what a predicament I was in. How did I boil the water for her hot water bottle? How did I heat the food to feed her? By the grace of God, I had an oil-fired stove, which meant that we could get by. If I had not had any form of heating, I would have been in deep trouble, as we did not get power for another two days.

I share this anecdote with the Chamber because it brought it home to me absolutely how fundamental the ability to keep ourselves warm is to life. I believe the British people have a deep sense of fairness, which we should be very proud of. It led to the national health service, free at the point of delivery, which was probably the greatest thing that Clement Attlee ever did. More than a century earlier, it led to the penny post, which meant that whether a letter or parcel was posted in Kinlochbervie in north-west Sutherland or in London, the cost was the same; it was about fairness.

I have said many times in this Chamber that the coldest village in the United Kingdom is Altnaharra, right in the middle of Sutherland. In 1995, the temperature dropped—unbelievably—to minus 27.2°C. Think how cold that is, and that was coupled with the fact that a lot of the houses are old and not well insulated, incomes are smaller and we pay an awful lot more than many other parts of the UK for our electricity. I believe we must address that fundamental unfairness.

During covid, we knew that keeping warm made recovery as speedy as possible. Good health is about having warmth. We can maximise the productivity of our population by ensuring they are healthy and kept warm. I will not lecture Conservative Front Benchers about that, because Altnaharra has been the coldest village for a very long time indeed. It was the coldest village under Conservative and Labour Governments and—dare I say it?—under Asquith's and Lloyd George's Liberal Governments, so the problem has been around for a very long time. My problem is that my constituents are losing out. I hear far too many stories of elderly people, like my mum, who have to make the invidious decision at this time of year, or in January, February or December, about whether to put the heating on, and that strikes me as a fundamental injustice.

Unlike the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), whose contribution I greatly enjoyed—like many in the Chamber, I will miss him, and I wish him a happy retirement—I intend to return to this place if I humanly can, depending on what the SNP decides to do; we will see about that. If I do return to this place, I give you warning, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I am not prepared to drop this issue. I will use whatever persuasive ability I have to get some assistance for those people.

Some say that people who live near wind farms should get a discount. I do not think that would work, because what about the people who do not live near wind farms? The problem is that once a wind farm is built, the energy comes almost for free—the wind is free—and that is what is so galling to my constituents. Anywhere they drive in Caithness and Sutherland, they see massive great wind farms, and yet they pay over the odds for the electricity, which comes from the wind farms, goes somewhere else and comes back with a big bill attached.

That is the end of my contribution. I give notice that I shall return to this issue at every possible opportunity if I am fortunate enough to return to this place.

5.38 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): At last week's Budget, the Chancellor stood at the Dispatch Box like a smiling, villainous fairy tale character holding out a shiny apple glistening with national insurance cuts, while all the while knowing that inside it was a deadly poison: the fact that we will all pay 10p more tax for every 5p we get back. The Chancellor is supposedly giving back, but people across the UK are suffering from the highest tax burden in 70 years, with the stealthy drip-feed of the poison of freezing tax thresholds.

The freezing of the basic threshold has brought 3.7 million more people into paying tax, and more taxpayers are squeezed by now having to pay the higher rate of tax, as more of their income is in that bracket, often because of a pay rise that has not even kept pace with inflation, so there is a double whammy of more tax and less purchasing power. The freezing of the tax thresholds affects many pensioners too. They do not need much of a workplace pension topping up their state pension before they are in that tax threshold country again. Of course, freezing the tax threshold hits those on the lowest income in particular.

And all this while we have had rampant inflation. Although inflation may now be calming down, prices are still rising, with higher food bills and higher energy

bills—the Government’s failure to roll out renewables more quickly has made that all the worse—and higher mortgages and rents.

This Government have also devolved economic woes, including through cuts to council tax budgets in England. The Welsh Government settlement is some £3 billion less than if it had grown with GDP since 2010, meaning that they have to pass on cuts to Welsh councils. Across the UK, people are being asked to pay higher council tax for fewer services. We have had the biggest fall in living standards in our history. People in Llanelli and across the UK are worse off under this Conservative Government.

This Conservative Government have been squeezing household incomes for 14 years. Back in 2011, the Tories increased VAT to 20%, putting up household bills. They have cut and cut and cut the benefits paid to the least well-off in society—many of whom are, of course, in work—leaving many without enough to live on. Back in 2011, the Government started using the retail prices index instead of the consumer prices index to calculate benefits, which worked out as a cut. Then, there were cuts to health and pregnancy grants, Sure Start maternity grants and the baby element of child tax credits, leaving the parents of newborn babies with less money to fend for them. Then, in 2013 we had the bedroom tax, which was a cut in housing benefit that had originally been calculated as what people needed simply to cover the cost of rent. By 2022, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that in eight out of 10 benefit changes between 2013 and 2022, unemployment benefit had lost value, either through freezes or increases that were worth less than inflation. Then along came rampant inflation. People are even poorer, and even more are now having to turn to food banks.

In all of that, we lost the child trust fund. Anyone turning 18 used to be able to claim money that had been put by for them by the state and their family. In 2011, however, the Tories cut it, meaning that 18-year-olds do not have that to look forward to. England lost the educational maintenance allowance as well, but in Wales we managed to keep it for the very poorest pupils.

We desperately need growth in the economy. This has been a complete Tory failure. At 22 Budgets, Tory Chancellors have promised growth, but they have failed. There have been seven consecutive quarters of falling GDP per capita and now officially we are in a recession. With cuts back in 2011, the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition choked off growth with swingeing austerity, and the incompetence continued with that disastrous mini-Budget in autumn 2022, leaving people facing years and years of increased mortgage payments. There has also been the failure to give business and industry the confidence they need to invest, including in renewables and to reform the energy market.

People in Llanelli and up and down the country are desperate for change and desperate for hope of a better life. That is why we need a Labour Government, who will slash energy bills for households and industry, invest in the new green technologies of the future, and invest £3 billion to ensure that we develop primary green steelmaking here in the UK. And the sooner, the better.

5.43 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): This is my first opportunity to respond to a Budget in this House and, like so many other milestones I reach in this place, I feel

like I am doing so while living through a form of parliamentary purgatory. We are trapped with a Government who forbid the public to remove them, who starve parliamentarians of meaningful legislation to scrutinise, and who have now put a Budget before us that is as impotent as it is self-aggrandising—hollow and inadequate, with no agenda and no real plan for growth.

Indeed, the only growth we have seen is in the list of this Government’s broken promises: improving living standards, broken; inflation returning to target, broken; increasing productivity, broken; growth, broken; levelling up the north, broken. Increasingly our country is broken, too, the victim of 14 years of Conservative negligence, of which this Budget is merely the latest sorry chapter.

What is most galling is the staggering dishonesty of the Budget’s central claim that working people will be better off as a result of its measures. It introduces a £9 billion tax cut based on implausible austerity, sandwiched between a £27 billion tax rise the year before and a £19 billion tax rise in the two years to come. For every 5p that this Budget gives back to families in Selby and Ainsty, the Government take away 10p as part of a tax burden that has risen to its highest level for 70 years. Selby families will be £870 worse off as they suffer through the Prime Minister’s recession, while inflation forces them to pay more for their weekly shop, using real wages that are below what they were in 2008.

This Budget is little more than an insult to the public’s intelligence—a prime instance of the Government’s offensively low expectation that working people will not realise the extent of their inadequacy to meet the challenges those people face. Central to the Budget’s failings is the absence of a real plan for growth. I am not sure how the Government still have not grasped this point after 14 years, but there can be no hope of sustained economic growth in this country without well-resourced public services. How can businesses grow if we do not modernise and expand our transport infrastructure? How can British workers be productive if they have to leave the workforce to care for parents or children? How can we level up our country with local government stripped to the bone? How can we have vibrant high streets when crime continues to blight our town centres? Well-funded public services are the bedrock of economic growth, yet this Chancellor intends to reduce real per capita spending for unprotected Departments by 13% between 2024-25 and 2028-29. That is £19 billion-worth of cuts, or a repeat of 71% of the austerity that we saw from the first austerity Parliament.

The Chancellor was in charge of our NHS during a portion of that Parliament, when the justification for hollowing out our welfare state was fixing the roof while the sun was shining. Minister, the sun is not shining now—in fact, it has not been shining for some time. Our public services are in desperate need of support, but this Government are too happy to continue putting critical services on the chopping block to aid their dogma to realise the danger they are causing. It is the same old Conservatives, putting party before country and ideology before reality, and making the British public suffer the consequences. That is the tragedy of this Budget: the missed opportunity to do what is right and achieve the growth we need. I am glad that the Chancellor finally woke up to the necessity of scrapping the non-dom status, but under Labour’s plans, that

[Keir Mather]

money would have gone into our NHS, creating more dental appointments and more capacity. Politics is about priorities, and the Chancellor has clearly decided that election giveaways based on fiscal fiction are the order of the day.

With all that being said—the Minister may like to hear this—there is one area of the Budget about which I am pleased: the announcement of the £105 million earmarked for the opening of new special educational needs and disabilities schools for children. That announcement is an opportunity to reiterate my plea for the Government to do everything possible to ensure the speedy delivery of the Selby district's SEND school, which has had Department for Education funding allocated since 2019, but for which building work has not even begun. Hopefully, that will go some way towards ending the scourge of young people in my constituency with additional needs having to travel in taxis for hours a day, to villages and towns as far away as Scarborough and Harrogate, just to get the learning and education they deserve.

Overall, we are left with a situation where our country has stalled, and a Budget that fails to grasp the economic opportunities of our time while doing nothing to heal the deep structural damage that lies beneath our broken economy. It is high time that the Conservative party lets the British public give their verdict on these 14 years of wasted potential, and I have no doubt that their decision will be for change.

5.48 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Cuts for Wales, cuts to services, cuts to pay and cuts to living standards, and absolutely no mention in the Budget of the most pervasive threat and greatest existential crisis facing every one of us—the climate crisis—all to fund giveaways to a few of the Government's friends at the top. There was absolutely nothing in this Budget for Cymru—for Wales. The Welsh Government, backed by the Senedd, called last week for greater fiscal flexibilities. They sought investment in coal tip safety and the allocation of the billions of pounds owed to us in consequential from HS2, but the Chancellor chose to ignore those requests.

I listened with some amazement to the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who was lauding the merits of the free market and capitalism. That could not be any further from the truth for my community, Cynon Valley, and for others across the south Wales valleys, whose history is one of extraction. This year marks the 40th commemoration of the miners' strike, which sounded the death knell for the industry, with the decimation of communities across south Wales and other coalfield communities. That is the legacy of neoliberalism and the capitalist state in the UK.

The Budget brought cuts to services, with Departments losing £20 billion in the coming years, which almost matches the cuts of the 2010 coalition. That means fewer youth clubs, fewer bus services and fewer bin collections, while local authorities are on their knees. Such cuts can only damage the fabric of society and risk further alienation of the public from politics. There were also more cuts to pay. This is the Tory low-pay

agenda. The public have seen well-paid Ministers restricting strike action to deal with the myth of wage-led inflation, and the Government continue to make late submissions to the public sector pay review bodies, despite people being unable to keep up with the cost of energy bills or food shops. This is shameful.

Who gains from the tax cuts? We saw £10 billion spent on cutting national insurance, when nearly half of the benefit of doing so goes to the richest fifth, but only 3% go to the poorest fifth. This is the Tory agenda to reward a few at the top while public services are disappearing and people's incomes are stagnating, including in Cynon Valley, where we have seen an exponential growth of food banks and food bank usage. In recent months, there has been a huge surge of people coming to my office asking for fuel vouchers because they cannot afford to heat their homes. Only last month, alongside trade union councils in south Wales, I arranged a hunger march—a hunger march—to commemorate the 97th anniversary of the first hunger march in the UK from the Rhondda up to London. It is an indictment that we now have more food banks than McDonald's restaurants. Shame on this Government that that has become normalised.

This Government's approach is testing not only the social fabric, but the future of our planet, and the British people will not accept the continued destruction of public services and people's pay. The next Government have no alternative but to find the funds to increase public sector pay, fund public services and invest in the future of our public sector. That includes ending the unequal and unfair low levels of taxation on wealth, which is surely now inevitable. We need a wealth tax now more than ever. The Chancellor should have confirmed a commitment to public sector pay restoration to its real level in 2010, starting with an above-inflation rise this year. He should have committed to lifting the minimum wage to £15 an hour at the next opportunity, and we will keep demanding that.

As I have said, our social fabric is under threat. We need an economy that puts people and the planet first, before profits and for the benefit of all. We must be arguing not for growth for growth's sake, but for growth for prosperity for all. That is enshrined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which we are fortunate enough to have in Wales. I would encourage the Government to look at that Act, and ideally to adopt it here in England and across the UK. This means enabling and supporting local communities not only to generate wealth, but to invest it in their own communities. That community wealth-building initiative is called *cymunedoli*. It is only by redistributing wealth that we will be able to tackle inequality, to transform society and to secure a just future—not only for current generations, but for future generations.

5.54 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): It is with pleasure that I speak on the final day of the Budget debate this afternoon. With this being the last spring statement before the general election, last week's Budget was a golden opportunity for the Chancellor to finally set out his plans to grow Britain's economy. We did not see a rabbit out of the hat, although it looks as if the Chancellor has managed to make his Back Benchers disappear. Instead, this Budget revealed what we have

known for far too long—that this exhausted, fading Tory Government are completely out of ideas. Millions of people across the country will have listened to the Chancellor, and collectively said, “Is that it?” The Government have limped on through another Budget week—clearly not everyone has survived—and a former Tory Cabinet Minister said that it has had “no traction at all”, because the Prime Minister is simply too weak to call a general election.

The unavoidable fact is that after 14 years of Tory Government our economy has flatlined into recession. Living standards have fallen off a cliff, and our public services are crumbling. The Budget has lifted the lid on 14 years of Tory economic failure, and nothing that they do between now and the election, whenever it comes, will change that. The Chancellor may have taken 2p off national insurance as a last-ditch effort to shore up votes, but Opposition Members have not forgotten that there have been 25—yes, 25!—Tory tax rises since the last election. This is the highest tax burden on the British public for 70 years.

For all the attempted fanfare about last week’s Budget—again, we see the enthusiasm on the Conservative Benches—for every £10 extra that working people will pay in tax under the Tories, they will get just £5 back as a result of combined national insurance cuts. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition said last week, the Government are openly giving with one hand but taking even more with the other. They are taking the British public for fools. On average, households will still be £870 worse off under this Government, yet the Chancellor merrily told the House last week that his “plan is working”. I know that my constituents in Wakefield, along with millions of people across the country, are just not buying it.

Five Prime Ministers, seven Chancellors, and 11 failed “plans for growth” have been trotted out by this Government. And what do they have to show for it? An economy in recession, smaller than when their latest Prime Minister took office. The national credit card is maxed out, with debt tripling to almost £2.6 trillion since 2010. Average post-tax earnings at the start of this year are £1,870 lower than at the start of 2021, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Real pay is up by just £17 a week since the Tories took office, with an unprecedented decline in living standards, and a cumulative £19 billion rise in mortgage costs for UK homeowners thanks to the Tory mortgage timebomb. As if that was not enough, now the Tories are eagerly promising £46 billion of unfunded tax cuts, which would leave a gaping black hole in the nation’s finances with working people paying the price.

There was little in last week’s Budget that will make any real difference to the lives of hard-working constituents in Wakefield. Some wards within my constituency rank among the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, and a shocking 32% of children in Wakefield live in poverty. Every one of those households suffering in my constituency and across the UK are a badge of shame for those on the Government Benches. Last week’s lacklustre Budget also does nothing to address the fact that the basic functions of the state are collapsing under the Tories’ watch. Not a single NHS dentist in Wakefield is taking on new patients. One in seven people in England are on a waiting list for NHS treatment, and thousands of children are studying in crumbling classrooms.

It is plain as day that the Tories have given up on governing, so it is little wonder that they finally caved to pressure from Labour after years of resistance, and have finally acted to close the non-dom tax loophole. That is a crushing, humiliating U-turn even for the Tories, and a damning indictment of a Government totally bereft of ideas. My constituents simply cannot afford another Tory Budget of decay and decline. We desperately need a general election, and a Labour Government who will get the economy growing again, make work pay with a new deal for working people, and back British business with a new industrial strategy in a national wealth fund. It is time for real change, and Labour is ready to serve. Call a general election.

5.59 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): May I say to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) that there is no point in Labour Members banging on about unfunded Tory tax cuts, when Labour is not going to do anything different and says it will not reverse them?

Productivity is an almost abstract word that is bandied about all the time, but the one point of consensus is that the UK’s productivity rates lag behind those of comparable countries. We keep hearing pronouncements about the need to improve productivity, but nothing changes. The last Prime Minister—the one of just 45 days—believed that tax cuts, especially for the richest, somehow boost the economy and productivity. Despite that ideology, the Government never show how the rich getting richer boosts outcomes or increases manufacturing productivity, or how tax cuts for the richest transform the productivity of those paid the least, who are doing the real work. Productivity certainly is not boosted by trying to force the long-term sick or those with disabilities into jobs they are not suited for.

The reality is that increased productivity stems from good planning and strategic investment. The Chancellor’s decision to make full expensing permanent at the autumn statement might drive forward investment but, even so, there are still questions to be asked about how the UK went into recession. Indeed, despite what the Government always tell us about global factors that affect all other countries, such as the war in Ukraine or global inflation rates, the reality is that within the G7, the UK is only outperforming Germany in GDP growth compared with pre-pandemic levels. Over a four-year period, the UK’s GDP growth—at just 1%—is a third of the eurozone, and miles behind US growth at 8.2%.

Of course, it is no coincidence that the US has its Inflation Reduction Act or that the eurozone is covered by the EU’s green deal industrial plan. It is no coincidence either that the UK has the lowest levels of investment in the G7—further proof that the Government should be providing schemes and investment to counter the EU and US measures. Instead we heard from UK Ministers at the time the blasé attitude that these other countries were simply playing catch-up with the UK. It was blinkered British exceptionalism at its worst. Indeed, the Government still do not recognise that they have fallen further behind; not only that, but they failed to listen to renewable energy developers about the strike rate for offshore wind being too low in the last contracts for difference auction, which has lost investment in renewable energy and thrown the 2030 deployment targets into doubt.

[Alan Brown]

Until the failure of auction round 5 for offshore wind, the contracts for difference process was at least a success for deployment of renewable energy. However, it still represented missed opportunities for UK-based supply chain development, for investment to be targeted at UK manufacturing and for increased UK productivity. Instead, the UK Government made it a race to the bottom in terms of price, so we saw billions of pounds of investment offshored in that process. The Government hid behind EU directives but now, post Brexit, the procurement strategy still does not sufficiently incentivise local content.

On Brexit, being outside the single market and the customs union—completing additional paperwork and products undergoing additional checks—clearly affects productivity. The OBR has confirmed that the UK is still on track to see a 4% hit to GDP and a 15% reduction in EU trade as a result of Brexit. Goldman Sachs estimates that Brexit has cost the UK 5% in GDP against comparable countries, so it is undeniable that Brexit is a large contributing factor to the UK's performance within the G7—another issue completely avoided by Labour in today's debate.

Greater investment is required in infrastructure, but the Budget did not allocate additional capital moneys. Indeed, the Scottish Government's capital budget is suffering a cut of close to 20% in real terms this year; yet somehow the Scottish Tories demand ever more construction—ever more deployment from the Scottish Government—while standing by as Westminster slashes our budget. That said, the Scottish Tories now see at first hand the Westminster respect agenda, as their wishes were overridden by the extension of the windfall tax. That is a further £1.5 billion of revenue from Scotland that is not being used for reinvestment. It is not propping up Scotland's capital budget; it has been used for a tax cut. That is shameful—and yet, we are supposed to doff our cap and be grateful for £300 million of additional Barnett consequentials.

We know, though, that cuts to the Scottish Government are coming down the line, given the £19 billion of departmental cuts associated with the autumn statement and now baked into this Budget. Of course, as was pointed out earlier, Labour is effectively sticking to the Tories' spending rules, so Labour will introduce austerity 2.0 if it comes into power. It is no wonder that the IFS says there is a “conspiracy of silence” from both Labour and the Tories on the scale of cuts coming down the line.

One cut that has been delivered is to the higher rate of capital gains for property sales. There has been enough analysis to show that charging capital gains tax at the equivalent rate of income tax would realise an additional £10 billion to £15 billion for the Treasury, yet somehow we are meant to believe that lowering the upper rate will magically bring in more money. It defies logic.

Labour likes to talk about Norway and the taxes it raises from the North sea. I like to talk about Norway, too, and the fact that it has a \$1.5 trillion sovereign wealth fund, which is the biggest in the world. We look at Norway as what we might have been. It is not a change of Government that we need at Westminster—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order.

6.5 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to tell you a story about modern Britain, my constituents and how their experiences of a Conservative Government have left them alone. People I know in Tamworth are struggling; they tell me that on a daily basis. This is an issue when we have a Government who are gaslighting the public into thinking that they are better off under the Conservatives, yet the tax burden is the highest for 70 years, wages are lower and public services around them are literally crumbling in a Parliament that will be defined as the worst on record for living standards.

Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that, come the election, tax revenues will be 3.9% of national income—about £100 million; higher than at the time of the last election. This remains a Parliament of record tax rises. The Treasury's own figures make it clear that the cut to national insurance will be paid for by years of austerity affecting Government Departments and our already overstretched public services. When the Conservatives' infamous mini-Budget caused massive damage, crashing the economy and sending mortgage rates soaring and families' budgets plummeting, they left constituents fearful for the future. Despite working full time, many hard-working people find themselves struggling to make ends meet.

It was a shock recently to attend an event where Conservative-run Tamworth Borough Council claimed there were no homeless people in Tamworth, following the annual snapshot survey taken on one day in autumn 2023. Government data between July and September 2023 showed that the council had assessed that 43 households were homeless and 38 were threatened with homelessness—81 households. According to figures collected by the Tamworth food bank over the last 12 months, 207 users stated they were of no fixed address, and 56 of them were children.

Local charities know that there are people who are homeless in Tamworth. Some are sleeping in their cars, some in local churches, and others are sofa surfing with no fixed abode. For many, the Government's poor stewardship of our economy has pushed the dream of getting on the housing ladder even further away. I speak daily with parents who still have an adult child living at home because even with good wages and a deposit saved there are no affordable homes in their communities. Of the houses that are being built in Tamworth, many are on the floodplains and therefore at risk when it comes to flooding incidents. The track record is getting worse and worse. The Government have slashed the Environment Agency's resources by two thirds since 2010 while one in six homes is now at risk of flooding and climate change is on the march.

Where next can I turn in this twisted tale of Conservative failure? To the high streets, where shops, cafés, restaurants and pubs have suffered and where people can no longer sustain the businesses that communities so value. In Tamworth, our high street has received some levelling-up funding. However, the £3 million shortfall following the astronomical rise in inflation is not covered by the Government, yet the time constraint for spending the money remains. This “use it or lose it” attitude has left destruction in its wake. As part of the project, the Peel café—one of our heritage buildings—was knocked down, contrary to requirements to consult on changes to the

plans. Our communities are being cut out of conversations around regeneration. Without them, we fail to plan for our future.

Labour offers a review of current business rates that do not support businesses, in an economy that has fallen off the tracks. Speaking of which, my constituency is a graveyard to HS2—£92 billion has been squandered on a badly managed, badly scrutinised HS2 project that could have unlocked financial benefits and higher network capacity across the nation. The Government claim that network speeds will not be impacted, but HS2 trains on Victorian tracks will run slower, meaning fewer trains per hour and decreased network capacity for Tamworth and the nation. The irony is that if the Government had done absolutely nothing and spent no money at all on rail infrastructure, we would be in a better position than we are today.

Let me turn to the tragedy of our public services, which are at breaking point and decimated after years of austerity. After 14 years of the Tory Government, more than 90% of crimes are going unsolved, meaning that the criminals are less than half as likely to be caught now than when Labour was in government. Tamworth no longer has a police station at which to report crime. One in seven people in England is on an NHS waiting list. More than ever before, people have put their lives on hold while they wait in pain and discomfort for months, even years. Such a tale I have had to tell of an utterly let down country, often left to pick up the pieces. Ordinary working people, families and pensioners see little to celebrate. We need a Labour Government. We need Labour's plan. This Budget is nonsense.

6.11 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): With four days to spend debating one single fiscal event, it would be easy to enter into Westminster village debates. Instead, ahead of the Budget I spent several days knocking on doors in villages in my Devon constituency to hear what rural residents wanted the Chancellor to announce. The feedback I got was plain: they cared not about jibes from the Dispatch Box but about saving our public services and infrastructure, including our roads, which are crumbling before our very eyes—a metaphor for public services in general. It is little wonder that people ask me, “If this Government cannot even stop the roads from falling apart, how on earth can they claim that things are getting better?” It is little wonder that the erosion of our roads has been mirrored by the electoral erosion of the Conservative party. Many of the people I spoke to in Devon regard this Government as having little left in the tank. It is little wonder that conspiracy theories are on the rise: people in the west country could be forgiven for thinking that potholes are a deliberate, affordable alternative to 20 mph signs and speed bumps.

This Budget was such a disappointment. There are more holes in it than in the A373 between Honiton and Cullompton. It contained little in the way of support for frontline NHS and care services. It is ironic that when national insurance was introduced by a Liberal Government in 1911, its purpose was partly as a safety net to catch people experiencing ill health. The Liberal Government who introduced it required contributions from employers and the state, as well as the individual.

The Chancellor's flagship measure—the national insurance cut—failed to deliver any help for pensioners or those on fixed incomes in the way that a rise in the income tax threshold could have done. Instead of long-term investment, the Government chose a series of quick patch-up jobs that brush over the latest crisis, rather than taking the time to fill in their holes properly. The Government need to understand that funnelling every last available penny they could scrape together into a national insurance cut will not turn things around.

The average pothole-related breakdown will set drivers back around £440. That is the same amount that someone might have got back from this national insurance cut. One trip down a poorly maintained road and all those savings are gone in a bang, as the driver shreds a tyre on the edge of a crater. I am reminded of driving through the streets of former Yugoslavia in an Army Land Rover 20 years ago, where avoiding a collision in Kosovo required a Land Rover Defender; increasingly, it is also a requirement in Culmstock, Colyton and Combe Raleigh.

If small businesses are the engines of our local economy, investment in our road network is the lubricant in rural areas such as Devon. The roads are the ribbons that connect our towns and villages. In recent years, many have become impassable. Almost every single week, my postbag is flooded with correspondence about potholes. I fear that if I were to plot them on a map, those reported across mid and east Devon would hardly leave any road left. They are certainly one of the things that people are most annoyed about. That is why the £6.6 million announced for Devon's roads is nothing more than a smokescreen. It goes nowhere near what is genuinely required to fix the underlying problem.

It is not just me saying that. The Conservative leader of Devon County Council, John Hart, who is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of our roads in Devon, says the funding is a “drop in the ocean”. He went on to say that while the council was given an extra £9.5 million for roads last year, £7 million of that repair money was immediately eaten up by inflation. Last April, the council was forced to announce that it only had the capacity to maintain priority roads, allowing other vital roads to endure a “managed decline”. This is a shameful state of affairs. It says something when getting on a horse and riding over the rolling hills of Devon may be the best way of traversing our county for the first time in over 100 years. Figures from the Department for Transport lay the issue bare—these statistics just cannot be argued with. Just 18.6 miles of roads in Devon had improvement work done in the year to March 2023, down from 273.6 miles five years ago, all under the Conservatives' watch.

The Budget was a missed opportunity. The Government know that they have lost the race and are now simply limping to the finish line. The people of Devon deserve so much better. They demand better. They know that, in the rural areas of the west country, the only way to get it is to vote Liberal Democrat.

6.16 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I know that the residents of Putney, Southfields, Roehampton and Wandsworth town will be watching this debate, because they tell me all the time as I go out and about in the constituency that they watch the Parliament channel. I also know

[*Fleur Anderson*]

that they will be very, very disappointed by the Budget. They will have seen nothing for our declining high streets, nothing for youth centres, and nothing to tackle the cost of living crisis that means that there are higher bills but less money for my constituents week after week after week.

The theme of this debate is productivity, which is fundamental for our competitiveness, wage growth, ability to attract investment and overall future economic wellbeing—in fact, our wellbeing as a whole. Without growth, we cannot have the hope for the future, the hope for our young people and the boost for our economy that we need. I will focus on one area of under-investment which has meant a chronic lack of productivity across the UK, an area of investment that is essential to tackle the climate crisis, boost our economy and give young people hope: green skills.

I was disappointed to hear in the Budget that there were no new policies to help boost the roll-out of low-carbon technologies such as electric vehicles or heat pumps. There is a clear need for better alignment between net zero investments and the skills and employment system. That is the problem that leads to our poor productivity at the moment. Solar Energy UK called the Budget “virtually nude” of anything to bolster that sector. We cannot begin to move in the right direction on green productivity without having the processes in place to embed green skills within our economic infrastructure, but we need a whole industry and skills approach. There is a massive shortage of heat pump engineers. We currently have 3,000, but we will need 27,000 by 2028. Offshore wind industry engineer numbers need to triple to just over 104,000 to meet our current targets, let alone our future ones.

Political choices have led to that under-investment and under-skilling. The Institute for Public Policy Research found that the UK employs fewer people in renewable energy as a proportion of the working age population than most other European countries. It does not have to be that way. In my constituency, South Thames College offers courses in green skills and solar panel fitting. It is taking proactive steps, responding to the wide range of green jobs arising across the economy. By helping students to move into apprenticeships or jobs, South Thames College shows that it is ahead of the curve in adopting a joined-up approach. Also in my constituency is Treadlighter, a solar energy company in Southfields. It is booming, but it cannot keep up with demand because it needs more skilled trainees and staff to fit panels.

Matching skills with green businesses is essential, but Government inaction is currently holding back productivity. A whole new approach is needed throughout the economy to secure a seamless transition between training, education, manufacturing, supply and services, but we do not see any of that in the Budget. We see no new boost, and nothing about the new revolution in green skills that would be so exciting for our economy and would give us hope. The Government’s green jobs delivery group has been meeting for a year and plans to publish its green jobs plan soon, but the Budget has given nothing to the green energy industry, so I have no high hopes for that plan.

We in the Labour party know how important to our success investing for the future will be, which is why we have committed ourselves to spending £23.5 billion

during our first Parliament in government in order to deliver green power by 2030. Green British Energy, a publicly owned energy company, will invest in green energy projects including offshore wind, hydrogen, carbon capture, tidal and nuclear. If we can match that with the green skills revolution, we really will have the productivity that we need to change the amount of money in the pockets of people across my constituency.

The No. 1 mission of the next Labour Government is to get our economy growing so that Britain will be better off, and we will do it through stability, investment and reform. That means bringing stability back so that we can protect family finances with tough fiscal rules and a long-term plan for our economy, it means investing in British business so we can unlock tens of millions of pounds of private sector investment for our towns and cities, and it means reforming planning so we can boost growth and get Britain building again. The Conservatives are missing in action. They have run out of ideas, they have run out of ambition and hope, and they have run out of all the ways in which growth can be boosted. It is time for a new approach: it is time for a Labour Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): To make the last Back-Bench speech of this Budget debate, I call the ever patient Ruth Jones.

6.22 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I knew my patience would be rewarded in the end.

I am pleased to be able to say a few words on behalf of the people of Newport West. I am just sorry that those words will be about such a bad Budget—a missed opportunity, and a let-down for my constituents. I congratulate the Leader of the Opposition on his powerful and compassionate response to the Budget on Wednesday. I also congratulate all my right hon. and hon. Friends who have spoken in recent days, especially the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who, earlier this afternoon, called out so powerfully and forensically the lack of a Government plan.

Week in and week out, real people come to my office, write to me, email me and call my team to describe their struggles to heat their homes, feed their families and pay their mortgages. Since my election to this place in 2019, my brilliant team have dealt with people in desperate need throughout my constituency. With each fiscal event from this tired Tory Government, my constituents have been moved from getting by to struggling, or, even worse, from struggling to absolute poverty. Since I was elected, absolute child poverty in Newport West—the percentage of children living in households with incomes below 60% of the median income—has remained at about 15%. That is shocking, and nothing has changed. The UK rate is also 15%, so this is a British problem, and nothing in the Budget will make things better for working people.

The people who have all the power to help are sitting right over there on the Government Benches. The Chancellor, who seems to be feeling the pressure in his constituency, could have delivered a Budget that invested in this country. He could have taken meaningful action to mitigate the cost of living crisis, and he could have genuinely helped people. I know, we all know and,

worst of all, the Conservatives know that they could have done far more to help ordinary people, but they made the political choice not to. One of my constituents who had had problems with obtaining the warm home discount wrote to me recently that

“people have to beg for help, and they get fed up with the long drawn out process. Many are not getting the help that is promised by the government.”

That is the real-life experience of people in my area, and I urge Ministers to wake up and take action.

This Budget confirms that the UK has the highest tax burden in 70 years, which will rise in every year of the forecast period. The Office for Budget Responsibility's figures show that for every 10p extra that working people will pay in tax under the Tories' plan, they will get back only 5p as a result of the combined national insurance cuts. That includes the OBR's revised estimate for the impact of tax threshold freezes, which will raise £41.1 billion over the forecast period, creating 3.7 million new taxpayers by 2028-29.

Given everything that was not in the Budget, we should all be very afraid. We should think about the £46 billion-worth of unfunded tax cuts that have been promised by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. This reckless attempt to save their own jobs, with no regard for anyone else's, exposes the clear risk of having five more years under the Conservatives. They will gamble with the public finances, and working people will be forced to pay the price yet again. This Tory Government clearly have not learned anything since the former Prime Minister crashed the economy and sent mortgages spiralling, leaving a real impact on working-class and middle-income people.

I am proud to stand for my party, because we know that with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) in charge of the Treasury, Labour will never play fast and loose with the nation's finances. I have heard nothing from the Government that improves the lives of ordinary people in Newport West. If they cannot or, worse, will not take the action needed to get our country back on track, they should make way for a fresh start from Labour.

This was a bad Budget, with nothing for Newport West. After 14 long years, it is time for change, time for a fresh start, and time for us to change course and get our country back on track. Let the public decide. Call the general election now—it is time for change.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

6.26 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): This Budget was the last gasp of a dying, desperate Government. It did nothing to address 14 years of Conservative economic failure and, as always with this Government, it is working people who pay the price.

Many Opposition Members have made powerful contributions to today's debate, and I apologise for not being able to mention every single one. However, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who said it was his last ever Budget speech today.

The British people are struggling with the highest tax burden in 70 years, and they still face further tax rises over the next five years—a point that was powerfully

made by my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Newport West (Ruth Jones). Food prices are still 25% higher than they were two years ago. Rents are up by 10%, and a typical family will pay an extra £240 a month when remortgaging this year. Nothing the Chancellor said in last week's Budget changes that. As much as he tries, he cannot hide from his Government's record: 14 years of low investment, stagnant wages and poor productivity, the country in recession, wrecked public finances and an economy crippled by debt. The Chancellor tried to wash away the realities last week, but families in our constituencies cannot do the same. People feel worse off under the Conservatives because they are worse off.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) focused on, the Office for Budget Responsibility—not us—has now confirmed that this will be the worst Parliament on record for living standards. Let me repeat that, because it is worth repeating: this will be the worst Parliament on record for living standards. It is the only Parliament on record in which living standards have fallen. Real pay has gone up by just £17 a week over almost a decade and a half of this Conservative Government. When the Labour party was last in power, wages rose by £183 a week over 13 years. After 14 years of Conservative rule, people have less money in their pockets.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) touched on, the latest ONS figures show seven consecutive quarters of falling GDP per capita from the start of 2022. This is the longest period of economic stagnation in this country since the 1950s, and now, under this Prime Minister and this Chancellor, the country has fallen into recession. Government debt has almost tripled under the Conservatives from £1 trillion to just under £2.6 trillion.

Did last week's Budget give the British people or British businesses any hope that the Government could turn things around? Absolutely not. Household disposable income is set to fall by £200 per person over the course of this Parliament. Real GDP per capita is expected to be lower at the end of this year than it was at the start of this Parliament, and borrowing has been revised up in the next five years of the forecast period. The Institute of Directors described the Chancellor's efforts as an “unremarkable Budget for business”, and the British Retail Consortium has said that it

“will do nothing to turbo charge investment and growth in communities”.

This was a failed Budget from a failing Government.

Sarah Edwards: Does my hon. Friend agree that this Conservative Budget has confirmed that the next Government will receive the worst economic inheritance since the second world war? Does she agree that the Tories should listen to our constituents, call a general election now and stop taking a wrecking ball to the economy on their way out the door? *[Interruption.]*

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Those on the Conservative Benches do not want to hear it, but if they have so much confidence in their record, why do they not do as she asks, call a general election and put a test to the public?

Unable to defend his own Government's records and unable to offer any plan to get the country out of the economic mess that his party created, this Chancellor

[Tulip Siddiq]

has resorted to undeliverable promises. When we thought things could not get any worse, the Chancellor bizarrely ended his Budget last week with a £46 billion unfunded tax plan to abolish national insurance. This would leave a gaping hole in the public finances, put family finances at risk and create huge uncertainty for our pensioners. This is even bigger than the unfunded tax cuts announced in the Conservatives' mini-Budget that added hundreds of pounds to people's mortgages, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) powerfully pointed out. I will be listening intently to the Minister's response today, and I hope that he will set out how his Government would fill that gaping hole in the public finances to avoid rerunning the disastrous experiment that crashed the economy just 18 months ago.

Fleur Anderson: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is absurd that throughout today's event the Government have been unable to confirm how they will pay for their unfunded £46 billion plan to abolish national insurance contributions? Where is the money coming from?

Tulip Siddiq rose—

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I asked earlier about what the Institute for Fiscal Studies has called a conspiracy of silence from both Labour and the Conservatives. Is Labour sticking with the baked-in £20 billion of future departmental cuts that are in the Budget, and if not, how is Labour going to pay for that?

Tulip Siddiq rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I fully appreciate the orchestration, but it would be quite a good idea if one intervention was responded to before the next one was made.

Tulip Siddiq: Apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will answer both interventions by saying that I know those on the Conservative Benches do not want to hear it, but if you make a pledge without the plan, you have to clarify where the money is coming from—[*Laughter.*] It is not a laughing matter. It is causing havoc in people's finances.

Then again, nothing would surprise me from this clown show of a Government. Less than a week after committing to a British ISA, the Chancellor has apparently U-turned and ditched the plan until after the election, because he has apparently just noticed that he has no idea how he is going to pay for it. Another U-turn, another uncosted announcement, another promise without a plan from this clueless Conservative Government.

Turning to the other tax cuts in the Budget, Labour has consistently said that we want to reduce the tax burden on working people. That is why, when the current Prime Minister wanted to increase national insurance two years ago, we opposed it. Let us be under no illusions: we support the measures announced last week to bring national insurance down by an additional 2%, but that does not change the fact that this Government have raised the tax burden to record levels and taxes are continuing to rise. Under the Chancellor's plan, households will be £870 worse off on average. His decision to freeze tax thresholds will create 3.7 million taxpayers by 2028-29.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) pointed out, OBR figures show that, as a result of last week's announcements, for every 10p extra that working people pay in tax under the Conservatives, they will get only 5p back. And the Government expect the British public to thank them for it! However the Chancellor tries to spin it, his Budget means that Britain will go into the next general election with taxes at their highest level since 1949.

Although we will always call out the Conservatives for pickpocketing the British taxpayer, we welcome their recent pickpocketing of Labour policies. Labour has long argued that people who make Britain their home should pay their taxes here. Bizarrely, however, the Prime Minister said that scrapping the non-dom status would somehow cost Britain money. Even more bizarrely, the Chancellor previously tried to argue that the non-dom status supports jobs and that reforming it would cause long-term damage to growth.

I hope the Economic Secretary to the Treasury will explain what caused this road to Damascus moment. Is he personally responsible for finally getting his party to listen to us about the importance of closing the non-dom loophole, which the OBR estimates will raise £3 billion a year? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) said, Labour first called for the loophole to be closed two years ago, meaning that the Government have cost the country £6 billion that could have been spent on precious public services.

I do not deny that the Conservative party has come a long way since their opposition to our windfall tax on oil and gas producers but, even after yesterday's announcement of a one-year extension, the Chancellor is leaving loopholes that mean the energy giants will still pay billions less in tax. Surely the Government have learned by now that they would save themselves a lot of time, and the country a lot of money, if they adopted Labour's policies in full.

This exhausted and directionless Conservative Government are out of ideas and out of time. All they had to offer last week were unfunded promises and an ever growing tax burden on working people. In contrast, our offer to the country will be carefully costed and fully funded, and it will always put working people first. The Conservatives have failed on growth, failed on living standards and delivered only stagnation and chaos.

Labour's economic plan will build on the pillars of stability, investment and reform: stability brought about by iron discipline and guarded by strong fiscal rules and robust economic institutions. [*Interruption.*] Conservative Members love chuntering, but they would hear our plan if they listened properly. Investment—we will work with the private sector so that we can lead the industries of the future and make work pay. Reform—starting with our planning system, we will take on vested interests to get Britain building again.

Britain deserves better, Britain deserves change and the British people deserve an election.

6.38 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): It is a pleasure to close these three days of debate on the Government's spring Budget. Before I get on to more contentious points, I will start on some common ground.

We all know that the last few years have been tough for our country. We all know that this Government have spent more than £400 billion on protecting lives and livelihoods after covid. We all know that Putin's war in Ukraine sent energy prices to unprecedented highs, and that this has had a huge impact on our economy.

Since 2023 this Government have principally worked to three economic priorities: halving inflation, growing the economy and reducing the national debt. We have made good progress on each of those priorities. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members should wait for it. Inflation has more than halved, going from 11% to 4%. Our economy is expected to grow faster than many of our major European neighbours and partners over the medium term. The IMF predicts that over the coming four years we will be the third quickest growing economy in the G7. The OBR has confirmed that national debt is on track to fall in line with our fiscal rules.

Members across the House may say, "A lot done; a lot more to do", but this prudent and responsible Budget takes us one step closer to tackling the inflation that has harmed the economy, to dealing with the low growth and poor productivity that has hampered us, and towards a brighter future. We have already had much success. That is why we are able to afford to cut national insurance for 29 million people. We will responsibly go further than that, as long as the country can afford it.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Asked last week about the Government's commitment to abolish national insurance contributions, the Minister said

"we'd like to continue along that track"—

more of a cul-de-sac, in my humble opinion—but today the Minister has been silent on that plan for a huge £46 billion unfunded tax commitment. Will the Minister tell us if it is still the Prime Minister's plan to resurrect the Trussonomics mini-Budget package of last year?

Bim Afolami: It is not our plan to resurrect anything from the mini-Budget. We have our plan and we set it out in our Budget.

As the son of a doctor and a pharmacist, as many of us are on the Government Benches, I am mindful that any good doctor will say that in order for the medicine to work, one has to complete the course and stick to the plan. This Budget sticks to the plan we set out in 2023 and has three key objectives: to reward work, to grow the economy and to improve productivity. Before I get on to those points, I will address some of the remarks made by hon. Members during the debate.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) made a point about some of the most vulnerable in our country and their access to credit. I commend her long-standing support for her constituents, including the most vulnerable. We are extending the household support fund, as she will know, and we are making it easier to access the debt relief order. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) welcomed the decision to extend the household support fund. In response to his question about making the fund permanent, that is a decision for the next fiscal event, whenever that will be.

I say to Members of all parties who are concerned for the most vulnerable that this is a Budget and a Government for them. Since 2010, the real income—the take-home

pay—of those working full time on the national living wage is 35% greater than it was in 2010. On rewarding work, thanks to the actions that this Government have already taken, falling inflation means that wages in real terms are on the up, even while unemployment is low. In response to the question raised by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), real household incomes overall have increased by 8% since 2010. But we all know that we can go further. The simplest and most effective way to do so is by reducing people's taxes and getting rid of the double taxation on work, which means reducing national insurance.

I was listening carefully to the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who is a man I rather like. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]* I rather admire him. We came to the House at the same time. We are practically the same age—he is about five months younger than me, but let us not go into that. But I was very surprised to hear him say—he can intervene on me if this is not correct—that it was "morally abhorrent" to cut national insurance.

Darren Jones: I always welcome the chance to return to the Dispatch Box. Just to answer the hon. Gentleman's question, I said that it was morally abhorrent to abolish national insurance contributions at a cut of £46 billion a year with no plan to pay for it. The Minister has the opportunity once again to tell us how he is going to fund the £46 billion.

Bim Afolami: This is great fun, Mr Deputy Speaker. I say to the shadow Chief Secretary that we have been very clear about this. We have cut national insurance by a third in the last two fiscal events. It is our long-term ambition to do so and to eliminate this double taxation on work. If Labour Members do not believe that we should eliminate this double taxation, they should say so.

Alan Brown *rose*—

Bim Afolami: No, I will not give way. I wish to make some progress.

My hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), and for North West Norfolk (James Wild) saw the wisdom and the importance of cutting national insurance by a third and what that means for ordinary people. From April this year, we will have taken a third off, which means £900 a year for the average worker. Some Opposition Members sniffed at that. They do not think that that is very much money. We know that, for millions of people across the country, that will make a huge difference to their lives, and we are very proud to support it.

Over and above the national insurance cuts, this Budget sets out a plan that rewards hard-working families. A lifetime of work should support the job of a lifetime: being a parent. For too long, hard-working parents have been unfairly penalised by our tax system—I am very glad that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) from the Liberal Democrats recognised that and supported our plans. That is why we are raising the child benefit threshold to £60,000 and increasing the level at which the support is completely withdrawn to £80,000. This is not done out of some ideological fancy. We are doing it because it will encourage growth in the labour market and generate an increase in work hours equivalent to around 10,000 people entering the workforce

[*Bim Afolami*]

full time. So this one act on childcare that the Chancellor has put forward will save nearly half a million families an average of around £1,300 per annum in addition to the national insurance cuts.

We also want to support those who make a career out of childcare, which is why, building on our announcement at the last Budget to extend 30 hours of free childcare a week to all children aged nine months and older of working parents, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that the Government will guarantee the hourly rate to ensure that private childcare providers can step up to deliver this offer.

Secondly, as many Members across the House have noted, this is a Budget for long-term growth. Growth means more opportunity. Growth means greater prosperity for families and firms. And, yes, growth means higher funding for our public services.

Alan Brown: The Minister knows full well that the autumn statement had £20 billion of future cuts to public services and this Budget bakes it in. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has called it a conspiracy of silence from both Labour and the Conservatives. He talks about long-term growth and an increase in public services, but will he come clean about that £20 billion cut and what the Government will do about it?

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. If he looks in the Red Book, he will see that the forecast for the next spending review period is that real-terms spending on public services—the whole House should hear this, because I have heard lots of discussion from Opposition Members about cuts and slashing—will go up every year by 1% in addition to inflation. We are building on a stable foundation for that growth. Against the backdrop of economic uncertainty, business investment—one of the chronic difficulties for our economy for generations—grew last year, and will be about 11% of our GDP this year.

At the Budget, we outlined next steps on the autumn statement's £4.5 billion funding package for strategic manufacturing, which many Members mentioned, particularly the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). That delivers the next stage of expansion for our high-growth industries.

To complement that, we are committed to ensuring the UK has the most attractive investment tax regime of any G7 or large European country. We have the lowest corporation tax rate in the G7. At the autumn statement, to complement that support for business and for growth, we announced that we would introduce permanent full expensing, which allows companies to claim, in the first year, 100% capital allowances on qualifying investments. At this Budget, the Chancellor confirmed that draft legislation on extending full expensing further to assets for leasing will be published shortly. I am very glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) supported that investment.

The theme of today's debate—improving productivity—was barely mentioned by Opposition Members. I echo what the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), said in her opening speech: when it comes to our public services, what the public care about is whether their services

improve. That means focusing on outcomes, not just inputs. Opposition Members are very, very fond of talking about inputs and how there are apparently there are all these cuts—this slashing and burning of public services—but they are not very fond of talking about our productivity plan and how we are investing to improve outcomes. I will tell you a secret, Mr Deputy Speaker: the reason they are not fond of it is that they know it would upset their union paymasters. That is why they do not want to talk about it. They do not believe in better public services, which would mean better value for money for the taxpayer, because they do not believe in better value for money. They do not believe in better support for frontline workers to actually do their jobs properly because they just want more money for their union paymasters. They do not believe in better results. They talk the talk but refuse to walk the walk, because they do not understand what it is to take any tough decisions.

I agree with something that the hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) said. He said that we cannot cut our way to prosperity, and I agree. That is why we are investing in our productivity plan and investing comprehensively in the NHS, as my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) set out compassionately and powerfully.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the Minister give way?

Bim Afolami: I will make some progress, and then I will give way.

From upgrading computer systems to using artificial intelligence to automate tasks, we will upgrade the NHS's technology for the 21st century. That is only part of our programme of reform to bring the whole of Government into the digital era and generate productivity improvements, including through structural investment—and what a win it would be. The National Audit Office and the Office for Budget Responsibility, bodies that Opposition Members are always terribly keen to quote—*[Interruption.]* They should listen to what they have said about productivity and outcomes. The OBR says:

“Raising public sector productivity by 5 per cent”,

which will bring us back to where we were before the pandemic,

“would be the equivalent of around £20 billion extra in funding”.

That is why we are doing it. That is why the work that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary is doing is so important.

Before I conclude, I think we can all agree, including Opposition Back Benchers, that it is impossible to know where the Labour party stands on anything these days. We used to know where it stood. The sad thing about the one concrete plan that it did have is that there was a document listing all the projects under the £28 billion and going through every constituency. That was the only plan they had, but they have dropped it. They should talk to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) as to whether he is happy about that.

Labour Members are confused and I feel sorry for them. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is chuntering from a sedentary position, but I am coming to her next, don't worry. Labour is so confused that, by the way she was going on, one

would think that she was a disciple of Peter Thorneycroft and Nigel Lawson. She was so keen on low taxes and sound money that I almost wanted to invite her to join us on the Government Benches. But then I remembered something: in one of her first acts as a Labour MP, she decided to mount the barricades and nominate the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for leadership of the Labour party. I wonder whether she has told the Leader of the Opposition that that is where her heart lies.

Look, I do not want to be mean spirited—it does not suit me very well. It might surprise you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to learn that I actually rather admire the right hon. Member for Islington North. He believes in things and has ideas, unlike the shadow Treasury team, who do not even have the semblance of a coherent plan or any beliefs at all, as it turns out.

We know that this will not bother the shadow Chancellor. Where is she, by the way? She is probably too busy on her smoked salmon offensive in the City of London, pretending to love bankers, to have time to think of any new ideas.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): She is on Wikipedia, cutting and pasting.

Bim Afolami: She is cutting and pasting. I cannot see her, but if she needs ideas and is happy to come in, there is always the option—and she has done it before—to cut and paste from someone else. I do not want to mislead the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the shadow Chancellor does have one aspect to her economic plan—forgive me for forgetting about it—and, as the deputy leader of the Labour party knows, it is called the workers' plan. True to form, the shadow Chancellor has cut and pasted this plan from the trade unions to such a degree that it might as well be called the unions' plan. It gives sweeping licence to unions over our whole economy, which will kill jobs, hurt our productivity and undo the good work of this Budget and this Chancellor.

This Budget is a plan for the future, a plan for jobs, a plan for growth, a plan for productivity, a plan on the side of working people, and I commend it to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 43.

Division No. 88]

[6.58 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Baynes, Simon
Afriyie, Adam	Bell, Aaron
Aiken, Nickie	Beresford, Sir Paul
Aldous, Peter	Berry, rh Sir Jake
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Bhatti, Saqib
Anderson, Stuart	Blackman, Bob
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bradley, Ben
Ansell, Caroline	Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Argar, rh Edward	Brady, rh Sir Graham
Atherton, Sarah	Braverman, rh Suella
Atkins, rh Victoria	Brereton, Jack
Bacon, Gareth	Brine, Steve
Bacon, Mr Richard	Bristow, Paul
Bailey, Shaun	Britcliffe, Sara
Baillie, Siobhan	Browne, Anthony
Baker, Duncan	Bruce, Fiona
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Buchan, Felicity
Baldwin, Harriett	Burghart, Alex
Barclay, rh Steve	Burns, rh Sir Conor
Baron, Mr John	Butler, Rob
	Cairns, rh Alun

Campbell, Mr Gregory	Gibb, rh Nick
Carter, Andy	Gibson, Peter
Cartlidge, James	Gideon, Jo
Cash, Sir William	Girvan, Paul
Cates, Miriam	Glen, rh John
Caulfield, Maria	Gove, rh Michael
Chalk, rh Alex	Graham, Richard
Chishti, Rehman	Grant, Mrs Helen
Chope, Sir Christopher	Gray, James
Churchill, Jo	Grayling, rh Chris
Clark, rh Greg	Green, Chris
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	Green, rh Damian
Clarke, Theo	Griffith, Andrew
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Grundy, James
Clarkson, Chris	Gullis, Jonathan
Cleverly, rh James	Halfon, rh Robert
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hall, Luke
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Hammond, Stephen
Colburn, Elliot	Hands, rh Greg
Collins, Damian	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Costa, Alberto	Harris, Rebecca
Courts, Robert	Harrison, Trudy
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Hart, Sally-Ann
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hart, rh Simon
Crosbie, Virginia	Hayes, rh Sir John
Crouch, Tracey	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Daly, James	Heapey, rh James
Davies, Gareth	Henderson, Gordon
Davies, Dr James	Henry, Darren
Davies, Mims	Higginbotham, Antony
Davis, rh Sir David	Hinds, rh Damian
Davison, Dehenna	Hoare, Simon
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Dines, Miss Sarah	Hollinrake, Kevin
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Docherty, Leo	Holloway, Adam
Donelan, rh Michelle	Holmes, Paul
Double, Steve	Howell, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Drax, Richard	Howell, Paul
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Huddleston, Nigel
Duddridge, Sir James (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mark Francois</i>)	Hudson, Dr Neil
Duguid, David	Hughes, Eddie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Hunt, Jane
Dunne, rh Philip	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Eastwood, Mark	Hunt, Tom
Edwards, Ruth	Jack, rh Mr Alister
Ellis, rh Sir Michael	Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
Eustice, rh George	Jenrick, rh Robert
Evans, Dr Luke	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Evennett, rh Sir David	Johnson, Gareth
Everitt, Ben	Johnston, David
Fabricant, Michael	Jones, Andrew
Farris, Laura	Jones, rh Mr David
Fell, Simon	Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Firth, Anna	Jupp, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine	Kawczynski, Daniel
Fletcher, Mark	Kearns, Alicia
Fletcher, Nick	Keegan, rh Gillian
Foster, Kevin	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Fox, rh Sir Liam	Kniveton, Kate
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Kruger, Danny
Frazer, rh Lucy	Lamont, John
Freeman, George	Largan, Robert
Freer, Mike	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
French, Mr Louie	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Fuller, Richard	Lewer, Andrew
Garnier, Mark	Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian

Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Mr Rob
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary

Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Joy Morrissey and
 Mark Jenkinson

NOES

Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Day, Martyn
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Hendry, Drew
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)

MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Monaghan, Carol
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Sheppard, Tommy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
 Kirsty Blackman and
 Gavin Newlands

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2024-25.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the motions made in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Standing Order No. 51(3)).

2. INCOME TAX (MAIN RATES)

Resolved,

That for the tax year 2024-25 the main rates of income tax are as follows—

- (a) the basic rate is 20%,
- (b) the higher rate is 40%, and
- (c) the additional rate is 45%.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

3. INCOME TAX (DEFAULT AND SAVINGS RATES)

Resolved,

That—

(1) For the tax year 2024-25 the default rates of income tax are as follows—

- (a) the default basic rate is 20%,
- (b) the default higher rate is 40%, and
- (c) the default additional rate is 45%.

(2) For the tax year 2024-25 the savings rates of income tax are as follows—

- (a) the savings basic rate is 20%,
- (b) the savings higher rate is 40%, and
- (c) the savings additional rate is 45%.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

4. INCOME TAX (STARTING RATE LIMIT FOR SAVINGS)

Resolved,

That—

(1) For the tax year 2024-25 the amount specified in section 12(3) of the Income Tax Act 2007 (the starting rate limit for savings) is “£5,000”.

(2) Accordingly, section 21 of that Act (indexation) does not apply in relation to the starting rate limit for savings for that tax year.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

5. HIGH INCOME CHILD BENEFIT CHARGE (INCREASE IN THRESHOLDS)

Resolved,

That provision may be made—

(a) amending sections 681B(1)(a) and 681C(2)(b) of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 by substituting “£60,000* for “£50,000”, and

(b) amending section 681C(2)(b) of that Act by substituting “£200” for “£100”.

6. CAPITAL GAINS TAX (REDUCTION IN HIGHER RATE FOR RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY GAINS TO 24%)

Question put,

That—

(1) In section 1H of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 (the main rates of CGT) —

(a) after subsection (1) insert—

“(1A) Residential property gains (see Schedule IB) accruing in a tax year to an individual are charged to capital gains tax at a rate of 18% or 24%.”,

(b) in subsection (2), omit paragraph (a) together with the “or” at the end of the paragraph,

(c) after subsection (4) insert—

“(4A) Residential property gains accruing in a tax year to the personal representatives of a deceased individual are charged to capital gains tax at a rate 24%.”,

(d) in subsection (5), omit paragraph (a) together with the “or” at the end of the paragraph, and

(e) in subsection (7), for “28%” substitute “24%”.

(2) In section II of that Act (income taxed at higher rates or gains exceeding unused basic rate band)—

(a) in subsection (1) —

(i) before paragraph (a) insert—

“(za) at the rate of 24% (if they are residential property gains),” and

(ii) in that paragraph, omit “residential property gains or”,

(b) in subsection (2), in the words after paragraph (b) —

(i) after “is charged at the rate of” insert “24% (so far as comprising residential property gains), at the rate of”, and

(ii) omit “residential property gains or”,

(c) in subsection (5) —

(i) before paragraph (a) insert—

“(za) at the rate of 24% (if they are residential property gains),” and

(ii) in that paragraph, omit “residential property gains or”,

(d) in subsection (9) —

(i) before paragraph (a) insert—

“(za) at the rate of 24% (if they are residential property gains),” and

(ii) in that paragraph, omit “residential property gains or”.

(3) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to disposals made on or after 6 April 2024.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 46.

Division No. 89]

[7.15 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Cleverly, rh James
Afriyie, Adam	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Aiken, Nickie	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Aldous, Peter	Colburn, Elliot
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Collins, Damian
Anderson, Stuart	Costa, Alberto
Andrew, rh Stuart	Courts, Robert
Ansell, Caroline	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Argar, rh Edward	Crabb, rh Stephen
Atherton, Sarah	Crosbie, Virginia
Atkins, rh Victoria	Crouch, Tracey
Bacon, Gareth	Daly, James
Bacon, Mr Richard	Davies, Gareth
Bailey, Shaun	Davies, Dr James
Baillie, Siobhan	Davies, Mims
Baker, Duncan	Davis, rh Sir David
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Davison, Dehenna
Baldwin, Harriett	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Barclay, rh Steve	Dines, Miss Sarah
Baron, Mr John	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Baynes, Simon	Docherty, Leo
Bell, Aaron	Donelan, rh Michelle
Beresford, Sir Paul	Double, Steve
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Drax, Richard
Bhatti, Saqib	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Blackman, Bob	Duddridge, Sir James (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mark Francois</i>)
Bradley, Ben	Duguid, David
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Brady, rh Sir Graham	Dunne, rh Philip
Braverman, rh Suella	Eastwood, Mark
Brereton, Jack	Edwards, Ruth
Brine, Steve	Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Bristow, Paul	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Britcliffe, Sara	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Browne, Anthony	Eustice, rh George
Bruce, Fiona	Evans, Dr Luke
Buchan, Felicity	Evennett, rh Sir David
Burghart, Alex	Everitt, Ben
Burns, rh Sir Conor	Fabricant, Michael
Butler, Rob	Farris, Laura
Cairns, rh Alun	Fell, Simon
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Firth, Anna
Carter, Andy	Fletcher, Katherine
Cash, Sir William	Fletcher, Mark
Cates, Miriam	Fletcher, Nick
Caulfield, Maria	Foster, Kevin
Chalk, rh Alex	Fox, rh Sir Liam
Chishti, Rehman	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Chope, Sir Christopher	Frazer, rh Lucy
Churchill, Jo	Freeman, George
Clark, rh Greg	Freer, Mike
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	French, Mr Louie
Clarke, Theo	Fuller, Richard
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Garnier, Mark
Clarkson, Chris	

Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian

Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Mr Rob

Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward

Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Day, Martyn
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, Stephen
 Galloway, George
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Hendry, Drew
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)

Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Joy Morrissey and
Mark Jenkinson

NOES

Lucas, Caroline
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Monaghan, Carol
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Sheppard, Tommy (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Williams, Hywel
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Kirsty Blackman and
Gavin Newlands

Question accordingly agreed to.

7. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (ABOLITION OF MULTIPLE DWELLINGS RELIEF)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Section 58D of, and Schedule 6B to, the Finance Act 2003 (relief for transfers involving multiple dwellings) are repealed.

(2) In consequence of the repeal of those provisions —

(a) in Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003—

(i) in section 87(3) (interest on unpaid tax: meaning of “relevant date”), omit paragraph (aza),

(ii) in Schedule 4A (higher rates for certain transactions), in paragraph 2(6), omit paragraph (d) and, in paragraph 7, for sub-paragraph (6) substitute—

“(6) In sub-paragraph (5) —

“contract” includes any agreement;

“relevant deeming provision” means any of sections 44 to 45A, paragraph 5(1) or (2) of Schedule 2A or paragraph 12A or 19(3) of Schedule 17A.”,

(iii) in Schedule 5 (amount of tax chargeable: rent), in paragraph 9, in sub-paragraph (4), omit “or 6B” and, in sub-paragraph (5), omit “or Schedule 6B”,

(iv) in Schedule 10 (returns, enquiries, assessments and appeals), in paragraph 12(2A)(a), for “, 81 A” substitute “or 81 A” and omit “or paragraph 6 of Schedule 6B (adjustment for change of circumstances)”, and

(v) in Schedule 15 (partnerships), in paragraphs 11 (2C) and 19(2C), in the substituted paragraph, omit “or 6B”,

(b) in Schedule 36 to the Finance Act 2008 (information and inspection powers), in paragraph 21A(7), omit paragraph (b) and the “or” before it, and

(c) in the Finance Act 2011, omit section 83 and Schedule 22 (transfers involving multiple dwellings).

(3) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to land transactions the effective date of which falls on or after 1 June 2024.

(4) But those amendments do not have effect in relation to a land transaction if—

(a) the transaction is effected in pursuance of a contract entered into and substantially performed before 1 June 2024, or

(b) the transaction is effected in pursuance of a contract entered into on or before 6 March 2024 and is not excluded.

(5) For this purpose a land transaction is excluded if—

(a) there is any variation of the contract, or assignment of rights under the contract, after 6 March 2024,

(b) the transaction is effected in consequence of the exercise after that date of any option, right of pre-emption or similar right, or

(c) after that date, there is an assignment, subsale or other transaction relating to the whole or part of the subject-matter of the contract as a result of which a person other than the purchaser under the contract becomes entitled to call for a conveyance.

(6) If—

(a) pre-commencement land transactions are linked to post-commencement land transactions, and

(b) all of the transactions would (but for this Resolution) be relevant transactions for the purposes of Schedule 6B to the Finance Act 2003,

a claim under that Schedule is available only in relation to the pre-commencement land transactions.

(7) If a claim under that Schedule is made in relation to those transactions, none of the post-commencement land transactions are to be regarded any longer as linked to any of the pre-commencement land transactions for the purposes of Schedule 6B to the Finance Act 2003 and all other purposes of Part 4 of that Act.

(8) For this purpose—

“pre-commencement land transactions” means land transactions the effective date of which falls before 1 June 2024 or which meet the condition in paragraph (4) (a) or (b), and “post-commencement land transactions” means all other land transactions.

(9) The amendments made by this Resolution also do not have effect in relation to land transactions the effective date of which falls on or after 1 June 2024 if they fall within a description of land transactions specified in regulations made by the Treasury (irrespective of the date on which the regulations are made).

(10) The regulations may make provision of a kind mentioned in section 114(6)(a) to (c) of the Finance Act 2003 but may not be made on or after 1 February 2025.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

8. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (FIRST-TIME BUYERS' RELIEF: NEW LEASES ACQUIRED ON BARE TRUST)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Schedule 6ZA to the Finance Act 2003 (relief for first-time buyers) is amended as follows.

(2) In Part 1 (eligibility for relief), after paragraph 3 insert—

“Eligibility for relief: acquisition of new lease on bare trust

3A In determining who is the purchaser for the purposes of paragraphs 1(4) and 2(2), paragraph 3 of Schedule 16 is to have effect as if sub-paragraphs (2) and (3) (trustee of bare trust granted a lease treated as purchaser of the whole of the interest acquired) were omitted.”

(3) In paragraph 6 (definition of “first-time buyer”), at the end insert—

“(3) In determining any question for the purposes of sub-paragraph (1), paragraph 3 of Schedule 16 is to have effect as if sub-paragraphs (2) and (3) (trustee of bare trust granted a lease treated as purchaser of the whole of the interest acquired) were omitted.”

(4) The amendment made by paragraph (2) has effect for the purposes of claims for relief under paragraph 1 of Schedule 6ZA to the Finance Act 2003 made in relation to any land transaction the effective date of which falls on or after 6 March 2024.

(5) The amendment made by paragraph (3) also has effect for the purposes of claims for relief under that paragraph made in relation to any land transaction the effective date of which falls on or after that date unless —

(a) the transaction is effected in pursuance of a contract entered into on or before that date, and

(b) the transaction is not excluded,

(6) For this purpose a land transaction is excluded if—

(a) there is any variation of the contract, or assignment of rights under the contract, after 6 March 2024,

(b) the transaction is effected in consequence of the exercise after that date of any option, right of pre-emption or similar right, or

(c) after that date, there is an assignment, subsale or other transaction relating to the whole or part of the subject-matter of the contract as a result of which a person other than the purchaser under the contract becomes entitled to call for a conveyance.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

9. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (REGISTERED PROVIDERS OF SOCIAL HOUSING)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Section 71 of the Finance Act 2003 (certain acquisitions by registered social landlord) is amended as follows.

(2) In the heading, for “registered social landlord” substitute “registered providers of social housing etc”.

(3) In subsection (1), for paragraph (a) substitute—

“(a) the purchaser is a non-profit registered provider of social housing controlled by its tenants.”.

(4) In subsection (1A)—

(a) for paragraph (b) substitute—

“(b) a housing association registered in the register maintained under Article 14 of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 (S.I. 1992/1725 (N.1.15)), or

(c) an English local authority that is a registered provider of social housing.”, and

(b) omit the “or” after paragraph (a).

(5) In subsection (2) for “relevant housing provider”, in each place it occurs, substitute “non-profit registered provider of social housing”.

(6) In subsection (3) —

(a) omit paragraphs (b) and (e) to (g), and

(b) for paragraph (h) substitute—

“(h) the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, or”.

(7) In subsection (4), omit paragraphs (b) and (d) (but not the “or” after paragraph (d)).

(8) In subsection (5) —

(a) after “means” insert “—

(a) any amount that is receipts of the disposal of social housing, provided the purchaser is entitled to use the amount for the purpose of the provision of social housing, or

(b)”, and

(b) in paragraph (b) (which is a result of the previous amendment), omit the words from “within” to the end.

(9) After subsection (5) insert—

“(6) In subsection (5) “social housing” has the meaning it has in Part 2 of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 (see, in particular, section 68 of that Act).

(7) In this section “English local authority” means—

(a) a principal council within the meaning of the Local Government Act 1972, or

(b) the Common Council of the City of London.”

(10) In section 121 of the Finance Act 2003 (minor definitions), omit the definition of “registered social landlord”.

(11) In section 122 of that Act (index of defined expressions), omit the entry for “registered social landlord”.

(12) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to land transactions the effective date of which falls on or after 6 March 2024.

(13) In consequence of those amendments, in section 150 of the Finance Act 2013 (annual tax on enveloped dwellings: relief for providers of social housing etc)—

(a) in subsection (2)(a)—

(i) for “relevant” substitute “qualifying”, and

(ii) omit the words from “(that” to “landlord)”,

(b) in subsection (3), for “relevant”, in each place it occurs, substitute “qualifying”, and

(c) for paragraphs (a) to (c) in subsection (4) substitute—

“(a) subsection (2) of section 71 of FA 2003 applies in relation to a reference to a qualifying housing provider controlled by its tenants as it applies to a reference in that section to a non-profit registered provider of social housing controlled by its tenants;

(b) “qualifying body” means—

(i) anything described as a qualifying body in subsection (3) of that section,

(ii) the Scottish Ministers,

(iii) a council constituted under section 2 of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994, or

(iv) Scottish Homes;

(c) “public subsidy” means—

(i) anything that is a public subsidy for the purposes of section 71 of FA 2003, and for the purposes of this section the reference in subsection (5)(a) of that section to “the purchaser” is to be treated as a reference to P or the qualifying housing provider (as the case may be);

(ii) any grant or other financial assistance under section 18 of the Housing Act 1996 (c. 52) (social housing grants);

(iii) any grant or other financial assistance under section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1988 (c. 43) (general functions of the Scottish Ministers);

(d) “qualifying housing provider” means —

(i) a relevant housing provider (within the meaning of section 71 of FA 2003),

(ii) a body registered as a social landlord in a register maintained under section 1(1) of the Housing Act 1996 (Welsh registered social landlords), or

(iii) a body registered under section 20(1) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 (asp 17) (Scottish registered social landlords).”

(14) Paragraph (13) comes into force on 6 March 2024.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

10. STAMP DUTY LAND TAX (PURCHASES BY PUBLIC BODIES)

Resolved,

That—

(1) In paragraph 3 of Schedule 4A to the Finance Act 2003 (application of the higher rate of 15% to transactions where purchaser is a company etc)—

(a) in sub-paragraph (3)(a) and (b), after “company” insert “but is not a public body”, and

(b) in sub-paragraph (4), at the end insert “and, for the purposes of that sub-paragraph, whether a person is a public body is to be determined in accordance with section 66”.

(2) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to land transactions the effective date of which falls on or after 6 March 2024.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

11. INHERITANCE TAX (AGRICULTURAL PROPERTY RELIEF AND WOODLANDS RELIEF)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for the purposes of inheritance tax restricting agricultural property relief and woodlands relief to land in the United Kingdom.

12. CORPORATION TAX (CHARGE AND MAIN RATE FOR FINANCIAL YEAR 2025)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made—

- (a) for corporation tax to be charged for the financial year 2025, and
- (b) for the main rate of corporation tax for that year to be 25%.

13. CORPORATION TAX (STANDARD SMALL PROFITS RATE AND FRACTION FOR FINANCIAL YEAR 2025)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made—

- (a) for the standard small profits rate to be 19% for the purposes of Part 3A of the Corporation Tax Act 2010 for the financial year 2025, and
- (b) for the standard marginal relief fraction to be 3/200ths for those purposes for that year.

14. CREDIT FOR LOW-BUDGET BRITISH FILMS

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made amending Part 14A of the Corporation Tax Act 2009 so as to provide for the payment of credits in respect of expenditure by companies on the production of films which have a budget not exceeding a specified maximum and which have a specified connection to the United Kingdom.

15. THEATRE TAX CREDIT

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made taking effect in a future year increasing the rates specified in section 1217k(4)(a) and (b) of the Corporation Tax Act 2009 to 45% and 40% respectively.

16. ORCHESTRA TAX CREDIT

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made taking effect in a future year increasing the rate specified in section 1217RG(4) of the Corporation Tax Act 2009 to 45%.

17. MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES EXHIBITION TAX CREDIT

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills)—

- (a) provision may be made omitting paragraph (c) of section 1218ZCG(1) of the Corporation Tax Act 2009 (date before which qualifying expenditure must be incurred), and
- (b) provision may be made taking effect in a future year increasing the rates specified in section 1218ZCH(4)(a) and (b) of that Act to 45% and 40% respectively.

18. ENERGY (OIL AND GAS) PROFITS LEVY (ENERGY SECURITY INVESTMENT MECHANISM)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for the energy (oil and gas) profits levy to cease to apply if the average prices of oil and gas over a specified period are at or below the average of those prices over the period of 20 years ending with 31 December 2022.

19. COLLECTIVE INVESTMENT SCHEMES (UNAUTHORISED CO-OWNERSHIP SCHEMES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made conferring power on the Treasury to make regulations applying any provision made in connection with authorised co-ownership schemes so that it applies (with or without modifications) in connection with unauthorised co-ownership schemes which meet specified conditions.

20. ECONOMIC CRIME (ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING) LEVY (AMOUNT OF CHARGE)

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending section 54(2)(c) of the Finance Act 2022 (amount of charge in case of persons whose UK revenue is very large) by substituting “£500,000” for “£250,000”.

21. TRANSFER OF ASSETS ABROAD (CLOSELY-HELD COMPANIES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Chapter 2 of Part 13 of the Income Tax Act 2007 to deal with cases where assets are transferred by closely-held companies.

22. VALUE ADDED TAX (LATE PAYMENT INTEREST AND REPAYMENT INTEREST)

Resolved,

That—

(1) In Part 2 of Schedule 54A to the Finance Act 2009 (further provision as to late payment interest and repayment interest) —

- (a) in paragraph 5 (interpretation) omit the definition of “VAT credit”,
- (b) in paragraph 7 (conditions for recovery of certain amounts of repayment interest), in sub-paragraph (1), for “on a VAT credit” substitute “in respect of an amount that is, or relates to, value added tax”, and
- (c) in paragraph 8 (common period rules for value added tax) —
 - (i) in sub-paragraph (2), for paragraphs (a) and (b) substitute—
 - “(a) an amount (“the overdue payment”) that is, or relates to, value added tax—
 - (i) is due and payable by the person, and
 - (ii) carries late payment interest, and
 - (b) an amount (“the relevant amount”) that is, or relates to, value added tax—
 - (i) is payable to the person, and
 - (ii) carries repayment interest.”,
 - (ii) in sub-paragraph (3), in the words before paragraph (a), for “During” substitute “In respect of”,
 - (iii) in paragraphs (a) and (b) of that sub-paragraph, for “VAT credit”, in each place it occurs, substitute “relevant amount”, and
 - (iv) after sub-paragraph (3) insert—

- “(4) An amount of repayment interest that —
- (a) has been paid to a person, but
 - (b) as a result of sub-paragraph (3)(b), ought not to have been paid,
- may be recovered from the person as if it were late payment interest.”

(2) The amendments made by this Resolution come into force on 6 March 2024.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

23. VALUE ADDED TAX (OTHER MINOR AMENDMENTS)

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending—

- (a) section 35 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 (refund of VAT to persons constructing certain buildings) in relation to the evidence for claims for refunds of value added tax,
- (b) section 50 of that Act (terminal markets) so as to clarify the powers of the Treasury under that section, and
- (c) Schedule 54A to the Finance Act 2009 (late payment interest and repayment interest) so as to give effect to the amendments made by the preceding Resolution in relation to times before 6 March 2024.

24. COLLECTIVE MONEY PURCHASE SCHEMES

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the treatment under Part 4 of the Finance Act 2004 of—

- (a) sums or assets transferred from a collective money purchase scheme in the course of its winding up, and
- (b) benefits provided from sums or assets transferred as mentioned in paragraph (a).

25. INCIDENTAL OR CONSEQUENTIAL PROVISION

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made which is incidental to, or consequential on, provision authorised by any other Resolution.

FINANCE BILL: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act of the present Session relating to finance, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Commissioners for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs or the Secretary of State which is attributable to provision made for credits to companies in respect of expenditure on the production of films which have a budget not exceeding a specified maximum and which have a specified connection to the United Kingdom.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Laura Trott, Gareth Davies, Bim Afolami and Nigel Huddleston do prepare and bring it in.

FINANCE (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Nigel Huddleston accordingly presented a Bill to make provision in connection with finance.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 179) with explanatory notes (Bill 179-EN).

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am a big believer in honesty, and that I should correct my mistakes should I make one. In yesterday's Budget debate I said that 222,000 families are affected by the two-child limit. I failed to read my own handwriting properly—the House of Commons Library briefing confirms that as of April 2023, 422,000 families are affected by the two-child limit. Could you advise me if it is possible for me to correct the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The hon. Lady will appreciate that that is not a strictly a matter for the Chair, but it is now a matter of record, and she can therefore take it that the record has been set straight.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Representation of the People (Variation of Election Expenses and Exclusions) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

IMMIGRATION

That the draft General Aviation (Persons on Board, Flight Information and Civil Penalties) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 28 November 2023, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

ENERGY

That the draft Energy Bills Discount Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

That the draft Single Source Contract (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

POLICE

That the draft South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (Election of Mayor and Transfer of Police and Crime Commissioner Functions) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PRISONS

That the draft Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Suitability for Fixed Term Recall) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

7.30 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I rise to present this petition, owing to the Budget failing to provide for any allocation of money to those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal. The final compensation recommendations were made by Sir Brian Langstaff, the chair of the infected blood public inquiry, in April 2023. This House voted in December 2023 to establish a body to pay compensation, as an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill. With two victims of the scandal dying on average every week, justice delayed is justice denied.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Kingston Upon Hull North,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002923]

Inclusive PPE

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Wood.)

7.32 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): There have been significant developments in both the design and use of personal protective equipment over the last few decades. UK workplaces are undoubtedly safer as a result. The Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992, now amended to the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations (Amendment) 2022, were an important step forward. They placed a duty on every employer in Great Britain to ensure that suitable PPE is provided to employees who may be exposed to a risk to their health or safety while at work. Regulation 4(3) states that personal protective equipment shall not be suitable unless:

“(b) it takes account of ergonomic requirements and the state of health of the person or persons who may wear it;

(c) it is capable of fitting the wearer correctly, if necessary, after adjustments within the range for which it is designed”.

However, despite being revised seven times since coming into force, the regulations do not make specific mention of women, who I hardly need to remind the Minister comprise half the population, or to others with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. That omission continues to have significant, real-world consequences.

The world is finally waking up to the fact that women are not just smaller men, whether that is in the design of crash test dummies or in the creation only three years ago of the first anatomically accurate female 3D physiological model for medical students. PPE needs to be designed with the female anatomy in mind. That also applies to the needs of others who are not catered for by a typical male body pattern.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for raising this issue; I spoke to her about it before the debate. It is so important for everyone to have access to PPE that fits correctly depending on the industry in which they work, including the female construction workers who the hon. Lady has referred to. Back home, I have been contacted by constituents about the provision of PPE for pregnant women who are still working towards the end of their pregnancies. Should not more consideration be given to ensuring that they have correctly fitting PPE, as they are more at risk from hazards and other safety concerns in the workplace? Let us do it right for them.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree. That is exactly what the debate is about—ensuring that everyone is safe while at work.

In September last year, the National Association of Women in Construction Yorkshire published a research report on women's PPE in the construction industry. I pay tribute to its author, Katy Robinson. Not only is she a resident of my area, but she inspired the speech that I am making tonight. She is also the campaign manager of NAWIC Yorkshire, a voluntary role that she undertakes outside work. She told me that most PPE distributors do stock women's PPE, but the issue sometimes lies with employers, despite such PPE being readily available on the market. Her study found that

[Emma Hardy]

59.6% of employers did not provide women-specific PPE, which resulted in women wearing PPE designed for men and led to issues relating to ill-fitting PPE.

Ill-fitting PPE was found to cause a range of health and safety issues, including increased slips, trips and falls, an increased risk of entanglement, a limited range of motion, decreased dexterity from gloves, and impaired vision from safety glasses. Worryingly, 42% of women reported experiences relating to ill-fitting PPE which had had an impact on their careers. Long-term health problems included plantar fasciitis, Morton's neuroma and tendinitis from poorly-fitting safety boots, and injury from suspension trauma and circulation damage as a result of ill-fitting harnesses.

According to other studies, 40% of women have reported experiencing an injury or incident that they identified as being related to PPE, 32% have had to make alterations or adjustments to PPE to make it fit, 77% have been exposed to dangers because of ill-fitting PPE, and 57% have found that their PPE sometimes or significantly hampered their work.

Every study reported that the majority of PPE is designed for men, and is based on outdated information and measurements. It could be argued that that is due to a historical lack of women in some sectors of industry and that those sectors just need some time to "catch up", but there are also issues involving ill-fitting PPE in female-dominated industries such as healthcare, where it became a headline issue during the covid-19 pandemic.

Inclusive PPE is defined as personal protective equipment that takes into consideration the user's protected characteristics, and momentum for change is building. Katy Robinson, who I mentioned earlier, founded the PPE Campaign with the aim of addressing

"the widespread inequalities in PPE provision and design among minority groups across the construction industry and beyond".

The Chartered Institute of Building has launched a "PPE that fits" campaign to drive awareness of the way in which ill-fitting PPE is affecting health and safety on site while also hampering the industry's ability to attract and retain a more diverse workforce. The Considerate Constructors Scheme, which helps the construction industry to raise its standards through construction site accreditation, has mandated the requirement of women-specific PPE. SHP is running a campaign called "Protection for everyone" to raise awareness of the issue, and locally, East Riding of Yorkshire Council voted to urge the UK Government to enforce inclusive PPE in industries involving science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Arco, which is based in my constituency and a leading UK provider of health and safety products and PPE, recognises the need for change and fully supports the campaign to improve inclusivity. I understand that this campaigning is indeed leading to change and that an increase in women's PPE provision has been seen since it began, but workers deserve a guarantee that they will be protected.

The Minister may say that the issues I have highlighted are covered by the regulations, but there is overwhelming evidence that as they stand, the regulations are not effective in ensuring that large numbers of workers are receiving the protection they need. Reference to the Equality Act 2010 can be found in guidance surrounding the regulations, but it is not statutory. Well-fitting PPE

should not be seen as best practice; it should be the minimum standard. An increasing number of manufacturers are creating products designed for women, including maternity PPE, and those that do typically sell them at the same cost point as men's. Unfortunately, some manufacturers still only make men's PPE, meaning that they can sell them at a cheaper cost point, as there is more demand for it and they make a loss on women's PPE—hence the assumption that men's PPE is cheaper than women's. This gives a competitive advantage to companies that choose to ignore 50% of the population and all others with protected characteristics who suffer from the impact of ill-fitting PPE.

I believe that specific reference to the Equality Act 2010 is a significant omission from the regulations and should be addressed. I acknowledge that the regulations have been regularly revised since they were drafted, and I note that it was rightly seen fit in the Personal Protective Equipment at Work (Amendment) Regulations 2022 to change the pronouns from he/his to they/theirs to be more inclusive, but the regulations did not address the issue that is materially affecting thousands of people's lives and careers. I urge the Minister to return to them and make the necessary changes.

7.40 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): May I start by congratulating the hon. Lady on securing such an important and interesting Adjournment debate? I would like to stress from the outset that the Government entirely support her assertion that personal protective equipment issued to workers should be inclusive and, of course, meet individual needs. The Government recognise that when we refer to "inclusive" in this context, it is not just a matter of gender, because the requirement covers disabilities, race and religion, which really emphasises the personal in PPE.

I understand the hon. Lady's point about providers waking up to the anatomy of women, and I fully agree. The availability of Mary Earps's World cup jersey was probably a bit too late for the hon. Lady's liking, mine and many others' as well.

I congratulate Katy Robinson on her work with women in construction. In my time looking after the Health and Safety Executive, it has been a delight to hear women's voices, and Katy is obviously a leading light.

It is the legal duty of employers to protect their workers from risks to their health and safety, and they must consider ways in which they can remove or reduce risk by any other means before PPE is provided. PPE includes high-visibility clothing, safety helmets, gloves, footwear and hearing protection. It should be regarded as the last resort to protect against risks to health and safety, but a rounded approach must be taken. For many workers, PPE is issued by employers to ensure that they are protected against risks that cannot otherwise be controlled, as I have outlined. PPE may be needed to reduce the risk of ill health and injury from hazards, such as breathing in dust or fumes, being splashed with corrosive liquids that may damage eyes or skin, and excessive noise, which may affect hearing and create hearing loss.

I turn to a couple of points made by the hon. Lady, and I will try to reassure her. I understand that the relevant trade association, the British Safety Industry

Federation, is initiating a project with the British Standards Institution to look at whether industry standards can be better framed to ensure that inclusive PPE is better designed. Manufacturers make up a significant proportion of those who sit on the relevant British standards technical committees for products of this type and, rightly, they are capable of influencing the range of what can be supplied.

The hon. Lady talked about the Equality Act and set out a number of protected characteristics that prevent workers from being discriminated against in the regulations. The protected characteristics cover age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy, maternity, race, religion or belief, and sex and sexual orientation.

On the HSE's comprehensive guidance, I note the hon. Lady's ask for statutory guidance, and I am sure that it will be listening to her queries. I am sure that if there is anything I cannot cover in the debate, we will be writing to her about it. The HSE guidance already clarifies the position relating to workers with protected characteristics and states that PPE provided must take this into account. There is no exemption from the regulations for disabled people, and suitable PPE must be worn and provided if the risk assessment indicates that it is required. I hope that that reassures the House.

It is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that suitable personal protective equipment is provided to workers who may be exposed to a risk to their health and safety, to increase the likelihood of acceptance of and happiness with that equipment. As the hon. Lady pointed out, ill-fitting boots present trip hazards and overalls with sleeves or cuffs that are too long increase the risk of entrapment in moving machinery, so it is important that PPE fits well. She mentioned the need for suitability to anatomy as well.

The design of PPE is regulated by UK regulation 2016/425 on personal protective equipment. Annex II of the regulation sets out the essential health and safety requirements that PPE must meet. This includes requirements that cover comfort and effectiveness. The hon. Lady also pointed out an issue with the lack of employer awareness when procuring items, rather than those items not being available, so tonight's debate is a welcome opportunity for us to spell out what employers should be doing.

Let me turn to the existing requirements in the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992. Where PPE is necessary, the regulations already state that the ergonomic requirements and the health condition of the person wearing it must be taken into account. It is clearly important that the wearer of the PPE should always be involved in the process, to increase the likelihood of the acceptance and effectiveness of the equipment. For any employees listening, that is equally important for them to know. In this context, "suitable" means that it is appropriate for the risks involved and, more importantly, takes into account ergonomic requirements, the health conditions of the wearer, and the fact that it is capable of fitting the wearer correctly without further increasing the risk. Those regulations are there, and I reiterate that to the House this evening.

The Health and Safety Executive and local authorities are responsible for regulating and enforcing the provision of PPE at work. Those authorities will take robust action if they receive reports of employers who do not

ensure that PPE that meets the requirements is issued to workers. They have also published a range of readily available guidance to assist employers to comply with their obligations. This highlights the fact that "one size fits all" is unacceptable. I bought my own protective boots for site visits so that I know they will fit correctly.

Emma Hardy: On that point, I can give the Minister a concrete example. I visit certain places with a member of my office staff who has size 3 feet, and she is unable to find any boots that fit her. That is a regular occurrence when we go on these visits. People assume that everyone has larger feet.

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. My feet are hardly the size of Kylie Minogue's, sadly, but sometimes those boots are just too big, aren't they?

The Equality Act 2010 sets out a number of protected characteristics, including gender, race, disability and religion. If a risk assessment undertaken by the employer indicates that it is necessary, PPE should be suitable and sufficient, and of course those protected characteristics must be taken into account. Those requirements under the regulations are enforceable. It is right to remind people that there is suitable guidance, both for industry and inspectors.

Taking a slight step back from the PPE issues, and turning to product safety and ensuring safety through design and manufacture, the Office for Product Safety and Standards is responsible for the legislative and standards framework that governs PPE, which is also regulated by regulation 2016/425. Annex II sets out the essential health and safety requirements that PPE must meet, which include comfort and effectiveness:

"PPE must be designed and manufactured in such a way as to facilitate its correct positioning on the user and to remain in place for the foreseeable period of use, bearing in mind ambient factors, the actions to be carried out and the postures to be adopted. For this purpose, it must be possible to adapt the PPE to fit the morphology of the user by all appropriate means, such as adequate adjustment and attachment systems or the provision of an adequate range of sizes."

I am sure the hon. Lady is pointing to that this evening.

Supporting these regulations is a suite of technical standards. Manufacturers make up a significant proportion of the members of the technical committees for these products, and they have the ability to influence the range that is supplied in this way. Again, this debate is a timely reminder that these regulations do not mandate manufacturers to produce PPE for specific users. However, the Government support any initiative—we have heard about some tonight—that improves design to meet the needs of the full range of users.

I understand from the OPSS that gender-responsive standards have been raised by industry groups, and that the British Safety Industry Federation is initiating a project with the British Standards Institution to look at how those industry standards can be better framed to ensure that PPE in particular is designed better and more appealingly for women.

Although the development of standards can take years, the law is clear about what is required. PPE must be suitable for the task and for each individual. I took time to reflect on the issue in preparation for this debate, and I am aware of the significant steps that have recently been taken by manufacturers. It seems clear

[Mims Davies]

that they are working harder than ever to increase their understanding of their customers' needs, which has partly driven an increase in the range available, but tonight proves the point.

I have been made aware of at least one article that suggests the perceived lack of available inclusive PPE is more about employers' lack of awareness in procuring the right items than about items not being readily available. In addition, a recent article in *New Civil Engineer* highlighted the PPE campaign that is working to raise awareness and to address inequalities in PPE provision and design for minority groups. There is a focus on women, but it also covers wider minority groups. One success highlighted in the article, relating to PPE and inclusivity, was that after a procurement team was alerted to the fact that items were available, those items were subsequently included in the internal procurement catalogue. Again, the issue was about awareness.

Although I am touching on successes in recent work, there is clearly more to be done. That is what tonight's debate is about and why the Health and Safety Executive

has lent its support to the "Protection for Everyone" campaign launched by *Safety and Health Practitioner*. The campaign aims to raise awareness about the effect of ill-fitting PPE and contains stories from those who have faced challenges in getting suitable PPE. The Government wholeheartedly support this message and we look forward to seeing how it progresses

The debate has provided a welcome opportunity to explore PPE. As I said to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, if there are further points that are relevant, I will respond to her in writing. I hope this reassures hon. Members in the Chamber this evening, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—we would expect nothing less—and others, that the legislation on PPE is appropriate. The Government are committed to raising awareness and, as some hon. Members mentioned, encouraging more manufacturers to provide PPE that is fully inclusive for their customers and their users.

Question put and agreed to.

7.54 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 12 March 2024

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

State Pension Changes: Women

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered compensation for women affected by state pension changes.

I thank each and every Member who has come to speak in the debate, and I am greatly encouraged that they have, as are those from the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign in the audience today, who are here to ask us, as MPs, to speak for them.

This is not an issue that any of us is unaware of. My emails in the last few days have been incredible. People do not understand the unfairness of what has happened, so let me take a moment to put the issue into context and to set the scene—I am conscious of time, Sir Gary, and I gave you a commitment earlier that I would give everyone else a chance to contribute.

The WASPI women are the generation of women born in the 1950s who have been adversely affected by the changes to the state pension age in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They argue that they were not given adequate notice of transitional arrangements to adjust to the increase in their state pension age from 60 to 65 or 66, depending on their date of birth. That is the crux of this debate.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate and for the great work he is doing. Unfortunately, Sir Gary, I have to leave early, so I will not be making a speech. The hon. Member said that the so-called WASPI women “argue” that they were not properly advised and informed, but the stage 1 report produced by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman actually confirmed that they were not properly advised and informed.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, and he is absolutely right. I will come to that point and confirm it. The issue is all about fairness and equality, but, with respect to the Minister and the Government, they have fallen down on that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I too congratulate my hon. Friend and colleague on securing the debate. He is a champion for women on this issue not only in his constituency but across the UK. Does he, like me, feel that last week’s Budget was a complete and total missed opportunity? The Government could have done something for these women if they really cared. They were able to step in and resolve issues to do with the Post Office, so why have they not been able to step in here, show a bit of compassion and demonstrate that they are prepared to solve this issue? Some 260,000 women have died since the campaign started in 2015. That is a disgrace, and the Government should act now.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend and colleague is absolutely right, which is why we are all here to make that case.

The WASPI women claim that the issue has caused them financial hardship, emotional distress and health problems. Many have had to work longer than expected, rely on benefits or use their savings to cope with the gap in their income. The hon. Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) is a strong supporter of WASPI women, and although he was unable to come today because of a prior engagement, he does support everyone else here.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I too thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. Some 8,000 WASPI women live in my constituency, and many have been in touch with me. They are at their wits’ end and do not know how they will manage financially—one constituent told me that they have had to sell their home. Does the hon. Member agree that Ministers should accept the clear findings of maladministration in the ombudsman’s stage 1 report and that the Government should commit to meeting the compensation recommendations as soon as the final report is published—if the Government care?

Jim Shannon: Absolutely, and we all say hear, hear to that.

The WASPI women also contend that they have been discriminated against on the grounds of sex and age and that they have been disproportionately impacted by the changes, compared with men and younger women. On behalf of those in the audience today, I very much agree with that assertion.

Actions to inform the women are felt to have been inadequate—I am using very gentle language in saying that—and did not go far enough. The changes to the state pension age were primarily enacted through legislative measures such as the Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2011. The Government claim that those changes were publicised through official Government publications in the belief that those were accessible to the public, but the fact is that they were not.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I too commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this really important debate. He puts his finger on the nub of the unfairness here: it was not just one Pensions Act that affected these women; many were subsequently affected by a further Pensions Act in 2011, so they were hit twice by the same injustice. It is all fine and well for the Government to say they do not accept that unfairness, but the reality is that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has already ruled that there was maladministration in the functioning of the policy. Is it not time that the Government just accepted that and did what is right by these women?

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Just a reminder that interventions should be brief.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Sir Gary. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman. Yes, there is maladministration, and I will use that word again shortly.

Many of the women concerned may not have been actively engaged with Government or have had knowledge of or access to Government publications. In that case, how could they have been informed to an extent that

[*Jim Shannon*]

would have made a difference? That is the crux of the matter and of the debate, and it is why we are all here. This is about equality for women, and there has been a level of unfairness in the pensions system.

It is important to remember that women born in the 1950s entered a labour market and a society that was different from what young women experience today. They began working in the 1960s, in their teens, in a workforce where women were paid less than men and were expected to leave their jobs when they married or began a family.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on his powerful opening speech. I am sure he will agree that it is important that we get on the record from the Minister today that the Department for Work and Pensions accepts the findings in the stage 1 report of maladministration. Most importantly, it must also act swiftly to compensate the women and the families of the women who have passed while waiting for compensation.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Everybody's interventions so far have added to the debate and reinforced the issue.

Back when ladies started to work, there were no remunerated childcare schemes and it was not standard practice for ladies to be offered access to work pension schemes.

With all due respect to the Minister, the DWP has fallen down on this matter. The Department admitted in 2009 that direct communication with those affected by increases in the state pension age was limited. In 1995, leaflets explaining the changes were available from the Benefits Agency, but only on request. In other words, if someone wanted to know anything—if they even knew to ask—that is what they should have asked for. The fact is that the DWP has a responsibility.

Some 16 million voluntary letters were issued in the form of automatic pension forecasts projecting state pension entitlements, including to women aged over 50 at the time. Those letters did not include any details of state pension age or mention that it was changing, so those women were not fully notified. That is what this debate is about. When we look back specifically to the years between 1995 and 2000, we are reminded that we lived in a relatively pre-internet world, where information was not so readily available at the click of a button and social media did not exist. In the late 1990s, we had only five TV channels, and 24-hour broadcasting was still a thing of the future.

The DWP survey of 2004 asked working-age adults about awareness of state pension age equalisation. The results showed that, of those who were aware, 47% got their information from TV advertising, 37% were informed by reading a newspaper and only 2%—only 2%—cited the Pension Service as their source of information. The Pension Service had the responsibility, and it failed badly. Some 98% of those who qualified did not even know from the state Pension Service what should have been happening. That is a massive issue, and it has to be addressed. Furthermore, despite the efforts made through television and newspaper advertising, access to what we

see now as the most basic avenues of communication was limited for women who were not securely housed or in unstable domestic environments.

WASPI women deserve to be compensated for the injustice they have had to face, and that compensation should be based on the principles of recognition, restitution and reconciliation. We could call them the three Rs—it is almost like going back to school—but here they apply to the WASPI women and pensions.

The first principle of compensation is recognition, and quite clearly there is a lot to do. The Government should acknowledge the harm and suffering caused by the changes to the state pension age, the inadequate communication of those changes and the failure to consult the women concerned for the reasons I have outlined. Recognition is important for restoring the dignity and trust of these women and for validating their experiences and grievances. It is also a precondition of achieving justice and reconciliation, as it shows that the Government are willing to take responsibility and to make amends for their actions. That is what this is about.

To date, there has been resistance to offering a formal apology to the WASPI women, and the Government have argued that the actions that were taken were lawful and reasonable. Let us be quite clear: they were not. That stance has been challenged by the PHSO, which found in 2021 that the Department for Work and Pensions had committed maladministration, as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) referred to in an intervention.

The PHSO also found that, by failing to act quickly enough to inform the women about the changes to their state pension age, the DWP had not given due regard to the impact of the changes on the women's lives and offered them no adequate support or guidance. The PHSO recommended that the Government should apologise to the women and pay them compensation for the distress and inconvenience caused by the DWP's maladministration—I use that word because it is the right word; it describes exactly what happened.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for the speech he has made so far. People have been waiting three years since the report he has just outlined. Does he agree that justice delayed is justice denied and that the Government should, as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said, compensate them now and use this Budget to deliver that compensation?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for that, and he is right: there is a real onus on Government to reach out and help.

The PHSO also found that the DWP had not given due regard to the impact of the changes on women's lives and had not offered women adequate support or guidance. It recommended that the Government should apologise to the women and pay them compensation for all those things, including the maladministration. The Government should take positive steps following the PHSO's findings and recommendations and issue that sincere and public apology to the WASPI women. That would be a significant gesture of respect and remorse and a first step towards repairing the relationship between Government and the women we all represent.

The second principle of compensation is restitution. The Government should restore the affected women to the position they would have been in had the changes to the state pension not occurred, or at least mitigate the negative effects of the changes. Restitution is important for compensating the women for the material and non-material losses they have incurred and for ensuring that they can enjoy a decent and dignified retirement. Wow! How much do we all want to see a decent and dignified retirement? Restitution is also a way to correct the imbalance and inequality caused by the changes and to ensure that the women are not penalised for their sex and their age.

The WASPI women will have different views and demands in terms of what constitutes fair and adequate restitution. Some want a bridging pension or a lump sum payment to cover the gap between their expected and actual state pension age. There really has to be something, and we need to see that coming forward. The restitution that each woman should receive may also depend on their individual circumstances, such as their income, health and caring responsibilities.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I join the chorus of congratulations to the hon. Gentleman for organising this debate. Like many here, he will have constituents who are starting to receive draft reports from the ombudsman about the second report, which will trigger the payment of the restitution he just mentioned. Obviously, they are in draft and we cannot comment on them now, but does he agree that if there is a final conclusion of injustice, to go alongside that of maladministration, it is essential that there is a rapid reaction from the Government to deal with that and to respond promptly, with a proper programme of compensation? Does he also agree that this will be incredibly complicated because lots of WASPI women, depending on their age and conditions, will have faced a different level of injustice, and everything has to be adjusted to reflect that?

Jim Shannon: I do agree with that. The Minister is obviously taking copious notes, and the civil servants have not had their heads up since the debate started, so I suspect and hope that they will have the answers we need.

The Government must adopt a flexible and tailored approach to restitution, based on the needs and preferences of the WASPI women. They should consult the women and their representatives to design a system of recompense that is fair, transparent and accessible. I call on the Government and the Minister to consider the PHSO's recommendations when it publicises its final report on the financial remedy for the women in due course. If they do that, we will have taken a step in the right direction. The PHSO has indicated that it will consider the impact of the changes on the women's standard of living, health and wellbeing, as well as the availability and adequacy of alternative sources of income and support.

The Government should also ensure that the restitution is delivered promptly and efficiently—do both those things—and ensure that the women are given clear and accurate information and guidance on how to claim and receive their compensation. The Government should

monitor and evaluate the implementation of the restitution scheme and its outcomes, and adjust the scheme if necessary to ensure its effectiveness and fairness.

The third principle of compensation is reconciliation. It is a word often used in society, but reconciliation is what we want here. That means the Government should foster a positive and constructive relationship with the WASPI women and their representatives, and address the underlying causes and consequences of the changes to the state pension age. Reconciliation is important for healing the wounds and divisions caused by the changes and for building trust and co-operation between the Government and the women. Reconciliation is also a way of preventing similar injustices from happening in the future, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred to. If we do it right now, it will be in place for the future and will ensure that the pensions system is sustainable and equitable for all.

The Government should engage in a dialogue and partnership with the women and listen to their views and concerns. They should involve the women in the decision-making and policymaking processes related to the pensions system and ensure that their voices and interests are represented and respected. The Government should recognise and celebrate the contribution and achievements of the WASPI women, and support their empowerment and participation in society. They have done so much, and we salute and thank them for that.

The Government should address the broader issues and challenges that affect the pensions system and the ageing population, such as the adequacy and security of pension income, the availability and affordability of social care, the quality and accessibility of health services, the diversity and inclusivity of the labour market, and the promotion and protection of human rights. The Government should adopt a holistic and long-term approach to those issues, and seek the input and collaboration of the WASPI women and various stakeholders, including other pensioners, workers, employers, civil society and the public.

Compensating 3.8 million WASPI women is not only a matter of rectifying past injustices, but a recognition of the hardships they have endured due to the sudden and unexpected changes to their pension entitlements. Importantly, it is a recognition of the place in history held by this wonderful post-war generation of women from all communities across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I was hesitating before intervening on the hon. Gentleman—

Jim Shannon: I have not finished.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Everyone calm down. This is an intervention.

Peter Aldous: I apologise. I was hesitating before saying anything because I did not want to stop the hon. Gentleman in his flow setting out what Government need to do. Does he recognise that there is a vital and pivotal role for Parliament to play when we receive the ombudsman's final report in considering it and making recommendations to Government, which the Government should then properly and fully respond to so as to uphold the office of the ombudsman?

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon to finish off.

Jim Shannon: I had not finished; I was giving way to the hon. Gentleman. I am almost there, by the way. I will keep to your timescale, Sir Gary, simply because everyone here deserves to give their input. I told you I would do that and I will do that.

Compensating those 3.8 million women is recognition of the place in history held by that wonderful post-war generation. I say that again because that is why I am here: to speak for those ladies who contact me in my office all the time. Those are the women who have collectively and individually played a pivotal role in shaping and inspiring change in society. We salute those women for what they have done over the years. They have contributed to the workforce and society throughout their lives, and they deserve to retire with dignity and financial security.

The WASPI women were the mothers, nurses, cleaners, dinner ladies, shop workers, teachers, carers, factory and farm workers—the list goes on. That is only a small group of who those people were. They were trailblazers for women in society and role models for subsequent generations of women, so when the time comes in the debate, let us do the right thing by them—it is imperative that we do.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is paying such a beautiful and wonderful tribute to that group of women that I feel I must rise to mention the more than 4,000 WASPI women in my constituency, the 700 who signed a petition in 2016 and waited all these years, and the two who are my sisters, who very much reflect everything he says. Time is toxic—they have waited so very long. Does he agree that we cannot wait any longer? Every year we are losing our WASPI women.

Jim Shannon: It is fitting that the last intervention on my contribution was from a hon. Lady who has staff who fall into that category, along with many in the Public Gallery today. For me, and for all of us here, it is a simple thing. Wrongs have to be righted—that is our job as MPs. There is pressure on all of us, on both sides of the Chamber, but there is more pressure on the Minister and the Government. They must deliver what is right. Let us stand by the WASPI women and make sure that they get what they should.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, all of you who have eyes will recognise that we have a dozen or so contributions to squeeze in and just under 40 minutes. It will be three minutes each, voluntarily. I will impose it if colleagues do not play ball. I am sure we will all be on our best behaviour.

9.50 am

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate, and for his tireless work on the campaign. I also pay tribute to the WASPI organisation for its campaigning efforts across Britain. Over 4,000 constituents in Cynon Valley are affected, and I am currently working with an active group of women campaigning for justice for WASPI women.

In July 2021, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's stage 1 report found clear maladministration in the way the DWP communicated state pension age changes. The DWP has still never publicly accepted that finding. The release of the final pages of the stage 2 report will make findings about the impact of the DWP's maladministration, and the stage 3 report will make recommendations on compensation. We have heard that both are expected in the coming weeks, and I echo colleagues' comments for the Minister to give us an update, and a specific date on which the announcement will be made.

In January 2024, the *Daily Mirror* reported that 260,000 WASPI women had died since the start of the campaign back in 2015. I have heard some harrowing stories of women's experiences, as I am sure everyone in the Chamber today has. People have even lost their houses because of the situation; there have been tragic cases. People have been plunged into poverty through no fault of their own, and have felt abandoned given the length of time the investigation has taken. That is why we desperately need action now.

I have supported, and continue to support, the case for full restitution, because that is in principle the right demand. I also welcome and support the WASPI calls for a one-off payment from the Government as fair and fast compensation. We must compensate these women, ideally at the ombudsman level 6 band of financial remedy—and the more, the better. Ideally it should be full restitution. I also welcome serious demands, such as those from the all-party parliamentary group for state pension inequality for women, and the State Pension Age (Compensation) Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

The Treasury saved over £200 billion through the changes that have been made to women's state pensions. It is yet another example of horrific injustice, alongside the Post Office scandal, Hillsborough, and the contaminated blood inquiry. Time is of the essence. To reflect the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) earlier, justice delayed is justice denied. Please, can the Minister indicate a hard deadline for the awarding of compensation payments? Will the women receive the money before the general election? The women have waited far too long, and too many families have seen them pass on without compensation. We must deliver now.

9.54 am

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important and timely debate. The Government's failure to come forward with proposals for compensating the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign is a disgrace. Tens of thousands of women have been plunged into poverty through no fault of their own, and many of them now feel abandoned given the length of time that this investigation has taken. Their situation has also been severely exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. As others have said, the Government have shown that they can act swiftly to end long-running injustices when they feel the need to do so. I strongly feel that the WASPI women should be afforded the same justice and dignity as victims of the Post Office scandal, and that should happen without further delay.

We must never forget the reality of what has happened here: 3.8 million women were given the bombshell news that their state pension age would increase from 60 to 66, just as they were about to retire and when it was too late for them to do any proper financial planning. Many were already in ill health, and others had taken early retirement and were planning to hang on until age 60 when they would receive the state pension, but all their hopes were dashed.

Last week we celebrated International Women's Day, and on Sunday we celebrated Mother's Day, but all the fine words about women's contribution to society mean nothing unless action is taken to compensate women who have been as badly treated as the WASPI women. In Ireland last week, we saw a salutary lesson of how a Government who try to write women off can be defeated when women and their supporters rise up to protect their rights. This Government need to remember that the WASPI women have votes, and so do their husbands, partners, children, friends and supporters.

It is important to be clear what this debate is about, because the Department for Work and Pensions sometimes has a habit of muddying the waters. The WASPI campaigners have spoken to me, and they want me to stress that their campaign is for fair and fast compensation. They have always supported pension equalisation between men and women, but their issue is the unfair way in which the changes were brought about. I would like the Minister to reassure me that when the DWP is asked for comment on the WASPI campaign in future, it will stick to the facts of what the campaign is about and will not issue misleading statements conflating it with other campaigns.

The questions that the Minister must answer today are very clear. Others will enumerate them but I make no apology for doing so now, because I want to ensure that the Minister and those advising him have the questions fully noted and that they answer them at the end of the debate. First, the PHSO stage 1 report was published in July 2021. Do Ministers accept the clear findings of maladministration in that report? Secondly, it was said around the time of the stage 1 report that Ministers could be proactive in finding a remedy. Do Ministers regret not taking that advice and moving more quickly, rather than leaving more and more women waiting and some dying with justice not being done? Finally, given that the investigation by the PHSO has taken more than five years and over a quarter of a million affected women have died during the lifetime of the WASPI campaign, do Ministers think that the system as a whole has treated women acceptably?

9.57 am

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I shall be brief. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) who articulated many of our concerns.

There is a clear message that justice is on the side of the WASPI ladies. They are an uncomplaining group, but they have an overwhelmingly obvious case. They brought up families, often held down jobs and played a phenomenal role in many of our constituencies, including mine, through many different community groups and organisations such as the women's institute. Not only was their rate of pay often not the same when they

were in the workplace, but they now find a second injustice in the maladministration—probably—of their pensions.

We may not get a perfect situation, but my message for the Minister is very simple: if we find in the next few months, as I suspect we will, that the WASPI case is right and we need to act on it, and that the Government and the DWP have not behaved in the way they should have done, there is a simple remedy. I personally would love to see a May election, but if we go through to November, the likelihood is that there will be another financial statement this year from the Government. I beg the Government and urge the Minister to listen very closely to the voices here. If it is deemed to be the right thing to do, as it almost certainly will be, we have a chance—not only for reasons of politics but for reasons of ethics and doing the right thing, because we do not want another scandal on this issue as well as many others—for the Government to issue a recompense process of some kind in an autumn financial statement.

To sum up, justice is on the side of the WASPI women. We need to recognise that and act on it, and the sooner we do so, the better.

9.59 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Sometimes we do not have a collective memory in Parliament. I will briefly go through some of the history of the last 10 years in which I and others have been dealing with this issue, because we need to learn its lessons.

In debates held here in 2015 we recognised the immense suffering people had gone through and the injustice of the case itself. Between 2015 and 2017 we tried to get cross-party agreement for a compensation scheme, but it was rejected. As shadow Chancellor at the time I met with all the various campaigning groups, including the WASPI women, and we asked Bryn Davies—now Lord Bryn Davies—a prime pensions expert in the field, to develop a scheme, which we brought forward in 2019. In a normal electoral cycle it would have been implemented by agreement, hopefully by 2020-21, but it was not, as we had an election campaign at that time.

The scheme balanced compensation with ready implementation and was relatively straightforward and simple. However, at the time the argument against it was cost—that at £12 billion a year over a four-year period it was too expensive. The Government had already saved £200 billion from those affected women; £48 billion may well have seemed expensive, but I remind people that at that time interest rates were on the floor.

The compensation scheme was relatively cheap, would have been paid over a limited period of time and would have delivered compensation to those women. I believed it was a legal contingent liability anyway and that it should have been brought forward from the Contingencies Fund, even if we were then forced to borrow, relatively cheaply. Had that happened, that scheme would have been paid out by now and the affected women would have been compensated. The 216,000 women who have died would have received something—but tragically they are now lost.

The conclusion is that I do not want to be here in another five or 10 years' time arguing the case. I agree with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely): we

[John McDonnell]

have the autumn statement. A relatively simple scheme should be brought forward so that the money can get out the door very quickly. I fear there is no sense of urgency from the Government, so we must create a cross-party sense of urgency. My other fear is that the ombudsman will bring forward its final report and the compensation levels offered will be trivial, which would be unacceptable given the suffering that people have gone through.

I appeal to the Government to listen to hon. Members on both sides of this House. The Government rejected and opposed the our earlier scheme, and by doing so they have probably enhanced the cost of compensation now. Let us grasp the nettle. Sometimes tackling injustices can be expensive, but it is right.

10.2 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate in Jim Shannon hall this morning—[*Laughter.*] He is an assiduous supporter of the WASPI women.

There are over 12,000 WASPI women in Renfrewshire, and one is a constituent of mine whose case is currently with the ombudsman. She has worked alongside me and my office team for nearly nine years, trying to get justice for herself and the other 1950s women—that is how long this saga has been going on. Just the other week I held my thousandth constituency advice surgery, and she came along to it; we joked that I think she had been to 100 of them—but like the rest of my jokes it is not funny.

The ombudsman was in no doubt that maladministration took place under the DWP's watch. What is scandalous is that the DWP refuses to accept those findings and instead has buried its head in the sand and left complainants in limbo. The ombudsman stated, "We would also have proposed recommending DWP provide appropriate remedy for others who have suffered injustice because of maladministration... However, DWP has refused to accept our findings of maladministration. Complainants, and others affected by DWP's maladministration, urgently need resolution."

1950s women have experienced huge financial detriment to themselves and their families through no fault of their own. Life-changing decisions were taken without the correct information, and only years later were those women suddenly confronted with the consequences of this issue—consequences that could have been avoided if the DWP had done its job properly.

The ombudsman said that the DWP is "not directly responsible or accountable" and that any "financial loss resulting from choices they made was not direct financial loss." I could not disagree more with that conclusion. Women should have been taken at their word, not asked to provide counter-evidence to a standard that is utterly unrealistic and impossible for many. There has to be accountability for those failings that the ombudsman clearly highlighted, and be justice for the women let down by the system and compensation for those adversely affected by decisions taken by the DWP that were outwith their control.

My constituent has worked for 50 years, paying her national insurance contributions all the way, yet does not receive a full state pension, and the ombudsman concluded that she would be due compensation at only a low level—1 or 2. That in no way equates to the enormous impact this issue has had on her physical and mental health, following decisions she took long before she was made aware of any changes to her pension age. There are too many women who have sadly passed away over recent years before seeing some closure for the injustice they have suffered. They will never see compensation or any kind of remedy for what they and their families have gone through.

It is time for this Government—or indeed any incoming Government—to do the right thing by these women and ensure state pension justice for all the women, including my constituent, who have been victims of the DWP's failings and who have campaigned tirelessly against this injustice.

10.6 am

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on a very eloquent speech putting forward this case.

The two aspects I wish to concentrate on are injustice and restitution. There is a manifest injustice. Others have mentioned similar injustices that have taken place in our society: Horizon, which is ongoing, the blood scandal, Windrush and others. They may be down to individual, corporate or departmental error. In many instances, they may require criminal proceedings, or disciplinary action may be required—but equally, as a society, we need to resolve that manifest injustice. That is why we have schemes such as the criminal injuries compensation scheme. We live as a society, and a sin against one is a sin against all. The state requires to ensure that those who suffer are compensated, especially when it is because of a Government Department.

That takes us to restitution. The damage inflicted upon these women is not simply that which can be quantified, because there is also an unquantifiable loss. Therefore, the restitution must take some account of the pain and suffering. When we grow up and move from childhood to the world of work, our dreams and aspirations may often not be fulfilled—but those dreams exist. Similarly, as people reach an age where they prepare for retirement, many have dreams about what they wish to do.

Some may not wish to retire, and that is perfectly legitimate, but others feel that they have contributed their bit and they wish to have some time of their own, doing what they want. That might simply be looking after grandchildren or tending the garden; they might wish to sail around the world or write a novel—that is a matter for them. But they have those dreams that they were entitled to receive.

The problem is that the changes that were made and the injustice inflicted upon those people have taken those dreams away. Many have not been able to look after the grandchildren or tend the garden as they wished, never mind any of the other, less prosaic things I suggested, because they have required to keep body and soul together.

In damages claims in Scotland we have quantifiable loss, but we also have something termed solatium, which is for the pain and suffering inflicted on and sustained by the individual. That is very hard to quantify—one cannot say that they have not been given a certain level of benefit or that they have had to pay out some amount in some other aspect—but there must be some recognition that these women's dreams were taken away in many instances, and that they have not simply suffered a financial injustice, but been denied the ability to do what they wanted, prepared and should have been entitled to do.

10.8 am

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his introduction to this important debate. I also declare an interest: my wife is one of the 3.8 million who were affected by the changes to the state pension age—although she can count herself as one of the lucky ones. Unlike hundreds of thousands of other women of her generation, this scandal did not condemn her to destitution in her retirement or undo the long-made plans she had spent her life working towards.

For others, of course, the situation is very different. One of my constituents, whose story has been recorded by the WASPI campaign, described her feelings as “being robbed of the way of life that I thought I would have”, after being informed that she would have to wait until the age of 66 to receive the state pension. This constituent, who was also affected by the collapse of Equitable Life, found herself unable to secure employment in a jobs market defined by systematic discrimination against older women, and thus became reliant on her husband's earnings to survive.

There is a grim irony here. Women born in the 1950s were at the forefront of the fight for equal pay and rights in the workplace. A considerable number would have been the first women in their families to have their own job. For many, that independent income would have given them the opportunity for the first time to leave abusive or exploitative relationships. Yet later in life, many of these women, to whom all of us workers owe so much, have found themselves once again reliant on their spouses just to get by.

We cannot overstate the sense of betrayal felt by those who have been affected: a generation of women who upon leaving school were promised, as I was, that the state would be there to provide a level of safety and security later in life. Instead, they find themselves struggling to survive during the worst cost of living crisis in living memory.

Last year, the WASPI campaign found that 70% of its members had been forced to reduce their weekly spending, with more than half struggling to pay essential bills and one in four struggling to afford food. Women who have worked all their lives have been left impoverished. A covenant has been broken.

That the WASPI women have been subject to grave injustice is beyond question. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report is absolutely clear that there was maladministration in how the DWP communicated information about the state pension age changes and the Department failed to act upon its own research, which showed that women born in the 1950s

were not aware of those changes, but more than three years on the DWP has yet to come clean and publicly accept these findings.

In that time, tens of thousands of affected women have lost their lives, with one WASPI woman dying every 13 minutes. The Government's approach seems to have been to hope that the WASPI women would simply go away—but anyone who has met the WASPI campaigners, as I have during some of their many lobbies of Parliament, will know that that that is not going to happen.

In a few short weeks, the ombudsman is expected to publish the next stage of their report, detailing its findings concerning the impact of maladministration in relation to the WASPI women and its recommendations on compensation. The Minister will no doubt urge patience, but the question that many WASPI women are asking is this: how much longer must they wait to receive some form of financial restitution, and will they even still be here by the time it arrives?

10.12 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his persistent and powerful advocacy of the WASPI cause.

I am here to speak up for the WASPI women of Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, who I have had the honour of working with these past nine years. Their campaign has been dignified yet determined, but, while it has been an honour to work with them, it is appalling, as other Members have already said, that they and their brilliant colleagues from across the UK have had to keep fighting for so long.

Along the way we have lost some brilliant campaigners. I pay particular tribute to my constituent June Miller, a key figure in the Cumbernauld WASPI group who marched just outside this Chamber in support of WASPI women in October 2018. Tragically, she is one of about 260,000 WASPI women to have died during the lifetime of this campaign.

It is surely beyond any doubt now that WASPI women have suffered injustice as a result of DWP maladministration, for all the reasons that the hon. Member for Strangford set out. The key point is that the PHSO stage 1 report recognises precisely that, so now the DWP must recognise that stage 1 report and the stage 1 findings.

The recommendations from the PHSO should be the starting point, or the bare minimum, for the DWP. To go further would be absolutely welcome, but coming up short most certainly will not be. The PHSO has encouraged the DWP to be proactive. Instead, Ministers continue to bury their heads in the sand. Many billions of pounds have been saved by the Treasury through pension reforms; some of that must be used to put right the wrongs that have been suffered.

The other relevant context here is the ongoing cost of living crisis, 14 years of austerity and decades of entrenched wage and pension inequality. All those factors have impacted WASPI women more than anyone else, so fair compensation is not just due, but absolutely urgent.

Strong arguments have been made that “fair compensation” should mean level 6 compensation, because of the profound, devastating or irreversible impacts that the pension changes have had on WASPI women.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

The women in my local WASPI groups have undoubtedly endured a reduced quality of life for considerable periods thanks to DWP maladministration and they will continue to suffer in that way until their losses are recognised and compensation is paid.

The time taken to get to this stage is clearly unacceptable. The Government need to look at making PHSO and other ombudsmen better able to deal with cases of that scale. More immediately, when recommendations on compensation are finalised, every effort must be made to get it paid urgently. Those steps must start now, so that there is no more unnecessary waiting. The WASPI women are not going to go away, and neither will MPs in this Chamber today—not until justice is done.

10.15 am

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate, and for all his work on this very important matter in at least the seven years that I have been in this place

I rise to speak in support of over 5,000 WASPI women in Ceredigion, and I begin by commending the WASPI campaign group there that has done so much in recent years to support those affected by pension changes. It has also done so much to raise awareness locally, and indeed nationally in Wales, of the injustice that women born after 6 April 1950 have suffered as a result of the changes introduced by the Pensions Act 1995 and the Pensions Act 2011.

I want to reinforce the point, mentioned by others, that we are talking about a generation of women who have suffered greatly throughout their lives. The injustice that they are suffering now has sadly come upon a lifetime of many injustices. As we have heard, they will have entered an unequal workforce, and they will have suffered greatly in society due to the inequality that previously plagued the United Kingdom as they grew up and came into adulthood.

Nevertheless, they are a generation of women who have contributed so much to bringing about positive change for the benefit of us all. Not only are they the mams, the mamgus, the sisters and the aunties, but they are ones who work tirelessly in various campaign groups, community organisations and causes. Yet after a lifetime of working diligently, they find themselves at the very end having to suffer financially and emotionally due to changes introduced by the state that were not communicated to them as they should have been.

The fact of the matter is that many of these women do not complain, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) said. They live their lives according to the law and they expect, very reasonably, that the state then recognises their contribution—that social contract—yet they have been failed so terribly by the failure of the Department for Work and Pensions to communicate the changes to their pension entitlements. To top it all off, after the ombudsman found that maladministration had taken place, the Department and the Government refused to acknowledge that maladministration. That is rubbing salt into the wound—I would venture—and I hope the Minister can address that.

Others have mentioned how these women have suffered not only financial harm but social harm, and their quality of life has been severely impacted. For that reason, I believe that when it comes to compensation we have to move away from the level 5 offered by the ombudsman. It needs to be much higher to reflect the fact that not only have they suffered financially but their lives have been put on hold and, as has been mentioned, sadly many of them have passed away before seeing justice. We cannot waste any more time on this matter.

10.18 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Like everybody else, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this debate forward, and also for sponsoring my private Member's Bill—the State Pension Age (Compensation) Bill—which is aimed at compelling the UK Government to bring forward a compensation framework for the 3.8 million women affected by the state pension increase without proper notification, including 13,000 in my constituency.

Given that the ombudsman concluded at stage 1 in July 2021 that the DWP was guilty of maladministration, we in this place should not be having to force this issue. Would it not have been comforting to see, for once, our Government care to step in and do the right thing by way of remedying an injustice? Of course, as have others said, as with the infected blood scandal, the postmasters scandal and the green deal mis-selling, they do nothing and hope the issue just goes away. They have ignored this issue for nine years, but at least it still has not gone away, even if too many politicians have already given up for my liking.

We are talking about women who did not have maternity rights back in the day, who were paid less than men, who were more likely to work part time, and whose private pensions, if they had them, were smaller than men's. In reality, the pension age equalisation was a further prejudice against these women, especially the many who had already retired before they got the bombshell notification that they needed to wait six years before they could access their state pension.

They then found out that the number of national insurance-contributing years required to receive the full pension had been increased, so many did not even have the opportunity to contribute enough NI to receive the full pension. That is another double whammy for these women. It really is time that the Government accepted the WASPI call for fair and fast compensation—for money that can be paid out to these women. That money will eventually be clawed back for the Government in taxes anyway, but it will also provide a local spending boost.

We also need to hear today from the Labour Front-Bench team what their position is. For too long, they have been quiet on this topic. For too long, we keep hearing that Labour is going to stick to Tory spending plans, which means austerity 2.0, including £19 billion of future departmental cuts. I hope that the Labour Front-Bench team commit to providing fair and fast compensation for the WASPI women if the Government do not step up to the plate. Let us not be kidded: we cannot have any faith in this fag-end Government stepping up to the plate.

When I presented my ten-minute rule Bill, I put a number of personal testimonies on the record. I hope the Minister will look at some of them, because they show what life is like for many people affected by the state pension increase. Unfortunately, I do not have time to go through those testimonies right now, but they talk about people losing their homes, being dependent on partners, being forced to try to get back into work, struggling on benefits to get by, and struggling on small private pensions because they did not have enough money or enough warning from the Government. Yet again, I say, pay that compensation and step up to the plate.

10.21 am

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his efforts in fighting this injustice.

There are 5,360 women in my Liverpool, West Derby constituency who are affected by the changes made to the women's state pension age by the Pensions Act 1995. Of those, 4,000 have been further affected by the Pensions Act 2011, which accelerated the increases to ages 65 and 66. It is important that they have their voices heard in this place. Those in West Derby who are part of the 3.8 million women affected in the UK have been left in an entirely unacceptable situation as part of this historic wrong.

I firmly and wholeheartedly support the campaign for pension justice. I want to put on the record the efforts of all the campaigners for justice, including the fantastic women I have met from CEDAWinLAW and WASPI. Without their hard work, this debate would not be happening. This is something they should never have to fight for in the first place, because the Government have the power to right this injustice. I was proud to stand in 2019 on a Labour manifesto that would have righted this injustice.

It is clear from the correspondence that I have received, and from speaking to campaigners in West Derby, just how much hurt has been caused by the DWP's actions. I want to talk about Jane, who phoned me at the weekend and wants her story heard in Parliament. She told me that the loss of her state pension, with no notice, meant that she had lost her cherished family home of 30 years. She broke down on the phone. It is completely devastating for her and her family. The plans she had made for retirement—to have a home with space for her grandchildren to visit her—are all now lost, taken away by the injustice and actions of the DWP.

After several years of investigations, it has been reported that stages 2 and 3 of the PHSO findings on the communication of the changes to women's state pension age could be published soon. Will the Minister confirm the timeline? This is an injustice that needs to be addressed urgently. It is completely unacceptable that the Government have so far refused to take action to right this wrong. There is nothing to stop the Government taking immediate action to provide compensation, as has been outlined in this place today.

In November 2022, I went to Downing Street with campaigners and handed in my early-day motion 430. That motion was signed by 87 Members of this House

and called for full financial restitution to women born in the 1950s. In the 16 months that have passed, this terrible injustice has only grown. Even more women are now facing poverty and total destitution as a result of the Government's inaction. I ask the Minister to reflect on what he has heard and to begin the parliamentary process to provide the full compensation that thousands of women in West Derby and millions across the country deserve, without delay.

10.24 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): First, I want to say how much of a pleasure it was on Friday to join the WASPI Glasgow women at the Mary Barbour statue, to mark International Women's Day. The clear message from those women is that they are not going away and nor is this issue.

I want to make three quick points. The first, which other Members have touched on, is about the historical injustices that women born in the 1950s have suffered throughout their lives, whether it is not receiving equal pay—far too many of these women are still fighting for equal pay and looking for compensation for unequal pay in the workplace—or the fact that while going about their lives they could not, for example, hire goods or services, or even get a cheque book, without the express permission of their father or husband, because society at that time decreed that it was a man who was the responsible person. What a quaint and fanciful notion that is! We have to recognise the injustices these women have suffered throughout their lives, and certainly the fact that they were not told that their pension age was changing and that many of them would have to work for an additional five years.

Secondly, it is almost certain that the ombudsman will send this issue back to Parliament to say that Parliament must now decide how to resolve the issue and how to compensate. That much is certain. The Government could have grasped the nettle. They could have recognised that this was coming and that it was time to address this issue, along with the issues of compensation for the infected blood and Post Office cases. They could have done all those things.

That brings me to my third point, which is that justice delayed is justice denied. The longer the Government wait and do not address this issue, the more the price tag will go up. That is an inevitability. We had the announcement of a Budget last week that has £46 billion of unfunded tax cuts, which is £46 billion that could have addressed all three of the issues I have mentioned. When he is on his feet, I hope the Minister will tell us how this Government should resolve this matter, because it should be up to this Parliament to decide it, instead of trying to dump it on the next Parliament.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, colleagues, for your co-operation; we are now bang on time as we turn to the Front-Bench spokesmen. I call the SNP spokesperson.

10.27 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate and, like so many other speakers, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing it forward.

[Patricia Gibson]

I also pay tribute to the WASPI women who have campaigned so very hard and with so much dignity and determination, and in particular to the Ayrshire and Cunninghame WASPI campaigners, whose resilience and strength in their quest for justice has been truly inspirational, especially in the face of ongoing extreme provocation through the inaction and intransigence of the UK Government on this important issue of social justice.

The UK Government have a moral duty to deliver the justice that the WASPI women need and deserve, and we need that to happen urgently. There are 10 clear and perfectly reasonable asks from the WASPI campaign to reach a fair conclusion for the women affected, all of which my party and I fully support. I do not have time to list them today, but the asks are clear and reasonable and should not in any way be controversial.

For years, the women impacted have been left not just in limbo, but in financial distress and poverty, navigating what ought to have been their retirement years after a lifetime of work, stripped of their deserved dignity in retirement. It has caused untold emotional distress. For five long years, the WASPI women have waited for the ombudsman's investigation to end and for its final report and adjudication to be published, during which time an estimated 260,000 women have died while waiting. That is tragic, utterly scandalous and completely indefensible.

As every speaker today has said, the rightful compensation should be delivered promptly; it must be meaningful and reflect the hardship, distress and injustice suffered by the women, and it must take into account the significant sums wrongly withheld from them. There must be no more obfuscation, avoidance or excuses. The UK Government must at long last deliver for the women. There are no more hiding places.

Like everyone in the debate today, I am very angry at hearing over the years about how WASPI women have had their retirement plans upended and about the hardship they have been thrown into. That has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, with soaring food and energy prices, rising interest rates and higher mortgage payments. Injustices have been worsened by appalling Government incompetence and mismanagement, as well as Government arrogance and a tone-deaf attitude to WASPI campaigners.

I draw the Minister's attention again to the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), which would require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a compensation scheme for women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1960 inclusive who have been affected by the increase in the state pension age. Having robbed women of their rightful pension, the Government, as everybody has urged them to do today, should turn their attention to putting that right, because WASPI women feel that they have been robbed. To govern is to choose and good Governments must have justice at their core. The WASPI women, the victims of the Horizon scandal and those impacted by contaminated blood would not agree that this Government have justice at their core—why on earth would they? When Governments make mistakes, as sometimes happens, they need to be big enough and brave and decent enough to put those injustices right.

The Government must at long last urgently recompense the WASPI women, who have been robbed of their rightful retirement after a lifetime of pay discrimination. Then, they must turn their attention to pensioner poverty in general and reform our current pension system, which is not fit for purpose. Any talk of raising the retirement age further must stop because, we know that raising the retirement age has a disproportionate impact on people on lower pay and of lower socioeconomic status. We need an independent savings and pension commission without delay.

The ombudsman has been clear that the women have suffered from maladministration and injustice, so there can be no argument. There is no place left for the UK Government to hide. WASPI women deserve the retirement for which they worked all their lives. Everyone deserves dignity in retirement. That should not be a controversial statement. It is time for delivery because WASPI women will not, cannot, must not and should not go away. The Government must sort this out urgently.

10.33 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Gary.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising this debate. He was kind enough to participate in my recent Westminster Hall debate on school libraries, and I am delighted to return the pleasure by attending his debate and responding for the Opposition. I also thank the many Members who have turned out today and spoken so eloquently, demonstrating so much understanding of this long-standing issue. I have to declare an interest because I too am a WASPI woman in my 50s. I put that on the record.

As we all know, many women get a rough deal from their pension. Women live around seven years longer than men, meaning our pension wealth needs to go further, yet on average we retire with pension savings of only £69,000 compared with £205,000 for men. Pensions were introduced at a time when the workforce was predominantly composed of men as the primary or sole breadwinner, with women expected to rely on their husbands' pensions for an income in retirement. We were systematically denied the opportunity to achieve our own economic independence and security. Thankfully, legislation and societal attitudes have come a long way since the 1970s, but the impact of those historical practices continues to affect women's economic status in retirement. Even today, women's average pay is equivalent to 75% of a man's and a lower salary will inevitably result in lower pension contributions and worse retirement outcomes.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and also congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on bringing the debate. On the inequalities the hon. Lady talked about, although many of us are not directly affected, there cannot be a family in this country that does not have a woman or a close relative who has been affected. Does she think that perhaps the Government need to reexamine whether they fully appreciate the scale of the problem and that they should listen to those of us who have been fighting this cause since the day we were elected, which is many years now?

Gill Furniss: Yes, I absolutely agree with the hon. Member and certainly we are aware of the gender pay gap, which is getting bigger and bigger. I have referred to the fact that women generally live longer than men, so they lose out at that end as well, in that they get only half a pension if they are widowed.

Many of us have taken extended maternity leave to be with our children during their formative years, and we shoulder a disproportionate burden of care. By the time they are 46, half of all women will have taken time out of the workplace for care purposes, including stepping up to look after elderly relatives, meaning they will miss out on vital contributions to their workplace pension. Even if they are one of the three quarters of working-age women in employment, there is a 33% chance they are in part-time employment, increasing the likelihood that they will miss out on the benefits of auto-enrolment under the current regulations.

Under the last Labour Government, pensioner poverty halved. Yet on this Government's watch it has risen so that one in five pensioners now live in poverty. That is scandalous.

Gavin Newlands: The hon. Member has made some strong points so far. She is talking about the last Labour Government. The last Labour manifesto promised £58 billion over the course of the next Parliament to give compensation to WASPI women. Will that be in the upcoming manifesto for the next election?

Gill Furniss: I am not here today to announce our manifesto or any of our manifesto commitments.

Gavin Newlands: I thought the hon. Member might say that.

Gill Furniss: However, I can say that I have been meeting the WASPI women regularly since I took this role just a few months ago. I am honoured to be in what I believe is a friendly and honest dialogue with them, and I will continue to do that throughout the coming months and beyond, should I be in the same position.

Alan Brown: If the hon. Member's dialogue is a friendly and honest one, she should be able to say whether the Labour party agrees with the principle of compensation for the WASPI women.

Gill Furniss: I believe I have already answered that. I am not here to announce our manifesto. I am here to debate like those who have already and I am here to listen, but I cannot announce our manifesto.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she has been very generous. I just want to ask her on a personal level—forget the Labour party, forget the Government, forget all of that—

Gill Furniss: Oh yes, that is going to happen.

Patricia Gibson: On a personal level, does she think that WASPI women should receive the full compensation they are due?

Gill Furniss: As I said, I am not going to announce our manifesto commitment. Like the hon. Lady, I am here to press the Government who are now in power and have the ability to act. *[Interruption.]* As a WASPI

woman, the hon. Lady would probably be able to guess, would she not? That is all I will say on that subject at the moment.

Two thirds of pensioners living in poverty are women. For many of us, a lifetime of inequalities will continue into retirement. The sadness of the situation lies in how many WASPI women have lost their lives during the time the Government have wasted not doing what they should do. Many women left their careers to look after elderly relatives or to cope after years of manual work, safe in the knowledge that they could get by on their savings for a handful of years until they reached their state pension on turning 60, but found to their horror that their state pension had changed, seemingly without warning.

Over the years, I have heard harrowing stories from both constituents and friends who are truly struggling, torn between whether to heat or to eat and unable to cope with the costs of their mortgage or rent. Pensioners are among those hit hardest by the cost of living crisis, and the Government's failure to get a grip on the situation has led to rampant inflation and food prices spiralling out of control.

Although I support the policy of state pension age equalisation, it is painfully clear that the way in which it was carried out was shambolic at best. Groups such as WASPI were formed not to reverse the policy of state pension age equalisation, but to mitigate its effects. I commend the group for its work in securing an investigation by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and its subsequent legal victories, including securing changes to the report. As we speak, the PHSO is still investigating actively. Although I do not wish to speculate on what their findings might be, it is a fact that they found that the DWP committed maladministration in how it decided to inform 1950s-born women of the changes.

I will always listen to and engage respectfully with campaigners fighting to right historical injustices, from WASPI women to the Allied Steel and Wire workers. Although I have not been in my role long, I have met representatives of the 1950s-born women on multiple occasions, and I had already met them at previous Labour party conferences. I will be honoured to continue going forward with them and keeping that dialogue open over the coming months and beyond.

I know that the Minister, like me, has been in his role for only several months, but I am sure it is apparent to him that the injustice these women have faced is clear. The poverty that many of them continue to face is also clear. These women desperately need a resolution to the maladministration to which they have been subjected. I therefore urge the Minister to act now to put that injustice right as quickly as possible, and I look forward to continuing the dialogue with the WASPI women going forward.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I remind the Minister to leave at least two minutes for Jim Shannon to have the final say.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate and all Members who have contributed to it.

[Paul Maynard]

This has been a valuable and constructive debate focused on the issues of compensation for 1950s-born women affected by state pension age changes. I recognise that there is a huge strength of feeling among 1950s-born women about the increase to their state pension age and the way in which it was communicated. We have heard today about people who have had difficult personal circumstances to manage, and their struggles are regrettable in the extreme. I am grateful to all Members who have participated. It is important that Members on all sides are able to tell the stories of so many of their own constituents. Indeed, I pay tribute to many of my own constituents whom I have sat with and listened to on a number of occasions as they explained their circumstances. It is important that such testimony is uppermost not just in my mind as the Minister, but in the mind of Government more widely.

I note that the Member in charge of the debate, the hon. Member for Strangford, is a Northern Ireland MP. For the record, I will set out how Northern Ireland manages its own system for dealing with complaints such as this; as he will know, such matters are for the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman to address. Any question relating to Northern Ireland must be directed to the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland. All DWP policy areas are transferred in Northern Ireland, including pensions. However, the equivalent Department in Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities, historically has maintained parity with the DWP on matters of social security, child maintenance and pensions.

As House is aware, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's investigation into state pension age communication is not complete. The date of publication is a matter for the ombudsman. As the investigation remains ongoing, I cannot comment on it, as the ombudsman's investigations are confidential. The privacy rules extend to all parties involved in the investigation.

Alan Brown: The Minister is right about probity and the fact that the ombudsman's investigations are to remain quiet. Does he accept that after stage 1 it is still in the Government's hands to bring forward compensation? They do not have to wait until the conclusion of further stages.

Paul Maynard: I will come on to the sequencing and the importance of the different stages shortly, but I am reminded that the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 states that ombudsman investigations that are not complete "shall be conducted in private".

The ombudsman has made some information about the investigation public via its website. It published the final version of stage 1 of its report on the website in July 2021. The report said that

"these women should have had at least 28 months' more individual notice of the changes than they got."

These findings relate to a specific window of time between August 2005 and December 2007. The report also found that

"between 1995 and 2004, DWP's communication of changes to State Pension age reflected the standards we would expect it to meet."

I know that there is frustration among Members of this House and their constituents about how long the investigation has been ongoing, and about the fact that the ombudsman has yet to publish his final report. It is a complex investigation that spans over 30 years, as equalisation of the state pension age was enacted in 1995. The ombudsman provides an independent complaint handling service for complaints that have not been resolved by UK Government Departments and the NHS in England. The ombudsman is managing the investigation in stages, and publication of the final report is entirely a matter for the ombudsman.

Bob Seely: I totally understand what the Minister is saying about the timing of the report. Can he give Members of Parliament any rough indication as to when that report will land and when it will be published?

Paul Maynard: As I think I have already said, the timing of the report is a matter for the ombudsman to determine. I have received no indication from the ombudsman of the timescale to which he is working, much as we would all like to know the date when it is coming.

The Department for Work and Pensions has to be mindful of its independence, but we are co-operating fully with the investigation. We believe that it is important to let the independent process conclude, so that we can then carefully consider the findings and the recommendations that may arise from the final report.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): For the record, can the Minister give us a cast-iron guarantee and reassurance that his Department is fully co-operating with the ombudsman?

Paul Maynard: I can indeed give that assurance. As I have just said, we are fully co-operating at every stage with the ombudsman's investigations.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I understand the Minister's position on the specifics and the dates. It is perfectly clear that we are not going to get any indication of a timeline, but does the Minister accept that the WASPI women paid their dues and did their part? We have already seen that maladministration has been found. Do the Government accept that a trust on which our entire democracy is built has been broken, and that WASPI women deserve justice as soon as they possibly can?

Paul Maynard: I very much hear what the hon. Lady says. The whole point of the ombudsman's investigations is to determine the outcome of that process and how justice is to be delivered.

Patricia Gibson: As has happened with other judgments in a legal context, will the Minister commit his Government at the very minimum to implementing the judgment of the ombudsman? Or will they try to fight it, obfuscate and kick it into the long grass?

Paul Maynard: I am sure the hon. Lady will appreciate the principle that until a final report is published and until we know the contents of that report, I—as a Government Minister with a duty to manage public money properly—cannot make any such commitment as she describes.

Joanna Cherry: The Minister is hiding behind the need to wait until the final report is out, but at around the time of the stage 1 report, the PHSO said that Ministers could be proactive in finding a remedy for 1950s women. What does the Minister say to that?

Paul Maynard: I certainly do not believe that I am hiding behind anything. The ombudsman's inquiry is going through the processes that the ombudsman itself has set out.

Justin Madders: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I have given way a number of times, and I have been very generous. I am conscious that I need to finish my contribution and allow the hon. Member for Strangford to comment. I am sorry, and if there is time towards the end I will try to give way, but I need to set out the factual information that Members have been asking me to deliver, so I will make some progress.

The announcement in 1993 of the decision to equalise the state pension age addressed a long-standing inequality between men and women. Changes to state pension age were made over a series of Acts by successive Governments, following public consultations and debates in both Houses of Parliament. All women after 5 April 1950 and all men born after 5 December 1953 are impacted by state pension age changes. The state pension age is currently 66, and is due to rise to the age of 67 between 2026 and 2028, as confirmed by the recent Government review of state pension age. The Government also committed in the last review to conduct a further review within two years of the next Government, to consider the age of 68. The further review will be able to consider the very latest evidence.

The reforms have focused on maintaining the right balance between the affordability and sustainability of the state pension, and fairness between generations. Women retiring today can still expect to receive the state pension, but over 21 years on average, which is over two years longer than men. If equalisation had not taken place, upon reaching the age of 60 women would be expected to spend on average over 40% of their adult lives in receipt of the state pension.

I will say a few words about the processes of the ombudsman's investigation, for clarification and to place them on the record. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman published its stage 1 report on 20 July 2021. PHSO found maladministration in the steps that the Department took between 2005 and 2007 in relation to notifying the women affected. In December 2022, the PHSO submitted its stage 2 findings and the original stage 3 findings for comment, and published a high-level summary on its website, concluding that the maladministration had caused injustice.

Following the PHSO's stage 2 findings in December 2022, the WASPI campaign initiated judicial review proceedings against the PHSO, arguing that the ombudsman's approach to calculating when letters should have been sent ignored pauses in the DWP's letter-writing campaign, which meant that women should have had notice far earlier than the ombudsman had assumed and could therefore have made different decisions to avoid some of the financial impact. Following an agreement between WASPI and the PHSO, the High Court granted

a consent order quashing the PHSO's final stage 2 report in May 2023. The consent order specifically requested that the PHSO revisited those sections of the stage 2 report dealing with the 28-month delay calculation. The stage 3 provisional view on remedy had not been finalised by the PHSO, so it did not require consideration by the court.

We responded to the provisional stage 3 report in early February 2023. The PHSO sent all parties to the complaint a revised provisional stage 2 report in November 2023. That is the report whose publication we await.

Gavin Newlands: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I have already given way, and I am running out of time. I do apologise.

I have listened carefully to the arguments that have been made today. I would like to set out further the range of support available both for those making provision for their retirement and for those who have reached state pension age.

In 2016, the state pension was reformed with the introduction of a new state pension to be simpler and more sustainable. It had the clear objective of providing the foundation for private saving. In this way, the state provides a base to which people can add to provide the pension they want through their retirement.

The new state pension improves outcomes for many women, carers and self-employed people, who often did less well in the past. State pension outcomes are projected to equalise for men and women more than a decade earlier than they would have under the old system. On average, women receiving the new state pension receive about £18 a week more than women under the pre-2016 system. Under the new state pension system, women currently receive an average of 97% of the amount that men receive, compared with 85% under the pre-2016 system.

Automatic enrolment has helped millions more women to save with a pension, many for the first time. Participation rates for women are catching up with those for men. Pensions participation among eligible women working in the private sector was at 86% in 2022, up from 40% in 2012.

Pension credit is extra money to help with daily living costs for people over state pension age and on a low income. It tops up a person's other income to a minimum of £201.05 a week for single pensioners and £306.85 a week for couples. People with a severe disability, carers and those who are responsible for a child or young person who lives with them can get more. Pension credit can also include extra amounts for certain housing costs such as ground rent or service charges. The pension credit case load is just under 1.4 million people, of whom 66% are female; in fact, of the total case load, 63% are single women. People receiving pension credit may also get help with other costs, including rent, via housing benefit, and council tax.

The latest statistics show that by 2021-22, the poverty rate for pensioners had decreased by two percentage points since 2010. For both female and male pensioners, there was a decrease of two percentage points over the same period. In 2021-22, there were 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty, after housing costs, than in 2010. By 2024-25, working-age and extra-costs disability

[Paul Maynard]

benefit rates will increase by 6.7%, and relevant state pension rates, including the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit, by 8.5%, following the 10.1% increase in April 2023.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I am about to conclude, because I have only a minute left before the hon. Member for Strangford needs to have his concluding say.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for raising such an important issue, which I know concerns very many people—thousands across each of our constituencies. I have the greatest sympathy for anyone who has found themselves in difficult circumstances, but I believe that the welfare state can be and is effective in providing support for those who need it. In particular, there is a range of established support that this Government provide for people either nearing or over state pension age. Additionally, we have made cost of living payments available to those who are most vulnerable.

As I have outlined, the Government take the matter of state pension age extremely seriously. The Department is committed to giving the best service it can, and we will very carefully consider the ombudsman's final report.

10.58 am

Jim Shannon: I thank each and every one of the right hon. and hon. Members present for their contributions. From a quick headcount, some 26 Back Benchers, as well as the shadow Minister and the Minister, have come along to make a contribution. Why did they do that? They did it because there is a wrong to be righted. That is the reason why.

I will make just a couple of quick comments. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said that the Government “could be proactive in finding a remedy.”

That is exactly what we are asking for. Have we seen that this morning? With respect to the Minister, I do not believe that we have just yet.

I encourage the Minister to continue discussions with his Department to ensure that these matters are addressed. We ask for an apology for the WASPI women. We ask for the issue of maladministration to be addressed. That is quite simple when what has happened has been categorised by the Department itself as maladministration. If that has been done, for goodness' sake get it sorted. I cannot understand why it has not been.

The need for compensation is still outstanding. Are we moving closer to it? We cannot get a time or a date. We really need those in place. Every Member here wants it in place. The delay will have costs. The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) referred to the 260,000 people who have died. How many more will die while the Government dither about getting the job done?

On behalf of the 3.8 million WASPI women, I suggest to the Minister with respect—I always at least try to be nice to everyone in the Chamber, because that is my nature—that we really do need an answer to our request. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has put forward a ten-minute rule Bill. Let us do that.

We speak on behalf of all the ladies who are here in the Chamber, and all those who are not here. Those are the people we are fighting for. Minister, I was going to say “Get the finger out,” but I will just say: let's get it done.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Social Housing Occupancy

11 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social housing occupancy levels.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I shall be speaking about an important issue that my constituents raise weekly—one that I have been campaigning on for many years as a Member of Parliament and a London council leader before that. It is about overcrowding in social housing, and indeed the housing crisis. I hesitate to use the term “crisis” because that would imply that the problem was sudden, unexpected and appeared out of nowhere, but no, the housing emergency intensified after the global financial crash of 2008-09 and in ensuing austerity years under consecutive Conservative Governments.

The generation born at the end of the second world war grew up in a world where people from a range of backgrounds had the opportunity, rightly, to live in an affordable and secure home. However, that completely changed after Mrs Thatcher’s privatisation, which created a property boom, and for the first time ever, homes became a barrier to social mobility. Over the years, the right-to-buy policy has led to the depletion of high-quality social homes. Nowadays, people are more likely to own a home if their parents own a home.

In England, there are now 1.2 million families waiting for social homes. In my own borough, 13,343 households are on the housing register. To date, over 2 million council homes across the UK have been sold off, with only 4% of them replaced. The Chartered Institute of Housing found that, as of 2021, 40% of the homes sold under right to buy were owned by private landlords who could charge as much rent as they wanted. Rather than subsidising rents through millions of pounds of housing benefit, surely it would be easier and cheaper to build council homes.

In my constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green, the average house price is £630,000, way above the national average of £285,000, according to a Library briefing from March 2023. Home ownership is an impossible dream and council homes are in short supply. Young people growing up in my constituency are forced to move away, or to live with their parents, or to spend up to 60% of their monthly income on expensive, insecure and often poor-quality privately rented housing.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Will she take the opportunity to congratulate the London Mayor on trying to tackle part of the problem by building homes? In my own borough of Southwark he has built 926 homes, including on the Manor and Rennie estates in Bermondsey, in Rotherhithe, and, in partnership with the Leathermarket Joint Management Board, off Long Lane.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is right that this issue takes political will. If people cannot afford to save while privately renting, they are not able to save for a deposit, so it is a Catch-22 situation.

Since becoming a Member of Parliament in 2015, I have campaigned for the building of social and affordable homes. I am particularly concerned about the level of overcrowding and its long-term impact on children and young people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. It is not just an issue on the mainland; it is an issue for us back home as well. Although we have a smaller population of 1.9 million, there are still some 38,000 applicants on the social housing waiting list. There are around 127,400 social homes across Northern Ireland, only 18,000 of which are located in rural areas. Does she agree that although the figures are exceptional for the mainland, they are also exceptional for Northern Ireland, and that there is a need to build social housing not only in urban areas but in rural areas?

Catherine West: As ever, the hon. Member makes an extremely important point. I am aware from reading in the press that Northern Ireland also has a shortage of the correct sorts of homes. Perhaps the right number of bedrooms are available, but not in the right configuration.

In Haringey, 1,053 individuals are estimated to be living in overcrowded or severely overcrowded council homes, and 871 private sector tenants in the highest social housing priority band are overcrowded or severely overcrowded. We know that no local authority wants to place a household in unsuitable or overcrowded accommodation. However, the severe reduction in the number of homes available to let through social housing and the changes to the local housing allowance mean that councils are forced to use the dwindling private rented sector, bed and breakfasts, low-quality accommodation, and hotels.

Sadly, constituents get in touch with me all the time who are exhausted with living in overcrowded, damp and mouldy homes, waiting years or even decades for suitable social housing. Last summer, one constituent told me she lives in an emergency one-bedroom studio with her 16-year-old teenager and six-year-old severely autistic son. As well as the cramped conditions, she told me,

“the roof has collapsed, and our bulbs keep going out as there is some electrical fault here, the fridge doesn’t work, I keep feeling constantly ill because there’s no windows that work either”.

Of course, in London, we all live with the shadow of the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell fire. Another constituent told me that she lives with her elderly parents and two children aged 17 and two. She tells me she has been waiting for her own social home since 2012. She says:

“my parents are elderly, they love me and my children, but due to being overcrowded and being in each other’s space every day, it has caused a major communication breakdown and arguments. I am a single mother with 2 children trying to build a bright future for my children”.

Another constituent currently lives in two-bedroom temporary accommodation with his wife and two children. He has been bidding for a permanent three-bedroom property for eight years with no success—and the list goes on.

London’s housing catastrophe has been 14 years in the making. When London Mayor Sadiq Khan arrived at City Hall, the number of new genuinely affordable homes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) said, had fallen to the

[Catherine West]

lowest levels since records began. The previous Mayor left the cupboard bare and changed the definition of affordable housing to make it even harder for working families. However, things are gradually changing. The Mayor of London is leading a renaissance in council housing development in London. Thanks to Labour, London has seen more new homes completed during Sadiq's tenure than at any time since the 1930s.

In Haringey—a Labour authority—the council is on track to deliver 3,000 council homes by 2031 and will continue to improve the existing stock. Last year, council house building in London was higher than in the rest of the country, built almost entirely in Labour-run authority areas, where members are pragmatic and tend to agree planning applications where they fit best-practice recommendations, and get on with it over the four years of their term.

Neil Coyle: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Southwark Council is the biggest landlord in London, but it also has the biggest council house building programme in the country. Does she agree that it is only with Labour working in partnership with the private and social housing sector that we will address these problems fully, and that we need a Labour Government to do that?

Catherine West: I completely agree. The combination of a Labour Government and Labour authorities at regional level would have a huge impact on house building. We know that it needs to be scaled up to a national level, and regional leaders need the power and backing to build more homes. Imagine the difference that a Labour Government could make.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some really important points on an important debate that has impacted my constituency. The Conservative-led council in Darlington embarked on a 10-year programme to build more council housing and is delivering 1,000 council homes over 10 years, but that is still not enough. Social housing providers are also building homes. I want to return to one of the points she made on the cause being the right to buy. Is it her view that the right to buy should be ended?

Catherine West: No, it is not, but we do need to stick to a pledge—regardless of which political party is in government—to replace every single home that is sold off; otherwise, we are depriving people in future of opportunity. Social housing makes it possible for working families to save, opening up other opportunities. If they pay 60% of their income in rent, they cannot do very much, whereas if they pay a third—approximately the level of social housing rent—it gives them so much more opportunity to do all sorts of things with their lives. I was pleased to hear the examples from Darlington, an area that has deep pockets of disadvantage.

According to the National Housing Federation, as of December 2021, an estimated 8.4 million people live in unsuitable housing affected by overcrowding, unaffordability, disrepair, damp and mould. For 4.2 million of those people, social rented housing would be the most appropriate tenure to address that need. Most significant of all, overcrowding is the largest problem nationally, affecting nearly 3.7 million people. What is

the impact of overcrowded conditions? I have spoken to many children and young people living in overcrowded homes who struggle to concentrate on homework and exam revision. Some are forced to work on the floor while sharing their room with young siblings; others try to study in libraries, but we know that some libraries are struggling to keep their doors open due to cuts in central Government funding. According to the National Housing Federation, almost 2 million children—one in six—live in overcrowded homes. What is more, 310,000 children in England share a bed with parents or siblings because of overcrowded homes. Children having to share a bed with their parents can have quite a negative impact on being ready to go to school and study in the morning. It is something we need to look at in detail and understand its long-term impacts.

One constituent recently wrote to me, saying:

“My family and I have been living in severely overcrowded conditions in a one-bedroom flat since 2016. Our children need their own space for learning and playing, but we cannot provide that for them. The severe overcrowding affects us and our children greatly, both socially and psychologically. The five of us are forced to share a bedroom just to separate our ‘living room’ from our ‘sleeping space’.”

We are making it very clear to children living in social homes that they do not deserve their own space: space to study, decompress and play—space to be children. According to Barnardo's, more than a million children in the UK either sleep on the floor or share a bed with parents or siblings because their landlord has failed to replace broken frames and poor-quality homes have turned linen mouldy. I received recently a video of a mum holding up a garment—her toddler's favourite purple jumper—that was covered in mould and had to be thrown away. The replacement cost of clothing and linen is high for people on low incomes. I have lost count of the number of parents who have contacted me to say they can no longer use the bedroom due to excessive mould on the ceiling, walls and bedding, so it becomes safer for children to sleep on a sofa with a sheet than in their own bedroom in a comfortable bed.

Last year, I visited Mind in Haringey, a mental health charity of which I am a patron. Staff told me about the different issues they were experiencing on the frontline, including speaking to more and more patients whose mental health difficulties were caused or made significantly worse by poor housing. I want to put on record my enormous gratitude to the Haringey Mind team, as well as the other fantastic organisations that support my constituents every day, including Shelter, Citizens Advice Haringey, St James's Legal Advice Centre in Muswell Hill, Wilton Road and Wood Green, Haringey Law Centre, Haringey Connected Communities, and lastly London Councils for their continued advocacy for the people of London.

According to the Times Health Commission, poor-quality housing costs the national health service £1.4 billion a year—proof that health and housing are integrally linked. Often, when I am out in the constituency and ask a group of children, “Who here has an asthma pump, or has a friend in class who has an asthma pump?”, all the hands go up. We need to tackle poor-quality air not just outdoors, but indoors.

When Nye Bevan, as Health Minister, founded the NHS in 1948, he also had a vision for council housing. He wanted to create a housing service similar to the

national health service, because he knew that good-quality, affordable homes were crucial to people's physical and mental health. We know that those living in overcrowded homes are more likely to face problems such as damp, vermin and lack of outdoor space. According to the 2022 Marmot review for the Greater London Authority, overcrowding is associated with higher rates of tuberculosis transmission, stress and depression. Scurvy is coming back into GP clinics. All this puts more pressure on our NHS, and means that people are sicker for longer.

A house is not just a roof over one's head, but a home that we decorate and personalise. It is a place to go after a hard day's work to laugh, cry and make memories for life; it is somewhere we feel safe and warm. The rights to security in our home, to make our home our own and, most of all, to live in a home fit for human habitation are non-negotiable. Housing should not necessarily just be a market, but a fundamental human right.

More recently, commercial properties, such as vacant shops, restaurants, gyms and offices are being converted into houses. Those buildings, which were never designed for human habitation, are being used up and down the country as emergency accommodation while residents wait years for their social home.

The Government shamefully voted through a planning loophole, known as permitted development rights, that allows changes to be made to an existing building without planning permission. It has resulted in thousands of buildings being converted without proper checks on quality, minimum space standards, fire safety, ventilation and energy efficiency, and of course it gets around the requirement for an element of that particular planning application to be social homes. The Government will do almost anything but put shovels in the ground and build more homes. The extension of permitted development rights is not just damaging but a missed opportunity to tackle Britain's housing crisis and produce high-quality homes. It is clear that we must prioritise council housing, council housing and council housing.

This Government can no longer be trusted to build council homes, or any homes at this rate. Fourteen years in power and they have nothing to show for it. Only a Labour Government will bring about the biggest boost in affordable homes for a generation. With social and council housing at the core of our plan, we will also ensure that developers honour their commitments in full to provide new social and affordable homes, which is something that the Government have turned a blind eye to. Last week's spring Budget was a missed opportunity to help people on to the housing ladder. Whether they have the money to have a mortgage or not, there was nothing for them. Whether it was to tackle growing private rents and their unaffordable nature, or the long queues for social housing, the Chancellor missed a trick.

As I have outlined, social housing provides long-term stability that enables people to get on with life. Whatever a person's situation—whether they are studying, working, have a young family or are living alone—social housing can help them to put down roots and can create community. I am proud that it was the Labour party under Clement Attlee that undertook the most ambitious housebuilding programme ever, and what is so different now from 1945? Is it that different, given all we have been through with the covid pandemic, with the war and with the energy crisis in Europe? Is that that different from the

1940s? Now is the moment and the Labour party plans on restoring social housing and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I remind Members to give the Minister adequate time to wind up—at least eight minutes.

11.17 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for bringing forward this debate. She has already spoken very eloquently and in detail about the issue of overcrowding in social housing and its impact on health, life expectancy and education. Although her constituency is in London and mine is in the north of England, we face identical issues and this is a national crisis. Indeed, I would say that the shortage of housing is one of the single biggest domestic issues that we face in our country.

In Bolton, the 2021 census showed that 7,000 homes were judged to be overcrowded, and of those 3,840 were households with dependent children—that is thousands of families with children forced to share beds with other family members and forced into cramped conditions without personal space. That is caused by a chronic housing shortage, which is forcing people into the private sector where the rents are unaffordable.

The Minister will tell us that homes will be built in the future. Let me remind him that when his Government came into power in 2010, they cut funding for affordable housing by 63%: the biggest cut to any capital budget. They also cut funding for new homes and social rents, thus causing rapid decline in the building of social homes. The Government have just not built enough homes, especially three and four-bedroom homes.

I have many constituents living in small houses with ill family members who need a room to themselves but they cannot have it. That of course causes a lot of disturbance and problems within the family, especially for children going to school. In fact, I was talking to a constituent yesterday who lives in a tiny two-bedroom home with three children and she is severely ill herself. She is desperate to move into a bigger home, but knows that she will have many years of waiting. That kind of thing has a lot of impact. In fact, covid impacted my constituency massively because as a result of overcrowding there was no space for the families to go and quarantine. Overcrowding affects children's education and health. It harms family relationships and causes distress and anxiety.

The Government have had 14 years to build many, many social houses, but have chosen not to do so because they have an ideological objection to social housing. If they did not, they would have built them by now and many of my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green and other Members across the country would not have to face these issues.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): It is a pleasure, Sir Gary, to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this important

[Jacob Young]

debate. She has worked tirelessly over the years to promote the interests of people and families living in social housing. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her invaluable contribution to this debate.

Like both hon. Members, I believe that everyone has the right to a decent, safe and warm home that meets their needs. This is a subject close to my heart: I was born and raised in Middlesbrough, where I saw from an early age the vital importance of decent homes for a good start in life, providing hard-working people with the solid foundation on which good, productive lives can be built and as the bedrock of strong local communities.

I also saw the consequences for people and families when homes were inadequate, poor quality and overcrowded, particularly for the poorest in our society, as the hon. Member for Bolton South East mentioned. That is why I am proud to support the Secretary of State and my ministerial colleagues at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities as we work to reduce overcrowding by delivering not just more homes, but better homes in the right places across the country, including thousands of affordable homes and homes for social rent—good new homes that are at the heart of our long-term plan for housing and are the driving force behind our work to level up, boost economic growth and strengthen a sense of pride and belonging nationwide. We are making good progress.

Since 2010 the Government have delivered nearly 700,000 affordable homes, including 172,000 for social rent. In my constituency alone during that period, over 1,800 affordable homes have been built, hundreds of which are socially rented. In the constituency of the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green in the London borough of Haringey, more than 3,400 affordable homes have been delivered, including nearly 800 socially rented properties.

Looking to the future, our £11.5 billion affordable homes programme will deliver thousands more properties for rent and to buy over the coming years. We are investing in improving the supply of good quality housing in some of our poorest communities through our £1 billion brownfield and infrastructure investment fund, which will unlock around 65,000 new homes across the country. I saw that funding in action during my recent visit to Blackpool, where we are spending £90 million to bring housing in the town centre up to scratch, helping to improve the lives of hundreds of local people.

We recognise, however, that social housing is a finite resource. Councils are responsible for allocating their housing stock through local schemes and are best placed to manage demand. That is governed by a framework set by central Government, which ensures that reasonable preference is given to those living in overcrowded homes. We want to see local authorities making full use of all these measures to deliver more good quality social and affordable housing for the communities they serve.

We encourage housing authorities to consider innovative ways in which to make the best use of their stock, such as by supporting individuals living in larger homes to transfer to smaller properties to help reduce overcrowding. Many councils are already doing so.

Neil Coyle: Will the Minister tell us whether the number of people in overcrowded social housing is going up?

Jacob Young: I do not have that figure to hand, but I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman. I should say that I am not the Social Housing Minister; I am responding on behalf of Baroness Scott in this debate. But I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets an answer to his question.

We are also working to improve the quality of social housing nationwide, taking action through the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, which will deliver transformative change across the sector, rebalancing the relationships between landlords and tenants, and ensuring landlords are held to account for their performance. The Act is one of a wide range of measures we are taking to drive up standards across the sector, which include supporting a new regulatory regime to improve the quality and regulation of social housing; introducing new standards on competence and conduct for staff involved in the provision of housing management services; and the introduction of Awaab's law.

I know the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green is particularly concerned about households that struggle with damp and mould. Awaab's law, following the tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in Rochdale in 2020, will now require landlords to address hazards, such as damp and mould, in social homes, within a fixed period. Collectively, those measures support our ambition to halve the number of non-decent rented homes by 2030, as set out in the levelling-up White Paper.

Neil Coyle: In the light of the specific case he just referenced, does the Minister regret the Lib Dem-Tory coalition decision to slash the Homes and Communities Agency's funding by 83%, which prevented some of those home improvements happening for at least the five years of that Government?

Jacob Young: I would say that we are acting, through legislation, in the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023. We introduced Awaab's law as an amendment to that Act, to ensure that such issues are tackled in a timely manner, to prevent more tragic deaths such as Awaab Ishak's.

Turning to local housing allowance, the Government recognise the cost of living pressures that tenants face, and that paying rent is likely to be a tenant's biggest monthly expense, as the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green said. From April 2024, we are investing £1.2 billion, restoring local housing allowance rates to the thirtieth percentile of local market rents. That significant investment will mean 1.6 million low-income households will gain, on average, nearly £800 per year in additional help towards their rental costs in 2024-25.

Decisive action has been taken across the UK to support households through cost of living challenges, meaning that more than 8 million of the most vulnerable households will continue to be supported through winter by additional cost of living payments. Discretionary housing payments are also available to help meet shortfalls in housing costs. Cost of living payments are also available this year to households on means-tested benefits, those on disability benefits and pensioners, with the household support fund now extended by a further six months, to help cover the cost of essentials.

As this debate has shown, we all recognise that social housing is a precious resource, which is why it must be used wisely and fairly. The British public want to know that decent, hard-working people, who have contributed to this country and played by the rules, can secure a home in their local community. That is why we are taking action to ensure that those who abuse the housing system should not benefit at the expense of those who play by the rules, and that local housing authorities do not disproportionately allocate housing to those newly arrived in the country or local area, while local families are left on waiting lists.

In conclusion, we will ensure that all applicants and tenants of social housing can benefit from a system that rewards responsible behaviour and protects local households, while supporting the most vulnerable and those most in need. That system would provide good homes as the building blocks for strong communities to be proud of, and the launchpad for people and families to get on in life.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Health and Wellbeing Services: Essex

[GORDON HENDERSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered health and wellbeing services in Essex.

I am grateful that you are chairing the debate, Mr Henderson, and pleased to see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) is the Minister responding. He has been very good on many issues that I have taken to him thus far. I will cover a wide and diverse range of health-related issues affecting my constituents and people across Essex. I appreciate that some of those issues fall outside of the Minister's portfolio, but I know he will take them on board and will feed back to colleagues. He is an excellent Minister, and I know he will respond in a helpful way. I am particularly pleased to welcome to the debate colleagues from neighbouring constituencies, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), because we care about the provision and quality of health and wellbeing services. It is important to our constituents, and it is important that our constituents know we will work together as neighbouring MPs on some of the issues.

As the Minister and colleagues will be aware, just over a year ago, in March 2023, we were in this very Chamber having a similar debate with a similar title—I think we stretched it to the east of England last time round—and this debate follows on from that one. Everyone here will know that Essex is an amazing county. Our residents, businesses and communities are hard-working, resilient, entrepreneurial, ambitious and aspirational. They obviously back all the Conservative values around lower taxes, being a county of entrepreneurs and the engine of economic growth. We are net contributors to the Exchequer. I never tire of saying that because, as net contributors, we in Essex do not always get our pound of flesh back from the Exchequer when it comes to investment in our public services. It is fair to say that our constituents expect that from the Exchequer, particularly the fact that we should be supported when it comes to our public services, including the NHS, but also wider health and wellbeing services that do not always require medical interventions or diagnostics.

Parts of our county—mid-Essex in particular—have experienced considerable population growth and demographic changes, and that covers the constituencies of Colchester and Maldon. For clarification, we share district boundaries, so our council boundaries are intertwined—we are effectively three integrated MPs, I think it is fair to say, on many of the issues that we stand up and speak for. Those living within Essex County Council's boundary totalled more than 1.5 million at the 2021 census, up by more than 100,000 people on the 2011 census, which is more than 7% and above England's average of 6.6% at the time. That includes areas such as Southend and Thurrock. When we include those areas, our county population totals just under two million, at 1.9 million. We are one of the fastest-growing counties in the country, and growth in the city of Colchester, which covers parts of my constituency, continues to grow. With that, demand on public services continues to grow. We see from the census that we have over

[Priti Patel]

300,000 people aged 65 or over, which is 21% of our population. That is higher than the average in England of 18.6% and, by 2035, that number will grow by up to 27%, so just under 400,000 people in Essex. The number of those over 85 will rise by 60%, so we can see that the numbers are growing. We are an ageing not just county but country and, that impacts on the working-age population of 18 to 65-year-olds which, by contrast, is set to rise by only 4%.

We can see the counter-cyclical issues resulting from the fact that a greater part of our population will be elderly. Interestingly enough, with that ageing population we are seeing increasing numbers of young families coming to Essex, which will mean more house building. Our schools are rated good and outstanding, and we are commutable territory, so our towns are thriving and growing.

As I said in the debate last year, there are pressures on social care which have had a very significant impact on the integrated care systems that have been introduced, with further integration taking place. In particular, those pressures have had an impact on spending at the county, district and city council level. We have a number of integrated care boards that cover Essex: NHS Hertfordshire and West Essex; NHS Mid and South Essex, which predominantly covers mid-Essex; and NHS Suffolk and North East Essex, covering Colchester and Tendring.

We also have a number of hospitals, the biggest being Broomfield Hospital, Colchester Hospital, the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Basildon University Hospital and Southend University Hospital. Our emergency services are provided by the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust, and the South Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust provides mental health services. I am shortly going to discuss those areas, and those trusts in particular.

As hon. Members have heard, we have a range of trusts, hospitals and challenges in Essex. When I was first elected we had the old-fashioned primary care trusts and strategic health authorities. Those were deeply unpopular, hugely problematic and bureaucratic and massively resource-intensive, and the changes in structures we have seen now provide greater integration. What really matters to all my constituents and residents across Essex is not so much the configuration and structure of services, but how those services work together effectively to deliver what those people and their families need: primary care, appointments and access to health services.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady on the debate. It is clearly about health services in Essex, and is therefore not to do with Strangford. However, to add my support to what the right hon. Lady is saying, I note that the problems in Essex she has outlined are replicated across my constituency as well. They include the closure of the local minor injuries unit, which is integral to the local community. That means that constituents have to travel further to get their healthcare—the very thing that the right hon. Lady is referring to. Does she agree that health bodies must focus more on community health and wellbeing to ensure that all constituents have the local access they deserve to efficient health and care services? Again, I commend the right hon. Lady on introducing the debate.

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and he has teed up the issue I wanted to raise—community healthcare provision and localised services. I have just mentioned our big hospitals in Essex, but it is absolutely vital that we have localised healthcare provision.

That brings me on to a local issue that affects my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon and me—the future of St Peter's Hospital. I raised this issue in the House last week in Health questions, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon has secured an Adjournment debate on Thursday to discuss it further. Last night I attended a public meeting hosted and organised in Witham by Witham Town Council on this matter.

I know that colleagues will say more about this issue later in this debate, but for context, to say that my right hon. Friend and I are receiving hefty mailbags on this issue would be an understatement. We are receiving unprecedented levels of correspondence and communication—emails and phone calls—from concerned and angry residents who are frustrated by the plans put forward by the integrated care board to remove services from St Peter's hospital, which could lead to its closure under the proposed consultation. The Minister will know that the plans are subject to consultation; my right hon. Friend and I have called for it to be extended, and yesterday we were given confirmation that it has been.

The measures that we are discussing include the removal of stroke rehabilitation in-patient beds to Brentwood and Rochford, which are not local areas and require considerable travel, and making permanent the temporary removal of a midwife-led birthing unit. The ICB is also seeking views on the future removal of other services from the site, including out-patient services covering blood tests, ultrasound scans, X-rays, podiatry clinics and services to support mental health patients, with an average total of around 300 patients a day using the particular site.

I should add that this is a much-loved community site, and it is fair to say that across the generations everyone in our district would have had some kind of interaction or engagement with it. I myself have used St Peter's and its maternity facilities. Last night, I met some of its maternity nurses, who kindly came to our public debate. They are remarkable ladies, who are wonderful in the care and compassion that they give to mothers, particularly new mothers who, quite frankly, struggle after the birth of their first child to adapt to some of the post-maternity services. The nurses are wonderful.

The hospital serves the town of Maldon and the wider rural area, including people in Maldon district who live in the Witham constituency. This part of Essex has experienced very considerable economic growth, particularly housing growth. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon cannot speak about small housing developments—we have significant housing developments in our constituencies. I will refer to the Westcombe Park development in Heybridge, which straddles both our constituencies. It is a development of over 1,000 homes, which speaks to the type of developments that we have locally. The current local plan runs up to 2029, and we will see the development of another 5,000 homes in that time. I recognise that we need more homes—people need homes to live in and we aspire to own our homes—but we also need to know that new housing and population growth will attract the infrastructure and public services to support them in the long run.

The consultation about St Peter's is very important. The document covers a range of issues, but I have to say that it is not acceptable for us to say, "It's fine for the services to go elsewhere and be relocated." Our constituents would experience considerable travel times if services were relocated and there are issues with local public transport as well. I am afraid to say that trying to park a car at Broomfield Hospital is nigh-on impossible. We want to those services to remain local; that is absolutely pivotal. Importantly, they should remain within Maldon town and Maldon district.

Our constituents have serious reservations about these proposals and it is right that we, as local MPs, continue to support, champion and work with the integrated care board, and work with local authorities, Ministers and the Government to secure these services in Maldon town. We have to keep these services in our district. I know that the Minister cannot specifically intervene in matters being considered by the ICB, but I would welcome his views, and I think this issue is going to be very important going forward. This consultation also sets a benchmark for engagement with ICBs and future-proofing localised healthcare services, which we all want to see in our constituencies.

I have mentioned the need to enhance services and safeguard them in Maldon and Maldon district. The Department is very familiar with communication around Witham town and my calls over 14 years for a new health centre there. My correspondence file in the Department is large; I know that, and I thank Ministers for their forbearance and all the responses that they have sent to me. However, like Maldon, Witham has experienced huge amounts of housing growth, which means that the demand for primary care is outstripping supply.

We have four GP practices in the town and I will name them all: Fern House surgery has 16,500 patients; Douglas Grove surgery has 6,500 patients; Witham practice has 6,500 patients; and Collingwood Road practice, which I visited recently, has 2,500 patients. That is a total patient list of about 32,000 just in the town itself. The national patient to GP ratio average is around 1,700 patients per GP, but across those four surgeries there are around 13 full-time equivalent GPs, which means that the local patient to GP ratio is closer to 2,500. That is the tense situation that we have and the challenge that we face.

We also have the incredible Anglia Ruskin University medical facility. Many of us were part of the group making the business case that was made for that and we are very proud of it. In September 2023, we saw the first cohort of medical practitioners from that facility. We are desperate to make sure that we keep them all local; we absolutely want them to remain local.

However, we need to discuss the practicalities and how hard it is to get a GP appointment. That is why we need new facilities, more support for GPs and more primary care staff to improve health services in Witham. I am consistent in my campaigning for all of that.

I pay tribute to Braintree District Council, which has been on this journey with us. We have capital funding for a service, but the Minister will recognise that we need the GP practices to make the business case on how they can work together. I pay tribute also to the work of the local ICB and the NHS Alliance director for mid-Essex, Dan Doherty, who has undertaken to pursue this project

with local councillors. For the first time in a decade, I feel that we have better collaboration and a stronger commitment to making this happen.

We have opportunities to redevelop locations. I cannot speak about them because some are commercially sensitive and are subject to the local councils and the ICB working together. We need the critical mass of our GPs to commit firmly to driving this proposal forward. The Minister knows that it cannot be achieved without them. We want to ensure that there is sustainability and a future business for them. For example, we are protecting prescribing, because one of the practices is a prescribing pharmacy. It is important that we give them the approach to do this.

With the game-changing dialogue that we hear in Government about localised health services, community pharmacies, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's focus on improving efficiency in the NHS, if we can knit those strands together, this could develop and lead to great outcomes for Witham town. The frustration of my constituents in Witham town is palpable; they have been waiting decades for this. We as a Government must deliver for them, and I will continue to press the Government on this.

In addition to the growing demands in Witham, we have growing demand for primary care and GP services in other parts of my constituency. These are theoretically villages but their growth means they are not analogous with the old view of what a village looks like; they include Kelvedon and Feering. Stanway in its own right is no longer a village; it has become a town within the Colchester city footprint. The beautiful village of Tiptree is famous for Wilkin & Sons and some other wonderful businesses. The Tiptree medical centre now has 12,000 patients on its books, and there are concerns that that is too many for one practice to handle. I recently received a letter from the practice explaining that their clinical rooms are full to capacity, and that they may consider options to close their patient list to new patients, formally or informally, and to reduce their patient catchment area significantly, so as not to include patients who are registered in the CM postcode area.

That is worrying and deeply concerning. Action is needed to address concerns about the impact of population growth. That is something our local authorities should be doing as they develop their local plans—they have to be much more strategic. Six years ago, a very unpopular planning application was submitted for 200 dwellings in Tiptree. It was widely opposed, including on the basis of pressures on the local health services, the Tiptree medical practice in particular. Initially the application put aside land for a new medical facility; despite local opposition, the application was granted on appeal, but in the end no site for a medical facility was included, according to the decision issued. That said that the application originally included the provision of land for a medical facility but that that was removed from the proposal because Tiptree medical centre and North East Essex clinical commissioning group no longer required the land on the site, and instead requested a financial contribution towards the provision of medical facilities. That contribution has been incorporated into the section 106 agreement. As we can see from the correspondence I referred to from the medical practice, the new capacity is now not sufficient.

[Priti Patel]

What we now have in Tiptree is an unwelcome development: a growing population but no significant new investment to meet the demands. Again, across Essex, planning contributions to health facilities are inadequate. They are not delivering on the improvements that have been promised, and that is totally unsustainable. I would like the Minister and the Department to review this and, in particular, look into the provision of GP services in Tiptree, and with the CCG look at how developer contributions are secured and issued.

As well as protecting and enhancing primary care facilities, we need to talk about GP training. I have already mentioned the facility at Anglia Ruskin University, which we are thrilled to have. I think that the Minister himself may have recently visited, and I will be heading there this week as well. It is an incredible facility that we need to grow at some stage, which I am already hinting to the Minister basically means expansion. We can then grow its capacity and have more locally trained medical practitioners.

On the subject of healthcare in our community, I thank the Minister and the Government for empowering pharmacies to deliver more services, which was long overdue. I have raised that issue in previous debates and I spoke about it when we had the announcement in January that pharmacies can now support patients with seven common conditions. That reportedly frees up something like an incredible 10 million GP appointments a year, while providing pharmacies with new business activities that importantly keep their footfall going.

Our local pharmacies are at the heart of our communities. That is pivotal, which is particularly in constituencies like mine and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, which as hon. Members will know, touch the coast. I urge the Minister to consider empowering pharmacies by giving them the opportunity to grow that provision around the wider conditions that they can treat. I am a great believer in social prescribing as well, and some of those pharmacies could even utilise their own buildings as social prescribing hubs, which we should all collectively look to expand.

The Minister has heard me touch on the importance of investment in primary care services, but the statistics I referenced in my opening remarks demonstrate the importance of prevention and social care services. I have to say that Essex County Council is blessed with the high-calibre leadership of Councillor Kevin Bentley and Councillor John Spence, who is the portfolio holder for health, adult social care and integrated care systems integration, and it has a strong record in supporting investment and service area improvements. I do not say that lightly because we were not there a decade ago, when none of us wanted to use the infamous term “bed-blocking” or say that it would take place in our hospitals, the implications of which we all know.

At any one time, the council is supporting around 16,000 people with social care, and 40,000 during the course of the year. Over 90% of people who use its services say that they are safe and secure, and the council is supporting increasing numbers with hospital discharges and reablement services. I visited an organisation called Medequip on Friday, based in Braintree district, that is contracted by Essex County Council. The innovation and the quality of care and equipment that it is providing

for reablement services is phenomenal, and we really have to do much more to support that. For example, the Essex Wellbeing Service has helped 73% of people in Essex to quit smoking, which is an important intervention using preventative care, and it also supported the provision of 42,000 NHS health checks. We need to do much more on health checks, particularly cancer checks.

I will not repeat the numbers on the elderly population, but the population with learning disabilities and autism is also increasing. It is expected to grow by 3% by 2025—just next year—and the population of working-age adults with sensory impairments will grow by 5%. The council is spending around £500,000 a year on adult social care services, just over £200 million on people aged over 65 and just under £300 million on working age adults between 18 and 64. I welcome the funding that we have, but we definitely need much more.

I met parents yesterday in my constituency who are fighting for education, health and care plans—a common experience for all of us now. Since 2019, under Essex County Council, the number of EHCPs has increased from just under 9,000 to over 11,600 in 2023—a 29% increase in four years. Essex is doing very well at this compared with many authorities, but we are struggling to get these plans for children. That is a long-standing issue. The Minister will recognise that we are seeing greater demand from parents and that schools are raising this issue.

Another area of frontline health provision that will be familiar to the Minister is dentistry. In the east of England in particular—not just Essex—we have long-standing problems. The Library has shown that, in 2023, around 52.2% of children in Essex had seen a dentist in the past two years, which is just under the English average of 53%. Our figures are not good, and I would like to hear from the Minister how we are going to make progress in this area.

I thank the Minister for the time he gave us last week to discuss the mental health statutory inquiry. Colleagues in Essex are familiar with the concerns about this issue. When we debated health and wellbeing services last year, the inquiry was on a non-statutory footing. It was established back in 2021 to investigate 2,000 in-patient deaths that had occurred since 2000. I pay tribute to Geraldine Strathdee for her work in chairing that inquiry and for doing all she could to gather evidence and see the witnesses that participated in that work. She, families and colleagues in this place were frustrated that not enough progress was being made and, importantly, that not enough evidence was coming forward. Colleagues pressed for the inquiry to be converted to a statutory inquiry, and we now have Baroness Kate Lampard chairing it. Over the past few months, she has been consulting on the terms of reference. I thank Kate for the work that she is doing. Obviously, the Minister is familiar with this. We are waiting for the terms of reference to be finalised.

Our constituents have been incredible in their dignity, their courage and their bravery but also in their resilience. As human beings, they have been through a terrible ordeal—they really have. They want to see the statutory inquiry progress at pace. I pay tribute to my constituent Melanie Leahy, whose son Matthew died in 2012 while a patient in the Linden centre. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon will speak to this as well, as Melanie Leahy was at one stage his constituent. She is

remarkable for the way in which she tackled what I call the institutional state failure of her son's treatment. Importantly, she helped to get a statutory inquiry. The families must all get the answers that they need and see lessons learned from what happened. We owe it to those who lost their lives and to their families to change the system and to get answers. I look forward to the Minister's comments on this in particular and on how we will come together to make time to meet the families and to work with them.

My final comments speak to the future of the NHS—the workforce plan, the growing demand for services and work on recruitment. I spoke about this in my last dialogue with the chief executive of Broomfield Hospital. I am interested in this, and I ask questions all the time. The House has heard the numbers and the statistics I put forward on how difficult it is to get an appointment and how pressed we are in terms of medical practitioners.

We should also recognise that we have an incredible international workforce locally. Our NHS would be in a much more difficult position if it was not for the staff from Botswana, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Nepal, Sudan, India and Egypt who are working in our health and social care services and contributing to our public services, our economy and our tax system. They care for elderly and vulnerable residents across our constituencies, and they should be thanked for that.

There have been interesting debates on migration, immigration and on the skills and contributions of those coming to our country. Of course there is a need to control numbers, but we have to recognise that we rely on those skills and contributions because of workforce pressures and the fact that we have not done enough as an economy and a country to grow skillsets here. I encourage the Minister to ensure that, as part of the NHS long-term workforce plan, we do much more. We have Anglia Ruskin University and other universities across the country, but we must do more.

I want the Government to recognise that we need a wider labour market strategy that addresses these issues, which sometimes unnecessarily inflame debates around immigration. They must also recognise that many of those who come to our country through a skilled worker route pay thousands of pounds in immigration health surcharges, which contributes to the finances of the NHS. Many of them are also higher-rate taxpayers and contribute to our economy, our country and important sectors.

Of course, technology also has a role to play—it really does. We can do so much more using technology, and we must make sure that we absolutely grow the workforce locally going forward.

I have presented the Minister with a long list of health and wellbeing issues across Essex, and I thank him and his team for their patience—he is a great Minister, who is very considered, and I know he will respond accordingly. With investment, innovation and support, our health and wellbeing services across Essex could be so much better. Importantly, they could meet the needs of our constituents and ensure that we have not just a sustainable NHS service that meets the needs of our population, but a happier and healthier population.

3.1 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for

Witham (Priti Patel) on securing this important debate on health and wellbeing services in Essex. Her powerful speech raised a number of issues affecting all parts of Essex, including my own, in north Essex, and specifically Colchester. Understandably, I plan to focus on north Essex and my constituency, but given that I stood down as a Minister of State at the Department of Health and Social Care only in late November, I want to start with some reflections on our NHS more generally. May I say in passing that the Minister is doing a marvellous job with a difficult brief? As he knows, it is a privilege and an honour to be a Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care and to be part of our NHS's story.

The NHS is a universal, comprehensive system that is free at the point of use and paid for through taxation—principles that remain intact and that receive strong public and political support today. At its heart, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham set out, the NHS is not about buildings and equipment—as important as those are, and we are of course passionate about health centres, hospitals and the latest technology—but about the circa 2 million people who work in it day in, day out to deliver and facilitate the high-quality care we rightly expect. I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who works in our NHS, especially those working in north Essex and those serving patients and my constituents in Colchester.

We all have our personal experiences of our NHS and of the care that we and our families have received. When we think about the future of health and wellbeing services in Essex, we have to be mindful of the broader context, much of which my right hon. Friend set out in her powerful speech. Our NHS is under significant and considerable pressure and faces a number of challenges. We have increasing demand, particularly in primary care and in urgent and emergency care. We are living longer, which is brilliant, but it comes with challenges, including living with complex conditions and comorbidities.

Social care continues to be a challenge, especially around workforce, as my right hon. Friend set out. We have increasing demand on mental health services. We had the covid pandemic, with the backlog and the waiting lists, but also the resulting later diagnosis of cardiovascular disease and other conditions, as many people were unable to or did not come forward with symptoms or for regular check-ups.

We also have the at times seemingly intractable complexity of NHS structures and processes; the silo mentality that we sadly see so often; the multiple tiers and archaic processes; the challenges in rolling out the latest innovative technologies, such as tech, drugs, treatment and therapies, that are available in some parts of Essex or the country but not in others; and the issue of making sure that research and innovation is truly embedded in every single trust in the country.

That is not an exhaustive list, and I have not mentioned two of the biggest challenges—workforce and funding—one of which my right hon. Friend touched on in some detail. First, on funding, the NHS will always need increased funding to reflect the changing nature of medicine and the health needs of our population and, importantly, to ensure that we have the very latest and most innovative and cutting-edge medtech, treatments, drugs, procedures and therapies for our patients. Despite record revenue and capital budgets for our NHS, year-on-year real-terms increases in funding, and further

[*Will Quince*]

significant funding—in fact, several billion pounds of funding—announced in the spring Budget, which I massively welcome, budgets remain a challenge for local systems and for trusts, not just in Essex but across the country.

Secondly, as my right hon. Friend pointed out, workforce is absolutely vital to our NHS, and she was right to mention the hugely important contribution that international staff make—they have contributed since its formation, and continue to do so. Regardless of the NHS long-term workforce plan, as important as it is, international recruitment will still have a hugely important role to play.

I was a Minister at the DHSC when the Government commissioned NHS England to produce the first ever NHS long-term workforce plan, which the Minister will no doubt elaborate on. The plan was then published, backed with £2.4 billion over the next five years by the Government. It included things like doubling medical school places, including at Anglia Ruskin University, which we are incredibly proud of; huge increases in nursing, midwifery and allied health professional training places; and a plan for retention—it is critical that it is about not just recruitment but retention and, of course, reform.

We talk about workforce and funding, but the truth is that addressing those two things alone will not tackle the challenges our NHS faces either nationally or locally. Only by innovating and transforming local systems and the delivery of health and care provision at a local level can we deliver on what we all aspire to across this House, which is our local populations living longer, healthier, happier and more fulfilling lives.

I firmly believe that integrated care systems, which my right hon. Friend touched on, are at the heart of achieving that. They are working holistically at a local level to get systems focusing relentlessly on patient outcomes and patient experiences, and breaking down the silo mentality that we have sadly so often seen in our NHS historically. Their other critical role is driving transformation and innovation at a local level, getting trusts and organisations to work together, and using all assets and capacity within health systems.

I pay tribute, as my right hon. Friend did, to the leadership of the Suffolk & North East Essex Integrated Care System—Dr Ed Garratt and his team. I know how closely they work with Nick Hulme and his team at the East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust or, as it is known locally, Colchester and Ipswich Hospitals. Our health system more broadly, and our two acute hospital trusts in north Essex and east Suffolk, face many of the challenges I set out earlier, but to their great credit, they are continuously looking at innovative ways to address them.

For example, our system in north Essex and east Suffolk is consistently one of the highest and best-performing in the country. It had the fastest roll-out of the covid-19 vaccine. It is a top performer for diabetes care. It has consistently low levels of delayed discharge, an issue my right hon. Friend the Minister and his fellow Minister, the Minister for Social Care, spent a lot of time focusing on, and rightly so, because of the continued pressure on urgent and emergency care and the importance of tackling delayed discharge.

Our local system has also led on innovation. It has developed the Care Tech Campus and the challenge fund, in particular, with the University of Essex and Essex County Council. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham was right to praise the role that Councillors Kevin Bentley and John Spence have played in that, working in partnership with the health system to deliver innovation in care that is providing not just better outcomes, but a better experience for patients. Finally, our local system is leading the way on National Institute for Health and Care Research-funded research, which we want more trusts across the country to do.

Before I finish, I want to raise a handful of initiatives in north Essex and east Suffolk that I think deserve highlighting, because they are going to be transformational in terms of both patient experience and outcome. The first is the elective orthopaedic centre at Colchester Hospital, which I was fortunate enough to have a tour of recently. It is hugely exciting. It is an impressive £64 million facility serving north-east Essex and east Suffolk. It is the largest of its kind in Europe, at over 11,000 square metres, and will include eight theatres, three wards, a physio, a gym, a day surgery, a recovery centre and its own imaging department. Importantly—I know the Minister will be pleased to hear this—it will enable 10,000 procedures a year following its opening, which is due to take place this August.

The second initiative is the Clacton community diagnostic centre, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling). I am sorry he could not be here for the debate, but I want to reference it as it serves the wider area. The centre is a £25 million investment in state-of-the-art diagnostics, meaning that patients can access the full range of diagnostic services, including CT scans, MRI scans, X-rays, ultrasounds, blood scans and cardiorespiratory medicine. Importantly—I visited a lot of community diagnostic centres when I was in the Minister's role—this facility has delivered more than 110,000 treatments in the past year. I would love it if the Minister could check this, but I think that it must be one of the highest performing centres—if not the highest performing centre—in the country.

I want to turn now to two mental health and mental resilience projects, which our integrated care system is leading on and which I think deserve a mention. The first is the north-east Essex mental health joint response vehicle, which was successfully commissioned as a three-year service following a successful pilot between January and March 2023. This unique service is a collaboration between the East of England Ambulance Service and the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust—our mental health trust—with a paramedic and mental health practitioner manning a 10-hour service seven days a week. That service has been so successful in ensuring that those experiencing a mental health crisis are seen by the most appropriate service. I am really keen that we extend those hours, and I know that the ICS is looking at securing additional funding to do so.

The data backs up why it is a good thing to do. In 2023, the joint response vehicle attended 757 patient calls for a variety of mental health-related presentations, including suicidal threat, self-harm, depression and psychosis, with 77% of patients being redirected to another service or provided with a care plan at home, reducing by 55% the number of attendances at emergency departments for mental health-related issues. I will not

need to remind the Minister that mental health is not only one of the largest drivers of attendance at our emergency departments, especially involving conveyance via ambulance, but leads to some of the longest cubicle occupation in our emergency departments, as hospitals do not have the beds to move people up and into, and often takes up additional resource, such as police officers and others.

The second initiative I want to touch on involves primary school wellbeing hubs—these are more about mental resilience, but I think that that is an important area to highlight. When I was Schools Minister and Children’s Minister, we worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on investment in mental health resilience support with mental health support teams, on training for schools and on the support teams that would go into schools to provide that support.

The Tendring and Colchester wellbeing hubs are a pilot project with 22 primary schools in Colchester and Tendring, which aims to improve children’s mental health and wellbeing through a prevention and early intervention approach. This programme has delivered across 22 schools, with 19 of them completing a number of questionnaires that have been evaluated by the University of Essex to demonstrate the impact and evaluate the programme over the 12 months in which it has run.

Overall, pupils who attended the wellbeing hub sessions had significant increases in their levels of resilience, wellbeing and happiness and decreased anxiety. The initiative was supported by more than 80% of parents, who said that their children communicated better, while more than 60% of children said they had more confidence and were more resilient and less stressed or anxious. I know that such programmes are happening to varying degrees across the country, but our integrated care system is really leading the way and demonstrating things that could be replicated and rolled out to other parts of the country.

In conclusion, I thank again all those involved in the delivery of healthcare across north Essex, as well as the leadership of the Suffolk & North East Essex Integrated Care System and the East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust for driving the innovation and transformation of health and care provision locally. We know that that is the future of delivering not just better a patient experience, but better patient outcomes. I once again thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham for giving us the opportunity to talk about health and wellbeing services in Essex, which, as she rightly said, we all care so passionately about. We all know that the challenges both locally and nationally are significant, and we all want and expect world-class care for our constituents. I know that I and all my Essex colleagues will continue to work with our local NHS bodies in all their guises to support them to deliver it.

3.16 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) for obtaining this debate. As she said, we who represent the county of Essex work together closely on these matters, and I absolutely endorse everything that she and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) said.

I was elected originally for a constituency called South Colchester and Maldon, which included the areas in the Maldon district now represented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham and a number of wards in the Colchester constituency. During all the time that I have represented the area, we have been debating the problems of healthcare in the county, particularly the lack of funding.

When I first came to this place, we were part of something called the North East Thames regional health authority. My right hon. Friend is right that the record of NHS funding overall has been very good, but we have suffered consistently from a skew, with more money going originally to the areas of London that were part of the North East Thames RHA, and subsequently, through the various allocation formulas, we have lost out. The funding per head has been consistently below what is needed, and that is reflected in some of the problems we have, particularly because, at the same time that we have been underfunded, we have seen steady and continuing population growth. My right hon. Friend referred to the 1,000-plus houses being built in Heybridge, part of which falls in my constituency. I have another development on the other side of Maldon from Heybridge of another 1,500 houses. About 3,000 houses are going up in Maldon and Heybridge alone, with more houses across the district. They are putting steadily increasing pressure on the health service.

The issue of St Peter’s Hospital, to which my right hon. Friend referred, is of huge importance to the town’s residents, the Maldon district and the surrounding area. I will bring that matter to the House’s attention on Thursday in an Adjournment debate, when we will have a lot more to say about it. However, it is fair to say, in summary, that St Peter’s Hospital is 150 years old, it has been steadily deteriorating and, in all the time that I have represented the area, we have been debating a replacement. We have come very close a number of times, but each time it has never quite happened. It has now reached the point where the hospital can no longer safely provide services in some of the areas, because the original structure is not appropriate, and although money has been spent on it, the hospital has nevertheless deteriorated. We have been debating whether to refurbish or relocate it for all these years, but nothing happened until we reached the point where it is now proposed that the hospital is closed and services—particularly maternity and in-patient services—are moved to other locations far from my constituency and, particularly, some of the more remote areas. I will speak about that in more detail on Thursday, but it is an indicator of the way in which my part of Essex, particularly, has been underprovided for for far too long.

That is also reflected in the access to primary care, which my right hon. Friend mentioned. We have two GP practices in Maldon. They both have patient lists well in excess of 12,000. I know that across the country people struggle to get appointments. We all hear about the difficulty that people have—they ring at five-past 8 and are told that the appointments are all gone—but it is especially acute in Maldon. Both those practices are in buildings that are simply not fit for purpose, and that compounds the problem. In each case, we are looking to reap a benefit from this housing development by obtaining investment into infrastructure.

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

I share my right hon. Friend's view that those currently trying to supply health services across the county are doing their best. I join her in congratulating and thanking the leadership of Essex County Council, whom I met last week to discuss these problems, including Kevin Bentley and his colleagues. Equally, I thank the representatives of the ICB, but we have reached a point where action has to be taken, and we are looking to the Government for help. As I say, I will talk more about that on Thursday. I know that every MP will claim that their area needs more support, but our situation is the consequence of decades of underfunding. We have been shouting loudly for too long without being heard, and we have reached a point where something has to change.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the Essex mental health inquiry, now called the Lampard inquiry. Melanie Leahy, originally my constituent but now a constituent of my right hon. Friend, and my constituent Lisa Morris have been calling attention to and ringing alarm bells about what has been going on in mental healthcare in Essex for a long time. When they first started doing so, they asked for an inquiry. For a long time they were denied it, until eventually we recognised that, clearly, something was badly wrong. The number of deaths that happened under the care of the then mental health trust was excessive and needed examination.

The Government eventually agreed and set up an inquiry, but it was not statutory. My constituents came back and said that it has to be statutory. At the time, we said to them that we had discussed this with the then Ministers, who said, "No, but our advantage is in it not being statutory. Therefore, we should not go down that road." The Government have now accepted that the inquiry does have to be made statutory, and at last a proper examination can take place to identify exactly what has been going on. Concerns are still being expressed by campaigners who have lost family members.

I welcome the meeting that I had with my right hon. Friends, including the Minister, just a week ago to discuss how to proceed with the inquiry. There are real concerns over the timescale, which is being examined, and whether the inquiry can continue to examine deaths that are still taking place. Even very recently, there was a death.

Equally, there is concern that the lawyers, Hodge Jones & Allen, have been working pro bono on this, and they need some kind of remuneration if they are to continue. In other inquiries, lawyers representing family members have received interim payments, and the lawyers in this case also need some support, so I ask the Minister to consider that. Most importantly, however, they have been promised meetings. I know that the Minister is in the process of setting those meetings up, including with the Secretary of State so that she can hear directly from some of the families who have been affected. I know that the Minister is also looking at the terms of reference and the process under which the inquiry proceeds.

This has been going on a very long time. The Minister will understand the frustration, so we would be grateful to hear anything from him this afternoon about whether we can now press ahead and have those meetings with the families and those representing them, and get a proper, full examination of what has happened in the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust and its predecessor bodies.

I will return some of those themes on Thursday. Again, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham; we will continue to work together with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and across the county, to ensure that our constituents receive the proper healthcare that they deserve.

3.25 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. I thank the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) for securing this important debate; I know this is something she is passionate about. She highlighted a number of important issues and concerns regarding health and wellbeing services in her constituency and across Essex, and I am pleased to respond on the Opposition's behalf. I also thank other hon. Members for their contributions to the debate; I have found it very insightful.

I will start with GPs, as securing the future of general practice is integral to the future of the NHS as a whole. GPs are vital to their communities and contribute hugely to keeping the nation healthy. However, the Government have broken their promise to recruit more than 6,000 GPs in the last five years. Ultimately, the NHS has lost the equivalent of 1,830 full-time, fully qualified GPs since 2015. There is a GP shortage crisis, and Essex is unfortunately on its frontline.

When we break down the numbers of patients per GP in the UK, Mid and South Essex ICB is worse than anywhere else in the country—I do not dispute that. There is one GP for every 2,281 patients. Staff shortages are a vicious cycle that leads to worsening outcomes, and we must train thousands more GPs to finally end that cycle. If we do not, we risk allowing the health of our nation, and the health of the people of Essex, to just get worse.

It is also worrying that the Care Quality Commission warned Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust last summer over failings in three Essex hospitals. It found that medical care had deteriorated, with waiting times not meeting national standards and patients not accessing services when they needed them. The people of Essex deserve better care. They deserve to be seen on time, and to have local hospitals providing quality care for them when they need it most.

In recent years, elective waiting lists have risen sharply in every region and area of England. However, there are large geographical differences, with the east of England being one of worst affected areas. When we compare the figures with January 2020, the waiting list at the end of last year was 113% higher in the east of England. At the start of last year, the Prime Minister made a promise to the country to get NHS waiting lists down. Last month, he admitted the obvious—that he had failed. However, the reality is that the Government have failed in achieving most of the waiting list and waiting time targets since 2010. Unfortunately, that is a result of 14 years of successive Conservative Governments running the NHS.

I will quickly reflect on the worrying state of maternal health services in Essex. We face a crisis in maternity services across the country, with the CQC rating two out of three maternity units dangerously substandard. For the people of Essex, all but one maternity hospital unit is failing. Following the release of the final Ockenden

report nearly two years ago, I urge the Minister to respond on the Government's progress on implementing the report's immediate and essential actions in trusts across the country. Safe care for women, babies and their families must be the top priority for our Government. It is clear that more needs to be done to improve care and safety in maternity services in England.

The Essex mental health inquiry has been covered in this debate, and I praise the grieving families and hard-working campaigners for their efforts in securing a statutory inquiry. In particular, I want to honour Melanie Leahy, whose son Matthew died more than 10 years ago in a mental health unit in Essex. She has never given up hope of getting justice and fighting to improve mental health provision in Essex and across the country, and she is an inspiration to us all.

Labour welcomed the announcement at that time, and I hope to hear an update from the Government today about progress on the Lampard inquiry. The Secretary of State offered to meet families last year, but that has yet to happen. *The Guardian* reported today that bereaved families have accused the Minister of dragging their feet over the inquiry into the death of almost 2,000 patients across NHS mental health trusts in Essex. I hope to hear from him about when that meeting is scheduled to take place and when the inquiry's terms of reference are scheduled to be published.

I urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that the inquiry finally provides answers for the bereaved families, who have been waiting for far too long. While we are most determined to find answers to the specific inquiry, we must be clear that poor mental health services and standards are worryingly prevalent across other parts of the country. We continue to hear of other tragedies in mental health services; those are unacceptable. The Government must treat those incidences as a wake-up call and act in the light of the soaring number of investigations to prevent any further suffering or loss of life.

In recent years, one of the ways the Government could have acted would have been to deliver a reformed mental health Act. Reforms would have finally modernised legislation to strengthen people's rights and choices within mental health settings. That was a manifesto pledge by the Government, and the Bill is ready to go—"oven-ready" as some on the Government Benches might have said previously. There is no excuse for the delay, but the Government have failed to get it done and deliver those much-needed changes. Labour has committed to introducing such a Bill in our first King's Speech. Not only will it deliver real change to mental health services across the country, but it will deliver 8,500 new mental health specialists, mental health support in every school and open-access mental health hubs in every community. Those fully funded and game-changing policies will make a real difference to tackling the mental health crisis that we face.

As we have heard, health and wellbeing services in Essex and across the country are facing extreme challenges. If we are privileged to get into government, Labour is determined to make a real difference for the people of Essex and this country by delivering more GPs, midwives, health visitors and mental health support and cutting waiting lists and times. We will deliver a mission-driven Government and break out of the current doom loop.

We will push decisions out to communities and finally end the short-term sticking-plaster politics of this Government.

3.33 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Henderson—I think this is the first time I have responded to a debate while you have been in the Chair. It is a pleasure to respond to the debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) on securing a debate on such an important subject. My further thanks go to my esteemed predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), not only for his work supporting his own constituency, but for his tireless efforts as a Health Minister and as my immediate predecessor in the Department. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for his thoughtful contribution and the powerful advocacy that he always conducts on behalf of his constituents.

We all know that much of the continued recovery of the NHS following the pandemic is entirely dependent on the people who work in our NHS. I commend my hon. and right hon. Friends for the tributes they have paid to NHS staff. Our long-term workforce plan, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, sets out the Government's vision and commitment to ensuring that we have an NHS that can deliver for the future. Our plan commits to improving retention by improving culture and leadership to ensure that up to 130,000 fewer staff will leave the NHS over the next 15 years. It also sets out an aim to double the number of medical school places in England to 15,000 by 2031-32. That is our commitment to the future of the NHS moving forward, and there is cause for optimism now too. In recent months, the rate of staff leaving active service in the NHS has returned to pre-pandemic levels. In the east of England, the rate of staff leaving active service in the NHS has followed a similar pattern and is now below pre-pandemic levels. We know there is more to be done, but the plan is working.

The number of doctors and nurses is also on the rise. There are almost 6,800 more doctors and more than 21,500 more nurses in the NHS than last year. In the east of England, there are almost 740 more doctors and almost 1,700 more nurses in the NHS than last year. My hon. and right hon. Friends mentioned Anglia Ruskin University. I had the huge privilege of visiting the university on 4 March to meet some of the medical students. If there is anything that gives a person optimism about the future of the NHS, it is sitting down and having a roundtable with some of the medical students in a university such as Anglia Ruskin, which has gone from strength to strength over recent years thanks to the campaigning of local MPs who have championed investment in that university.

Medical training at our best medical institutions is an essential part of delivering the long-term workforce plan. I therefore welcome Anglia Ruskin University's commitment to the medical degree apprenticeship and recognise that it is a trailblazer. The university can bid for additional Government-funded places, in common with all existing medical schools across England, and I look forward to continuing to work with it and local MPs to secure more investment in the university.

[Andrew Stephenson]

We know that the NHS faces pressures all over the country, including in Essex and the east of England more broadly. As a Government, we are committed to working every day to improve the outcomes and experiences of patients. A huge part of that is making sure that patients get to talk to a GP. I am glad to say that since 2019 we have recruited more than 36,000 additional staff into general practice, covering a range of roles including pharmacists. We fulfilled our commitment to recruit 26,000 additional staff a year ahead of the March 2024 target, and we have also delivered on our manifesto commitment of 50 million more general practice appointments a year, with 367.7 million booked appointments across the past 12 months.

Looking more closely at the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham, I am pleased to say that there are now approximately 105 full-time equivalent members of the clinical general practice workforce. That is an increase of 62% since September 2019, when there were about 65 full-time equivalent staff in the clinical workforce. In the east of England, there are now approximately 3,909 full-time equivalent GPs and an estimated 3.7 million general practice appointments took place in January 2024, with 72% of those face to face. In Witham specifically, 76% of appointments in January 2024 were face to face, up from 68.5% in January 2023. All the same, I commend my right hon. Friend for her tenacious advocacy of a new health hub for Witham. Her constituents are fortunate to have such a doughty champion, with a deep and genuine care for their access to the health service.

Mid and South Essex ICB has confirmed that GP practices in Witham are working together to help meet the health needs of local residents by sharing staff, teams and services. However, as my right hon. Friend acknowledged in her speech, the financial complexities of bringing GP estates together can be multifaceted and challenging. Mid and South Essex ICB has confirmed that transitioning to a new building would involve complex considerations surrounding property ownership, leasing arrangements and financial investments. The ICB is also concerned that while section 106 monies serve as a valuable contribution to local NHS healthcare provision, the money available may fall short in sustaining the entire development of a new healthcare centre. I hope my right hon. Friend and the ICB can continue to work together to think carefully through those challenges and find the best solution that meaningfully responds to the needs of Witham's patients.

I also thank my right hon. Friend for her comments about the future of St Peter's Hospital, which I know is a subject dear to her heart and to the heart of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon. As she said, it is generating an unprecedented reaction from her constituents. I will keep my comments on this issue brief, knowing that another debate on it will take place on Thursday. That will provide a longer opportunity for my right hon. Friends, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, to build and expand on the concerns that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham has set out today.

Let me be clear that no decision has yet been made about the future of St Peter's. Any decision regarding the future configuration of NHS services in Mid and

South Essex should be made locally, following engagement with local communities. I am sure that local views are being listened to and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham said, an NHS consultation is currently live. I urge both her and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, and their constituents, to participate in it actively.

I expect any subsequent decision taken by the local NHS to demonstrate improved outcomes for patients, having taken into account all of the many issues that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham has outlined today, which I am sure will be further expanded upon on Thursday.

I want to reassure both my right hon. Friends. In my constituency, an unpopular reorganisation of local health services in east Lancashire under the last Labour Government in 2007 removed a significant number of health services in my constituency and transferred them to Blackburn, so I am very conscious of the potential impacts of hospital reorganisations and I always look at these matters very closely and pay close attention to the views of local Members of Parliament.

I turn to the subject of urgent and emergency care. We absolutely recognise the pressures that these services are facing and we are working to ensure that people receive the care they need when they need it. Although we recognise that there is more to do, we have seen performance improve this year.

For example, at the Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust 67.3% of accident and emergency patients were seen within four hours in January 2024, which was better than the trust's performance in January 2023. At the East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust, 72.2% of A&E patients were seen within four hours in January 2024—performance above the national average. Ambulance handover delays, which have a big impact on response times, have reduced significantly this winter compared with last year. At the Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust, delays of over 60 minutes have fallen by 48%. Nationally, we have seen progress on ambulance response times, with the average ambulance waits for category 2 incidents down by over a third this winter.

We have heard today about the continuing difficulties that patients have in accessing a dentist. That is deeply unfortunate and it is essential that we give patients access to the dental care that they deserve. That is why, on 7 February, we published our plan to recover and reform dentistry, to make dental services faster, simpler and fairer for patients. The plan will fund around 2.5 million additional appointments; our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry is backed by £200 million.

Hon. Members also mentioned the important role of community pharmacy. Community pharmacy is delivering healthcare, which makes an extremely valuable contribution to patients' lives. That is why we are continuing to support the sector financially, and we are providing over £2.6 billion every year to support community pharmacy. To go further, we are now investing up to £645 million across this financial year and the next in Pharmacy First, which will allow for more blood pressure checks and more contraception consultations in pharmacy.

I will now address some of the concerns expressed regarding the Lampard inquiry, which is an issue of the utmost importance and sensitivity. I completely recognise

the desire of families and other stakeholders that the terms of reference of the inquiry be finalised as soon as possible, so that the inquiry can make progress with its investigations. Let me update my hon. and right hon. Friends on the most recent discussions.

Following consultation with families and other stakeholders, the chair of the Lampard inquiry has shared her initial views on potential changes to the terms of reference. On 5 December, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care agreed to meet families and local MPs in Essex to discuss the terms of reference. On 6 March, as referred to by both my right hon. Friends today, the local MPs and I met to discuss the inquiry. We agreed that my right hon. and hon. Friends across Essex would put forward names of family members to attend a meeting with the Secretary of State, so that she could hear directly from the families herself.

We have now identified a potential date for that meeting, and that will be communicated very shortly to local MPs, if it has not been already; the date will be emailed out by my office. I hope that the meeting can take place on that date, and that we can make the swift progress that we all want to see. Families have been waiting far too long. Again, I commend my hon. and right hon. Friends for their work to shine a light on what has gone on and to ensure that the inquiry was established, and I hope that it can finally get on with its work and deliver the outcomes and justice that the families all want to see.

I will wrap up by addressing one of the most important elements in the future of healthcare: prevention. I reiterate the Government's commitment to our levelling-up mission to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy by 2030 and to increase healthy life expectancy by five years by 2035. To do that, we are tackling health inequalities through programmes such as the NHS's Core20PLUS5, which focuses on improving health outcomes for the poorest 20% of the population as well as other groups.

Furthermore, we will publish our major conditions strategy this year, a direction-setting document aiming to pave the way for further action towards integrated care, co-ordinated around the needs of people. It aims to improve healthy life expectancy, reduce pressures on the NHS and reduce ill health-related labour market inactivity. Together, those programmes will help us shift the dial, both nationally and in Essex, on NHS pressures.

I thank my hon. and right hon. Friends for their contributions, and once again thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham for securing the debate.

I hope my answers have helped to assure all those who have attended that we are firmly committed to delivering for the health and wellbeing needs of people in Essex and across the country.

3.46 pm

Priti Patel: I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these important health issues across Essex. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for joining the debate, and to the Minister for a concise series of well-considered remarks. We have touched on a range of issues, including the challenging demographics of the county of Essex and the needs of populations, and key areas covering primary care services, GP-patient ratios, our hospitals, the need to safeguard the facilities of Maldon St Peter's Hospital, the need to secure a health centre in Witham town, the growing needs in Tiptree itself and the significant demands on social care.

I thank everybody for their comments on the EPUT statutory mental health inquiry, which is particularly sensitive, difficult and challenging. I pay tribute to the Minister for meeting us last week, and his comments on meeting the families are crystal clear. I thank his private office, which contacted us MPs today—in less than a week—to ask for the specifics that we have discussed. It is important that we can go back to those families with the information that a meeting with the Secretary of State will take place very soon.

My final comment is to echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon: the inquiry has been going on for too long. We need to find the right balance of redress and parity of esteem in the whole mental health debate. However, while the inquiry takes place, we also need to find the right services and support for the families and the lawyers in particular.

It has been a pleasure to secure this debate and raise these issues. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their important contributions. There is more to do, and we will be back to discuss the same issues again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered health and wellbeing services in Essex.

3.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Criminal Cases Review Commission

4 pm

Gordon Henderson (in the Chair): I will call Damian Collins to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Henderson. I wish to bring up the case of my constituent, Paul Cleeland, who is sitting in the Public Gallery for this debate, in relation to the work of the Criminal Cases Review Commission. I appreciate, Mr Henderson, that this is not a court, you are not a judge and I am not a lawyer. However, the CCRC is a public body, established by the Criminal Appeal Act 1995, and is subject to scrutiny by Parliament.

The CCRC has been the subject of Select Committee reports, particularly the Justice Select Committee report in 2015, which raised concerns about the threshold for the referral of cases by the CCRC to the Court of Appeal, in particular on the safety first principle. That was acknowledged in the Government's response to the report. Admittedly, some years later it is now the subject of an inquiry by the Law Commission that was established in 2022, although that piece of work is still at the pre-consultation phase. Therefore, I think this is a legitimate area for a debate in Parliament, as the CCRC is a public body.

Mr Cleeland's case has been presented in Parliament on numerous occasions since he was convicted of murdering Terry Clarke in November 1972 in Stevenage. The case was raised in Adjournment debates in the House of Commons in 1982 and 1988, and by me in 2011 and again today. Many regard it as a miscarriage of justice, one of a series of miscarriages of justices that we are familiar with, certainly from the 1970s, but one that remains outstanding. Mr Cleeland has always maintained his innocence and never accepted guilt; when he was released on licence from prison after 26 years he still refused to admit any liability for the offence, and he has continued to fight to clear his name since, including repeated appeals to the CCRC for his case to be referred to the Court of Appeal.

For the benefit of the Minister and other hon. Members I will give a brief summary of Mr Cleeland's initial trial and why it was regarded almost from the start as a potential miscarriage of justice. Mr Cleeland was committed of murdering Terry Clarke, a man that he knew, had worked with and was familiar with. Mr Clarke was shot twice with a shotgun at the rear of his property in Grace Way in Stevenage—one shot in the back and, after he turned to face his assailant, a fatal wound in the chest. It was alleged that the Gye & Moncrieff shotgun was found near the scene of the crime. It was established by the Crown in Mr Cleeland's trial that that was the murder weapon, although there has never been any forensic evidence linking the gun to the murder or to Mr Cleeland.

There was a concern shortly after the trial about the likelihood that Mr Cleeland would have murdered Mr Clarke in that location and in that way. First, it would have required him to wait for Mr Clarke to return home at two in the morning, in a road that was effectively a cul-de-sac with a series of residential properties where he could easily have been observed. Waiting for someone that he knew, the chances are that he would himself have been recognised by neighbours in the area, so many people questioned whether that seemed likely.

Secondly, there were questions about the motive for the crime. In the local reporting at the time of the murder there seemed more likely scenarios. In particular, Mr Clarke was due to give evidence in Stevenage court the following week and it was believed that he might give evidence against other criminals who he felt were complicit in charges that he faced. There may have been other people with a motive for wanting Mr Clarke off the scene.

There are particular concerns relating to the Gye & Moncrieff shotgun. In the evidence considered by the court in Mr Cleeland's trial, looking at the spread of the pellets on the body of the victim, it was believed that the shotgun must have been fired between 18 feet and 40 feet away from Mr Clarke. That seems implausible. One of the only eyewitnesses to the murder, the man's widow, said that the assailant shot at close range, was about 5 feet 8 inches—shorter than Mr Cleeland—and that he had dark hair, while Mr Cleeland had fair hair. There was no corroboration, from one of the only eyewitnesses, that he was likely to have been the murderer.

Later that same month, two sawn-off shotguns were found in a weir near Harlow by Essex police. They referred those guns to the Hertfordshire police investigating Mr Clarke's death, to consider whether they might have been the murder weapons. The significance of sawn-off shotguns was that they were consistent with the assailant's approaching Mr Clarke at short range, because a sawn-off shotgun would have produced the spread of pellets in the victim's body consistent with a short-range shooting, but only from a pump-action gun.

Nevertheless, the case was heard in St Albans Crown court. No verdict was reached. Then it was retried and Mr Cleeland was convicted. The case was subsequently considered in 2002 by the Court of Appeal, which discredited a lot of the evidence produced in Mr Cleeland's initial trial.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am here to show support from the commission on the future of justice and miscarriages of justice. This is a very well-known case. Our commission, which I co-chair with the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), looks at these cases. If we can be of any help, we will be. We know about this case, and we are looking at the adequacy of forensic science at the moment. We would very much like to help.

Damian Collins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and I am sure my constituent is as well. I have some particular asks for the Minister at the end of my speech and they may be relevant for the work the hon. Gentleman is involved in.

I would like to consider what has become known subsequent to the 2002 Court of Appeal case. Much of Mr Cleeland's conviction rests on the belief by the Crown,

as established in the trial, that the Gye & Moncrieff shotgun was the murder weapon and the two guns found in a weir in Harlow were nothing to do with the murder at all. The view of the Court of Appeal was that the two shotguns found in Essex could not be considered to be the murder weapon, and that it might have been established that the Gye & Moncrieff gun was the murder weapon.

Mr Spencer, the forensic expert called to give evidence to the Court of Appeal, discredited a lot of the evidence presented against Mr Cleeland by Mr McCafferty of the Metropolitan Police Service in the original trial. In particular, he noted that there were no case notes for any of the assertions that Mr McCafferty made in the trial, and therefore doubt should be placed on the evidence he had given. Mr Spencer also concluded that there was no hard evidence connecting the gun with either the murder or Mr Cleeland.

There was also the question of the consideration of the other guns that had been found. The summing up of the Court of Appeal case said that it was clear that both Mr Pryor and Mr Spencer discounted the other guns. That was not true. In the transcript from the proceedings of the Court of Appeal, when my constituent was questioning Mr Pryor, Mr Pryor was very clear that he could not rule out that one of the sawn-off shotguns could have been the murder weapon. He may have said he did not believe it was, but he could not exclude that possibility.

It is also not the case that Mr Spencer could have reached that conclusion, because he had never actually examined the guns himself. The Court of Appeal wrongly stated that he had, but he had not—in fact he could not have done, because the guns were destroyed in the 1970s, when it was believed that they were no longer of any importance to the police.

It was clear from the Court of Appeal hearing, despite what was said in the summing up, that there was no forensic link between the gun and the murder and Mr Cleeland, and that the expert witnesses did not discount the possibility that one of the other guns could have been the murder weapon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate; I spoke to him beforehand. He has outlined a very serious case that prompts a lot of questions. Of 31,300 applications received by the Criminal Cases Review Commission, 832 have been referred to the Court of Appeal and only 500 have been successful. The Government and the Minister must try to encourage more people that the process is effective by referring more cases and hearing more evidence. That would instil the confidence, as the hon. Gentleman has clearly outlined on behalf of his constituent.

Damian Collins: I agree. The hon. Gentleman raises a point essential to the work of the Law Commission in reviewing whether enough cases are being referred or whether the CCRC is taking too much of a precautionary approach.

Since the Court of Appeal hearing, other cases have come forward. At Mr Cleeland's initial trial, Mr McCafferty presented evidence that there was lead residue on Mr Cleeland's clothing and that this was consistent with firearms discharge. The sodium rhodizonate test was the one used at the time—this was the theme of my 2011 Adjournment debate—but it was not a firearms residue test.

It was known not to be so: as early as 1965, it was known within the police that it could not detect firearms residue, but only the presence of lead. Concerns were raised that it was not made clear at the trial that the test was extremely limited, and that the lead residue could easily have come from other environmental pollutants. Mr Cleeland was a painter and decorator at the time and worked with lead-based paints. He had also been to a fireworks party on the evening of the murder and could have picked up lead residue there, but that was never clearly explained.

Further forensic evidence produced since 2002 by Mr Dudley Gibbs has also cast doubt on the judgment. He maintained that there is no forensic evidence linking the Gye & Moncrieff shotgun with Mr Cleeland. He also pointed out, significantly, that the gunshot pellets found in the victim's body were a different size from those found in the Blue Rival cartridges alleged to have been used at the shooting. It was believed at the time by Mr McCafferty, and presented in court to the jury, that the Blue Rival cartridges came with a highly distinctive wadding that would have linked the cartridges to the gun and to Mr Cleeland. Mr Gibbs made it clear that the wadding was not distinctive in any way and could have come from any number of brands of cartridge that could have been purchased. Again, that casts doubt.

In the Barry George case, Barry George was convicted of the murder of TV presenter Jill Dando and later acquitted on the basis that the lead residue found on his clothing and presented in court could not have been evidence of his having fired a gun. Again, it was only a small particle of lead and it could have come from environmental factors. On those grounds, the Court of Appeal overturned the decision, in what is often referred to as the Pendleton judgment, on the basis that it was not possible to know how the jury would have reacted if they had known that the lead residue itself was circumstantial evidence, not evidence of having fired a gun.

All these things apply in Mr Cleeland's case. The concern throughout—in the subsequent cases he has brought to the CCRC and when he sought to appeal the CCRC's decision in the divisional court and latterly in the civil court of the Court of Appeal—has been that the CCRC, the courts and the judges have consistently relied on statements that are just not true, and that have been demonstrated in court not to be true. Mr Pryor did not discount the question that one of the Harlow guns was the murder weapon. Neither he nor the other expert believed that there was any forensic evidence linking the Gye & Moncrieff shotgun to the murder or Mr Cleeland—a point that was consistently made.

Mr Cleeland is now in the position of having been accused of being a vexatious litigant simply because he is seeking to correct the record and have the CCRC clearly state these facts instead of relying on previous evidence and previous rulings that are not true and that are inaccurate. He wants the record to be corrected, and he wants the CCRC to acknowledge the complaints that have been made and consider the judgments that have been made by other judges who have relied on evidence presented by the CCRC, which continues to reassert these points.

When we look at the case now, it is hard to know how the jury would have reacted in the 1970s when they considered Mr Cleeland's case, particularly because almost

[*Damian Collins*]

every principal area of evidence presented by the Crown was subsequently proven to be flawed. That is true even of the evidence from two policemen who described having overheard cell confessions by Mr Cleeland that implicated him in the crime. Subsequent to 2002, those policemen were discredited and regarded as unsafe witnesses, as their evidence was considered to have potentially misled another case. Had that been known at the time, their evidence would have been considered very differently in the case of Mr Cleeland. There is now substantial evidence that challenges what has gone before, but the CCRC continues to reject it. In many ways, it is presenting evidence that does not bear out the facts. Those seem to be the reasons why the CCRC will not refer the case on.

My request to the Minister, which I am happy to set out in writing to her and to the Lord Chancellor, is that there be an acknowledgment of these mistakes; that the record be put right and fresh consideration be given by the CCRC to Mr Cleeland's case, in the light of these facts having been corrected and amends having been made; and that the Law Commission considers Mr Cleeland's case directly in its work on the safety principle for referrals.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is making a persuasive case. May I urge him to get involved with the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice, and the wonderful Welsh lawyer Glyn Maddox who specialises in these cases? I would very much like to introduce the hon. Gentleman and this case to him and to that group. It has been a pleasure to hear from the hon. Gentleman; we have heard many more such cases. I have to give a little bit of a prod: the commission needs more resources.

Damian Collins: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about resources. Lack of resources may be a reason why some of the errors have occurred and why the CCRC has not considered some of the other points that have been mentioned. I am happy to take up his invitation to become involved with the APPG on miscarriages of justice and to refer this case to it.

I am calling for acknowledgment of these errors of fact; for the CCRC to correct the record and reconsider the case in the light of the points that I have made; for the Law Commission to consider the case with regard to its current and open investigation; and for the Government to consider the CCRC's response in Mr Cleeland's case, particularly in the light of the corrections. The Government have already commissioned a CCRC review based on another case that was launched last year, so clearly reviews are possible if the Ministry is persuaded that there is a case. I certainly believe that there is in Mr Cleeland's case.

I would welcome a response from the Minister. I will also follow up to her in writing, setting out my requests, and I will be grateful for a response from her to that letter.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for, I think, the first time, Mr Henderson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for securing this debate.

Miscarriages of justice have unbelievable consequences for everybody involved, and they undermine public confidence in our justice system. Since its inception in 1997, the Criminal Cases Review Commission has referred 836 cases, or roughly one every eight working days, of which 571 have resulted in a quashed conviction. Each one represents a conviction that would have stood if it were not for the diligent efforts of CCRC commissioners and staff.

Recognising the importance of an independent body to investigate potential miscarriages of justice, the Ministry of Justice has ensured that the CCRC has the funding that it requires to carry out its work. That is why, since 2021-22, its budget has increased by 18% to support increasing demand and enable the commission to meet its key performance indicators. Importantly, that has also enabled the CCRC to carry out more outreach to promote its services and ensure that justice prevails.

Like everyone in this room, I am only too aware that the CCRC has attracted particular scrutiny over its handling of some recent cases in which its decision making has been questioned and challenged, along with the way it has responded to new evidence. Although my Department works closely with the CCRC to monitor its performance, its decisions are independent of the Government. It applies to each case a test set by Parliament: that there must be a real possibility that the conviction verdict, finding or sentence would not be upheld if the reference were to be made.

I cannot stand here today without acknowledging the terrible miscarriage of justice suffered by Andrew Malkinson. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Lord Chancellor has tasked Her Honour Judge Sarah Munro KC with investigating the conduct of Greater Manchester police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the CCRC, and with providing the answers that Mr Malkinson deserves. When that inquiry reports, my Department will take its recommendations extremely seriously.

Damian Collins: In that case, there is also an acknowledgment of the wider implications of the miscarriage of justice. In the case of Mr Cleeland, he could have been wrongly convicted on the basis of flawed forensic evidence. That evidence was presented by a Mr McCafferty, who gave evidence in many, many cases in the 1960s and 1970s, so there could be other miscarriages of justice that may need to be considered as well.

If you will give me some latitude, Mr Henderson, I would like to raise one point that was subsequently discovered, but was not known about at the time that Mr Cleeland went to the Court of Appeal: CCRC raised concerns with the Forensic Science Service about the safety of the evidence presented by Mr McCafferty. That was in 2000, but Mr Cleeland was not informed of it at the time that the Court of Appeal heard his case again. I urge—I will put this in my letter—that any papers still held by public bodies relating to Mr Cleeland's case that have not yet been released be made available to him.

Laura Farris: My hon. Friend is quite correct that Mr Malkinson's case turned on the presentation of the new forensic evidence, and the issue is when that was known and whether it was adequately dealt with at the time that it was brought to the CCRC's attention.

I turn now to Mr Cleeland's case, which I think my hon. Friend has raised in Parliament on more than one occasion. His submissions this afternoon have focused principally on new forensic evidence; he also raised issues around circumstantial evidence, motive and eyewitness and expert evidence. It is obviously not for me to draw any conclusions about all those, but I reiterate that I have noted all my hon. Friend's points. I hope he understands that I cannot comment or intervene in Mr Cleeland's case, but what I can say is that I know that Mr Cleeland has made multiple attempts to overturn his conviction and has had his case reviewed by the CCRC before. That is not a final point; I am simply putting it on the record.

I have carefully noted what my hon. Friend said about the evidence that has come to light since the Court of Appeal reached its conclusions in 2002. I reiterate what the CCRC has said to Mr Cleeland: he is entitled to apply again through a lawyer if fresh evidence or information has emerged. This approach aligns with the CCRC's practice of accepting multiple applications from individuals, provided that they present new evidence or information to be assessed against the "real possibility" test.

I acknowledge the list of requests that my hon. Friend has made today. He has asked that an acknowledgment of mistakes be prepared, that the Law Commission be invited to include consideration in Mr Cleeland's case in its forthcoming review, and that the CCRC correct the record. Obviously I can provide him with no undertakings on any of those points, other than that I will raise these matters with the Lord Chancellor for further consideration.

Damian Collins: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. If the CCRC would acknowledge that in some of its deliberations it has made factual errors or drawn wrong assumptions on the evidence presented, it might then allow Mr Cleeland to apply again based on an acknowledgment of those errors. We are now in a position where the CCRC has not acknowledged that and is therefore refusing to consider new appeals on the basis that it has already considered the evidence that Mr Cleeland has brought. His contention is that it has not properly considered that evidence and that in its findings it seems to be making the same mistakes.

Laura Farris: I reassure my hon. Friend that I understand his point, and I will take advice from my officials. First, I will raise the matter with the Lord Chancellor; I told him in advance of this debate that I would do so. Secondly, I will have to check with my officials but, if appropriate, perhaps we can raise the case with the CCRC on my hon. Friend's behalf.

Based on the statutory tests set by Parliament, the CCRC is fulfilling the role that it was set up to do. Although I cannot comment on how the CCRC applies

the real possibility test, I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend's arguments, and I am confident that it adopts a professional, impartial and objective approach in deciding whether the relevant test has been met in each case.

Damian Collins: I have one final intervention, and I am grateful to the Minister for taking it. In the piece of work that it is doing, the Law Commission itself acknowledges that Mr Cleeland has also sought to challenge the CCRC's rulings through divisional courts and has failed there. However, it was subsequently determined that those appeals were not a criminal matter but one that should be considered by a civil court, and they were instead referred not to divisional courts but the civil court of the Court of Appeal. That set a new precedent and overturned previous cases, so there is now a question about the safety of some of the other cases heard by divisional courts. It has subsequently been determined that they were not the appropriate courts to consider Mr Cleeland's case, yet his appeals to those courts have been counted against him in the charge that he is a vexatious litigant. There should be some acknowledgment that he was making his appeal to the wrong court. The ruling has subsequently changed, and he should never have been being considered by those courts in the first place.

Laura Farris: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. That is an irregularity that I have not come across before, so I will escalate that point.

I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for representing the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. It is important that work like this happens in Parliament. These should not just be constituency cases; they need wider ventilation, particularly with the assistance of the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill). The all-party group is an important organisation and I am glad that it exists in Parliament.

The Lord Chancellor has asked the Law Commission to conduct a wide-ranging independent review of the appeals system to ensure that the courts have the right powers to enable the effective, efficient and appropriate resolution of appeals. I have listened carefully with respect to the irregularity that my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe has identified, and we will take it up further. I thank him for securing the debate and for drawing this important case to our attention.

Question put and agreed to.

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Parents and Carers of Infants: Support

4.30 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered information on support available for parents and carers of infants.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. As vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group for conception to age two—the first 1,001 days—and mother to three adult children, I know how important the early days are. There is a wealth of evidence that the critical 1,001 days from conception to the age of two have a significant impact on the health, wellbeing and opportunities of babies and children throughout the rest of their lives.

The arrival of a new baby can bring huge joy to families, but it can also be a time of stress and anxiety as parents and carers adjust to the new responsibility, which can be overwhelming. There is no rulebook in parenting, and all families need some help to give their babies the best start in life. Parents are always learning and adapting to the different needs of growing children. We are all fallible. Help comes from family, friends, healthcare professionals or volunteers. There is often a huge variety of support and services available, but as my right hon. Friend the Minister found when she led the early years healthy development review, it is not always easy for families to access information about what support is available. That can make it hard for families who are juggling the demands of caring for a baby to find the support they need when they need it most. That is why I introduced the Support for Infants and Parents etc (Information) Bill on 6 February.

Before I continue, I thank the Chamber Engagement Team for their work in engaging the public on the Bill, and the Department of Health and Social Care for its advice. Interestingly, in feedback to the Chamber Engagement Team, many responders said that they were given very little information, especially on breastfeeding, and that lots of parents were paying for information from private providers, or mainly got information from online communities. Others had more mixed experiences, often saying they were given better information ante, rather than post, natal. Only a minority had much better experiences. Most people centred their responses on improving the dissemination of more consistent information. Increasing the numbers of health visitors and midwives was also a popular theme, and many said that they had heard of the family hub network, and the Start for Life programme.

My Bill is intended to support a baby's cognitive, emotional and physical development during the 1,001 critical days from pregnancy up to the age of two by making information on the support available easier to access.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. In my constituency, there is an organisation called Family and Babies Bolton. Elaine put together the organisation over a number of years. It deals with breastfeeding and breastfeeding support and information for new mothers. Does my hon. Friend agree that this debate is a great opportunity to recognise the work of those organisations, not only in Bolton but across the country, which ensure a better future for our babies and infants?

Sally-Ann Hart: I agree with my hon. Friend. The wonderful thing is that we have so many voluntary organisations that do amazing work helping young mothers and parents with breast and infant feeding. Our family hubs focus on that, as does the Start for Life programme. It is not just one organisation; there are lots of services out there that can support parents doing this.

The Bill will achieve its aims by ensuring that local authorities publish a Start for Life offer on their websites and via other means they consider appropriate—for example, by providing physical as well as digital copies of their offer. A Start for Life offer is information on services that a local authority is aware are available in its area for infants, parents or carers of infants, or prospective parents and carers, that are provided by or on behalf of public authorities.

In particular, the Bill focuses on services that support the physical and mental health and development of infants, and that support parents and carers, or prospective parents and carers, in providing support to their infants. The services named in the Bill that local authorities will be under a duty to publish information about are maternity services, health visiting services for current or prospective parents or carers of infants, services promoting positive relationships between infants and their parents or carers, mental health services, and breastfeeding and other infant-feeding services. Local authorities will be able to provide additional information on other services that they consider it appropriate to include information about.

The Bill also includes a regulation-making power so that the Secretary of State may ensure that information on other services provided by or on behalf of a public authority that are likely to support infants, parents or carers of infants, or prospective parents or carers, are included in a Start for Life offer in the future. The Bill introduces a further duty on the Secretary of State to publish guidance to local authorities relating to those duties. It is important that parents receive evidence-based support and are provided with information that is backed by research and proven by parents, such as that of the Start for Life programme.

While I understand that guidance on Start for Life offers already exists, I know there will be a huge amount of learning from the Government's family hubs and Start for Life programme that could be considered and taken on board as part of new statutory guidance. A duty to consult on the statutory guidance will ensure that local authorities and bodies the Secretary of State consults will have the chance to have their say on what will most help them to fulfil that duty and support families locally.

Finally, the Bill requires the Government to publish an annual report that sets out information about support that is being provided in England for infants, their parents and carers, and prospective parents and carers. The report will also include information that the Secretary of State considers appropriate to include, such as information about the impact of support on outcomes. That is very important as it will create further transparency for prospective parents, and for parents and carers of infants, so that they can understand the support available as they navigate the joys and the challenges of raising a new baby.

I will say a few words on the family hubs and Start for Life programme. Family hubs offer early support to families and young children to help them overcome difficulties and build strong relationships. East Sussex County Council was one of the trailblazers benefiting from the £300 million investment up to 2025. It is leading the way and supporting other local authorities to improve services that are offered to families so that they can be rolled out more widely across the country.

We have three family hubs in Hastings, offering support including maternity and health-visiting services, breast and infant feeding, parenting programmes, budgeting, employability and many other things. I pay tribute to East Sussex County Council's director of children's services, Alison Jeffrey, who is soon to retire, for all her dedication, determination and service to all families across East Sussex—especially to ensure that children's life circumstances are not life sentences.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady. When it comes to the issue of childcare or support available for parents and carers of infants, what she is saying is really important. Just to give a quick point of view from Northern Ireland, there has been an increase of some 14% in the price of childcare—which is part of this topic—in Northern Ireland as of 2021. My party has long pushed for an increase in the tax-free childcare allowance beyond 20%.

The pressure on working-class families cannot continue. More needs to be done to support them financially with childcare, so that they can go out and work and, as a result, make ends meet at the end of the month. The hon. Lady is right to raise this matter. I would press the case of working-class families who are under extreme financial pressure.

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The Bill is not specifically to do with childcare; it is also to do with the information given to parents and carers and prospective parents and carers of babies and infants. However, I do take on board his point about childcare. I think the hon. Gentleman will be aware that people who are in receipt of universal credit get free childcare, to some extent. That is worth noting, is it not? I thank him for his intervention.

Strong families are at the heart of communities. It is so important in Hastings and Rye to have high ambitions for and expectations of our families, because supportive families make for more stable communities, better outcomes for children and happier individuals. Investing in families and making sure they get the support they need from birth through to adulthood helps with children's educational attainment, wellbeing and life chances, while improving wider outcomes such as poor mental health and unemployment. That is why funding allocated to family hubs must continue beyond 2025, and further funding should be allocated to extend the scheme to all local authorities in England beyond the 75 pilot authorities.

My Bill is scheduled to have its Second Reading on 15 March—this coming Friday. I hope it will be successful and that we can work together to ensure that every baby has the best start in life.

4.41 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I came along this afternoon just to listen, not to speak. However, I have been so inspired by my Sussex colleague,

my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), and equally so shocked by the revelation that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) does not intend to make a speech in this debate—above and beyond the mini contribution he has already made—that I will use the time available to make a few comments. I want to speak particularly in support of my hon. Friend's Bill, which I wish well this Friday, but also in the greater context of the Best Start for Life programme that has been championed over so many years by the Minister.

It is worth reminding ourselves why the whole issue of getting the best start in life and encouraging, nurturing and supporting parents at the very early stages is so important. I speak as the chair of the APPG on conception to age two—first 1,001 days. We have a display of officers from that eminent group here today, which was set up by the Minister herself some years ago. Those first 1,001 days are critical because it is a period of uniquely rapid growth in toddlers' brains. More than a million new connections are formed every second in a baby's brain, and babies' growing brains are shaped by their experiences, particularly the interactions they have with their parents and other caregivers. What happens during this crucial time lays the foundations for future development, not just during childhood but into adulthood. They are effectively lifelong.

There is a lot of research showing that the way in which parents interact with their baby predicts the child's later development. In order to thrive, children absolutely must have a loving and secure relationship with at least one sensitive, nurturing caregiver who can respond to his or her needs. That is why it is so important to support parents and parent-infant relationships to give children the best start in life. A range of stress factors during pregnancy and early years can be communicated to and can impact on a baby or growing toddler.

The cost of not getting it right is considerable. Some years ago, when the Maternal Mental Health Alliance issued its flagship report, it costed maternal perinatal mental health problems at some £8.1 billion. That is what it is costing for not giving mums and dads the best support to ensure that they can bond with their children. One in six new mothers will suffer some form of perinatal mental illness, and covid certainly worsened that situation, with all the pressures on first-time parents in particular of babies born during covid, as they did not have access to some of the support networks that we took for granted until then. In addition, child neglect has been costed at something like £15 billion each year, so we are spending £23 billion-plus on the consequences of not getting it right by intervening at a stage when it could have the maximum impact for the parent and, mostly importantly, the developing and growing child.

Healthy social and emotional development in the first 1,001 days means that individuals are more likely to have improved mental and physical health outcomes from cradle to grave. It means that children can start school with the language, social and emotional skills they need to play, explore and learn, and that children and young people are better able to understand and manage their emotions and behaviours, leading to less risky and antisocial behaviour later on. It also means that children can have the skills they need to form trusting, healthy relationships.

[*Tim Loughton*]

It has been calculated that some 28% of mothers with mental health problems report having difficulties bonding with their children. Research suggests that the initial dysfunctioning of mother-baby relationships affects children's development by impairing their psychomotor and socio-emotional development. As well as the direct impact on the child, it can have longer-term adverse effects on the parents and wider family. The onset of a maternal mental health condition can precipitate relapse or recurrence of previous mental illness. It has the potential to herald the onset of long-term mental health problems and is associated with an increased risk of maternal suicide, and we know how alarming the figures are for women who commit suicide soon after giving birth. It is important to say that this is not limited to mothers; there is also an impact on fathers. Post-natal depression has been linked with depression in fathers and high rates of family breakdown, so this is all about families and the children. That is why it is important not only that we have a range of services available in a joined-up way, but that those parents know how to access those services and whom to speak to.

I will give an example from all those many centuries ago when I was the Children's Minister. One of the first things I did in the first summer recess was to spend a week being a social worker in Stockport. I went out with real-life social workers, without cameras, just doing their daily job. One of the first places I was taken to, with a really impressive social worker—I think they chose one of the most challenging cases they could—was a house in one of the most deprived parts of Stockport, where a young mum with three young boys from three different fathers, none of whom was on the scene, were living in absolute squalor. There were no carpets on the floor, and they were literally eating off the floor. There was nothing in the fridge, some furniture dumped at the bottom of the garden and dirty mattresses that the kids were sleeping on.

One of the children had a bad toothache—I remember it distinctly as if it were yesterday—so the social worker said to the mother, “Why haven't you taken the child to the dentist?” because it had been going on for some time. The mother herself had had a tooth problem the day before. She had gone to the emergency dentist and had it sorted out, but she had not had the presence of mind to take the son with her. Before long, if things went on like that, those children would have ended up in care. The mother would have been absolutely beside herself—she doted on and relied on those children greatly, and the kids relied on her. For all her problems and challenges in being a decent mother, that was all she knew; she had had poor parenting herself.

What struck me was that a number of professionals had been going in and out of that house over a period of time, and virtually every time they went, she had to start her whole story again about the various problems. There was no real joined-up action where that mum and her kids were almost literally taken by the scruff of the neck to children's support services at the local children centre, taken to the dentist, or given information and classes on nutrition and feeding and things like that. What was needed was somebody to take control of that family's life, get them back on the straight and narrow, and join up all the services and all that information, and

that just was not happening. A lot of money, time and resources were being spent on that family, and things were not getting any better. That is why the Start for Life programme, and the Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye is putting together, are all about making sure that somebody takes control of the information around a family's requirements and needs, points them in the right direction, and takes them physically to where they need to go if necessary, so that it does not constantly start again every time the family comes into contact with yet another agency or professional service. That is why the work on the red book—digitising it, for example—is important to make sure that information is readily available to everyone having contact with families that need that sort of help.

None of this is rocket science or, frankly, new; we have been talking about it for many years. Earlier, I dug out one of the reports from the conception to age two: first 1001 days all-party parliamentary group. “Building Great Britons”, which we produced back in 2015, is now almost 10 years old. I reread the foreword, which I wrote, and we made some recommendations. I will go through those quickly to see how many have become reality and how many can still become reality with the assistance of my hon. Friend's Bill. We also came up with two conclusions. The first was:

“We want to create children who at the end of their first 1001 days have the social and emotional resources that form a strong foundation for good citizenship.”

Tick—that is absolutely still our goal. The second conclusion was:

“Without intervention, there will be in the future, as in the past, high intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, inequality, dysfunction and child maltreatment. These self-perpetuating cycles create untold and recurring costs for society. The economic value of breaking these cycles will be enormous.”

Tick—that absolutely applies today, as it did then. A case in point is the one I cited in Stockport, which is a textbook example of how failing to intervene properly is costing an awful lot of money.

The first recommendation was:

“Achieving the very best experience for children in their first 1001 days should be a mainstream undertaking by all political parties and a key priority for NHS England.”

I hope that the Start for Life programme, which the Minister proposed, was done with the sign-up of all the other main political parties. That is really important, because it is a long-term scheme. When there are changes of Government, it is important that one does not change everything for the sake of changing it—I was going to say, “Throw the baby out with the bathwater.” One might want a bit of rebranding or tweaking here and there, but this needs at least a decade to really take effect. I hope that the good work the Minister has done will carry over if there is a change of personnel and Government in the future.

The second recommendation was:

“Require local authorities, CCGs and Health & Wellbeing Boards to prioritise all factors leading to the development of socially and emotionally capable children at age 2, by: adopting ...a ‘1001-days’ strategy”.

That is part of what the Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye will impress on local authorities. Much of this is delivered through local authorities and local health professionals. It is all very well for the Government to say, “This is what needs

to happen,” but it does not happen unless there is the buy-in, the infrastructure and the commitment to deliver it at the sharp end at local level.

The third recommendation was:

“National government should establish a ‘1001-days’ strategy fund to support local authorities and CCGs to make a decisive switch over the next 5 years, to a primary preventive approach”.

I think we are only part of the way on that one. The Minister may want to pick that up and explain how we can achieve that.

The fourth recommendation was:

“Hold Health & Wellbeing Boards responsible for ensuring that local authorities and CCGs demonstrate delivery of a sound primary prevention approach”,

as outlined in part 2 of our report. Again, that is what my hon. Friend’s Bill is trying to get at. We need to see commitment at a local level for local people to judge. They can do it in different ways. What might apply well in my constituency might not apply so well in my hon. Friend’s constituency, in large northern metropolitan boroughs, or in rural constituencies. It is up to local interpretation how it is best delivered, with a framework set out nationally, but with local authorities and local agencies having to describe and set out how they are going to achieve the goals and aims.

The fifth recommendation was:

“Build on the ‘Early Help’ recommendations of the Munro Review”,

which I commissioned in 2010,

“by requiring and supporting all relevant agencies in prevention to work together to prevent child maltreatment and promote secure attachment.”

As I found in office, joined-up government is an illusion. I hope that the appointment of my right hon. Friend the Minister, with a remit in several different Departments as well as Best Start for Life, achieves more of a joined-up approach in that regard.

The sixth recommendation was:

“Appoint a Minister for families and Best Start in Life with cross-departmental responsibility”,

which I hope the Minister is achieving. I hope it will survive and continue under whoever fills her shoes at some hopefully distant stage in the future.

The seventh recommendation was:

“Make joint inter-agency training on the importance of the early years for social and emotional development, for all professionals working with children and families in the early years, a priority in the ‘1001-days’ strategy.”

That is important, as I found in safeguarding. We need professionals from different bodies singing from the same song sheet. The most effective way to do that is with joint inter-agency training so that they learn about the requirements of the job sitting next to the police officer, the health visitor, the teacher, the GP, or whichever professional is involved. We do not do inter-agency joint training nearly effectively enough.

Sally-Ann Hart: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Family hubs involve partnership working. I know that East Sussex family hubs partner with police, health and education, so they really do provide whole-family support.

Tim Loughton: That is absolutely right. We had children’s centres to an extent; we must have family hubs to a much larger extent. We need a sort of Piccadilly Circus of different professionals coming together, sharing

information and nominating who will act for a particular family to make sure that the job is done and that a family in need does not fall foul of memos circulating between different professionals that never actually hit the spot. Somebody must pick it up and act on it. So many safeguarding cases end badly because somebody does not take responsibility, pick up the ball and act on it in whatever way. That is why family hubs are important.

We have all the relevant people in the same place, although hopefully going out of the family hub because most of the good things happen outside a family hub. It is not all about bricks and mortar, but where the services are targeted. The problem with children’s centres in the past, great idea though they were, was that the 15% most deprived families who would benefit most from the services offered by children’s centres tended to be those who did not access those centres. Family hubs are all about getting across thresholds where people live and go, work and shop and whatever it may be.

That was effectively the eighth recommendation. Children’s centres and youth hubs should be set up to be a melting pot of different services available.

The final recommendation was:

“Research evidence and good local area data are necessary to ensure effective changes are implemented to services. Where data and evidence are not available, these should be prioritised and supported with appropriate funding.”

I hope that as family hubs are rolled out and the Best Start for Life project becomes a reality they will start to produce the evidence we need to show that the impacts we are having on babies and their parents is life changing and dramatic. It is certainly a good investment socially and financially because hopefully we can prevent all the problems by getting in at the most appropriate time, at the earliest time.

Communication, information and all the things that my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye is endeavouring to achieve with her Bill—I wish her well with that on Friday—are all about continuing the jigsaw of the Best Start for Life, which my right hon. Friend the Minister started and which I hope will come to full fruition, because we desperately need it for so many of our children, families and babies in this country.

4.59 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson.

This has been a small but perfectly formed debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing not just the debate, important though that is, but a Bill. I wish her Bill well on Friday, because, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly said, there is a degree of consensus on these issues across the House. We all understand the need for children to have the best start in life, and for parents to have wraparound support as and when they need it. Those first 1,001 days are crucial to the development of a child to ensure that they start out in life with the best chances that we can give them.

I was interested in what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said; my ears pricked up to attention when he mentioned Stockport. Being a partly Stockport Member of Parliament, I am keen to promote it as one of the two boroughs that my parliamentary constituency sits within. Stockport children’s services

[*Andrew Gwynne*]

are good. They provide decent support to families when they need it, and there are some challenges. Stockport is a unique borough in many ways, in that it is a microcosm of the entire United Kingdom. It has some of the richest, most prosperous parts of Greater Manchester within its boundaries, and some of the poorest parts. It is almost a perfect make-up of the country.

Tim Loughton: Although it was 14 years ago when I went there, I have been back since. I am delighted to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that Stockport had a fantastic children's services department then and it has remained so, with some impressive, experienced social workers. Where I went was not in his constituency; I visited nearby, with the full compliance and support of the then Member.

Andrew Gwynne: I would hazard a guess that the hon. Gentleman visited Brinnington, which is just over the border. Irrespective of that, he is absolutely right to support the Best Start for Life programme, and he is right that we should not change it for the sake of it. We can tinker around at the edges, but the ethos behind it is absolutely right.

I would also hazard a guess that if this Government had their time again, they might well have done the same with the Sure Start programme, which was starting to make a big difference. I will talk very briefly about my experience of Sure Start in my constituency. I was given the privilege of opening one of a number of Sure Start centres. This one was in the Dukinfield part of my constituency, in the Tameside borough. It was attached to a primary school in the middle of a 1960s deck-access council estate. The centre had been open and providing services to the community for about six months before it had its official opening. As the guest of honour cutting the ribbon, I was introduced to a number of people who used the services within the Sure Start provision.

I was introduced to a young mum called Sarah. She was very young, and had been ostracised by her family because she had become pregnant. She had no natural support network around her. Her only existence had been the four walls of her flat in the deck-access estate. Understandably, she had become very depressed post pregnancy, and the life of her young baby was essentially sitting in front of the television while mum was in her dressing gown eating crisps. Her brilliant Sure Start worker eventually convinced mum to go to the new provision across the way, and got her out of those four walls of the flat.

Dukinfield is a very white, very working-class community. The Rive Tame, which runs through Tameside—the clue is in the name—is only very narrow, probably no wider than this room. On the opposite side of the river from Dukinfield is Ashton-under-Lyne, and that part of Ashton-under-Lyne is very heavily south Asian, with predominantly Pakistani and some Bangladeshi communities. Never the twain shall meet. That river may as well be a wide ocean. Those two communities did not mix, but this Sure Start centre was shared by both communities.

Sarah very excitedly introduced me to her best friend Ameena, who lived in Ashton. Those two would never have met but for that Sure Start provision. She said

to me, “Mr Gwynne, let me introduce you to my best friend Ameena. Her daughter plays with my daughter. They're best friends, and I go to her house. Mr Gwynne, before I came here I couldn't boil a pan of water. She's now teaching me to cook curry.” I just thought: Wow! Not only is it a safe space for different communities to come together by accessing support through mainstream statutory services, but they are informally helping one another. I thought that was great. If we could bottle that and spread it out, that is what we should be doing.

That is why I will always argue passionately that Sure Start was working and why I am pleased that the Minister has brought in family hubs. Although they are not yet on the scale of Sure Start, from small acorns grow great oaks. I believe that, whoever is in government, supporting the family and nurturing them in those first 1,001 days really matters. In terms of the Bill from the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye, some really simple changes can make a big difference. She mentions that for many it is not easy to access information for support and that local authorities should publish the Start for Life offer on its website.

I know we are not supposed to use props, but I draw Members' attention to the website of Grow in Tameside, which has a page for key Tameside contacts for early years support and information. It is all there on the website, in part because early years has been a passion of Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council for a long time. In the 1980s, before it was fashionable, they had child and family centres in Tameside. Those centres were used as the evidence base for Sure Start when the Labour Government came in in 1997. The Minister made sure that Tameside was one of the pilots for the family hubs, so we have family hubs operating already in Tameside and doing great stuff. They could do more, but it is great what they do.

This is not just about statutory services but about the wider support network, whether that includes religious organisations, community organisations, the voluntary sector or others. There are lots of things going on. I am a very proud patron of Home-Start in Oldham, Stockport and Tameside. Sarah and the team there do great work. The Dad Matters team under Kieran does great work engaging with dads. They have a breastfeeding service, and they have Cascade, where people can donate toys and clothes to families who need them. That work is being done, but we need to turbocharge it. That is why Labour will always support any measure that means the best start in life for children and families.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Henderson. What a lovely debate! I thank all colleagues from across the House for their contributions; it has been genuinely interesting. I would like to begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for introducing her Bill on such an important topic and for securing time to debate it today. As Members will know, I have been championing the needs of babies for getting on for 27 years—gosh, that makes me very old. Now, having the huge honour of being the Minister with responsibility for Start for Life, I remain as committed and as passionate as ever in my mission to make sure that every baby gets the best start for life.

It began with my mum, a qualified midwife, asking me to help her to write a business plan for the Oxford Parent-Infant Project, a charity that to this day helps families who are struggling emotionally to cope with the journey to parenthood. Having experienced post-natal depression myself with my first son, who is now 28 and very big, I know only too well how crucial the earliest years are.

I have spent much of the last 27 years helping to establish parent-infant partnerships and various different charities providing therapeutic support for families, and then, in Parliament, working on the cross-party manifesto for the 1,001 critical days, and championing babies in Government and in Parliament.

I have worked with many colleagues. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) for noting that this is a cross-party agenda. I totally agree with him. I had so many conversations with Dame Tessa Jowell about the fact that Sure Start went so far, but that family hubs would be the 21st-century version. That is not to denigrate in any way the fantastic work of Sure Start, but family hubs are a one-stop shop, building on that excellent work and using the potential for digital to create a digital red book. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), has been sending me parliamentary questions about that. I encourage him to continue doing so, because it might speed things up.

There are many different measures to create the one-stop shop for parents, in a way that did not exist with Sure Start. Crucially, we want to make sure that those services are completely universal. What every parent and carer has said is, “No.1: tell me where I can get services and what they might consist of. No. 2: don’t stigmatise me. Don’t make me feel that if I go to this place, you might start proceedings against me and my children.”

The programme is designed to improve on, build on and grow that crucial support for the early years, and I am delighted to hear that it has the support of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish.

As well as the support from Dame Tessa Jowell, Lord Field, Lord Blunkett, Lord Cameron, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), Boris Johnson and our present Prime Minister, who all support this crucial early days agenda, I pay particular tribute to the support from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has worked with me for so many years. We met when I was 18 and he was 19 at university. Before we were in Parliament together, we had this same interest in early years. As a former Children’s Minister, he has done so much to promote this agenda. I have mostly enjoyed working with him; sometimes I wish he would pipe down, but it is really excellent that he carries on banging the drum for early years. We have worked on it for so long together; he feels like an old pair of boots. Is that parliamentary language, Mr Henderson? I am sure it is.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham discussed, there is strong evidence that the 1,001 days from conception to the age of two set the foundations for our cognitive, emotional and physical development. Nurtured babies will go on to develop strong relationships and, as they grow up, will be better equipped to tackle the challenges that life throws at them. Investing in that critical period represents a real opportunity to improve outcomes and tackle health

disparities by ensuring that millions of babies and their families have access to a one-stop shop style of family hub where all support services can be found in one welcoming universal hub.

Shockingly, up to 40% of babies are not securely attached by the time they reach the age of five to a loving adult carer. Worse still, around 10% have disorganised attachment, which is closely linked with the worst outcomes in our society.

I was delighted, back in July 2020, when the then Prime Minister asked me to chair the early years healthy development review. The goal was to create a vision for brilliance during the 1,001 critical days from conception to a child’s second birthday.

During that review, I met with families, academics, frontline professionals, charities and volunteers to understand what was going well and where change was needed. I saw excellent examples of people helping families when they needed it most, but I also heard how hard it can be for parents and carers to find timely support. I heard about the many services available to families, which are delivered by a workforce of highly skilled professionals, as well as many dedicated volunteers, but I also heard that information on those services is often patchy and difficult to find, with parents finding it almost impossible to navigate the system and understand what support is available to them.

In March 2021, the Government published “The best start for life: a vision for the 1001 critical days”. The vision set out six action areas for improving support for families during those critical days to ensure that every baby in England is given the best possible start in life, regardless of their background. It is the first action area in that vision that describes how every local authority in England, working with the NHS and other partners, will be encouraged to provide a clear and joined-up Start for Life offer to every new family.

Each local authority’s Start for Life offer would describe the essential support that every new family might need, as well as providing information on the additional support that some families require. A clear and accessible Start for Life offer will help to signpost families to the support and services available where they live, and those Start for Life offers should explain clearly to parents and carers what exactly is available and where to find it. The recommendations included in the vision are relevant to every local authority in England.

In my role as the Under-Secretary of State for Public Health, Start for Life and Primary Care, I now have the ongoing pleasure of visiting local authorities up and down the country, and I see directly some great work happening to give every baby the best start in life. Just last week I visited Uxbridge family hub, where I saw some fantastic work by Hillingdon Council and its partners to provide vital services to families with babies. That included providing a welcoming space for parents and carers to make new friends, and offering many different specialist support services, including antenatal, midwifery and health visiting, as well as infant-feeding and parent-infant-relationship support.

To support the implementation of the Best Start for Life vision, the Government are investing around £300 million to improve support for families through the family hubs and Start for Life programme. The programme is implementing many elements of the vision

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

5.20 pm

and is delivering a step change in outcomes for babies, children, parents and carers in 75 upper-tier local authorities in England, including most of those with high levels of deprivation.

The programme provides funding for local authorities to publish Start for Life offers and to establish parent and carer panels so that they can receive direct feedback from those using the services. There are many examples of good progress in publishing and publicising Start for Life offers right across the country. For example, Northumberland County Council has equipped every health visitor, midwife and family-hub practitioner with a QR-code keyring that, when scanned, takes users to a bespoke website setting out the local Start for Life offer. That ensures that parents and carers can be encouraged to access the offer at every opportunity.

Many local authorities that have not yet received additional funding through the family hub and Start for Life offer have also chosen to publish their Start for Life offers anyway, and to implement other elements of the vision, because they can see the huge benefits to future outcomes for families and their children. Early prevention is not just kinder but much cheaper than later interventions.

In the Government, and across parties, we all remain committed to ensuring that every baby gets the best start in life. Central to that is ensuring that parents are able to easily find the support that they need, when they need it most. The Support for Infants and Parents etc (Information) Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye, has the potential to help ensure that that is the case, so I want to conclude by reiterating my thanks to my hon. Friend for her introduction of that private Member's Bill, and for securing today's debate on such an important issue.

The debate has highlighted just how important the 1,001 critical days are, as well as the huge opportunity that the Bill provides to ensure that families have access to vital information about the support available to them at such a critical stage in both their lives and the life of their baby. I look forward to the Bill's Second Reading on Friday.

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank everyone who has attended this debate and made a contribution, showing support on this very important issue. I especially thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for her comments and her interest in this private Member's Bill.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for his valuable comments as chair of the APPG on conception to age two—first 1001 days. As a former Children's Minister, his knowledge, passion and focus on children and families is exemplary. He highlighted the long-term aims that were in the "Building Great Britons" report—it was extremely helpful for him to draw attention to them—and how failing to intervene is not just a social and human issue, but an economic one, too, if we are going to put the pound signs in front of our eyes.

My right hon. Friend the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham are the dream team for early years. I have to say that—it is absolutely right. I also thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for his kind words and support, for his clear passion for children and families, and for his clear acknowledgment that children and families are not political. They really are not political.

In conclusion, I believe that the support for my private Member's Bill, the Support for Infants and Parents etc (Information) Bill, will play an important role in helping to achieve the Government's aim of giving every baby the best start in life. I hope that the Government will support the Bill when it has its Second Reading on Friday.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered information on support available for parents and carers of infants.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 12 March 2024

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telegraph Media Group: Anticipated Acquisition Reports

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): Today I can confirm that I have received reports from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and from Ofcom on merger situations involving Telegraph Media Group Ltd (TMG). These reports were provided in response to the public interest intervention notices (PIINs) that I issued in the anticipated acquisition of TMG by RedBird IMI on 30 November 2023 and RB Investco Ltd on 26 January 2024 respectively.

The PIINs required the CMA to report to me on my jurisdiction to intervene in these merger situations, and if any competition concerns may arise as a consequence. They also required Ofcom to assess and report to me on the need for accurate presentation of news and free expression of opinion in newspapers.

Next, I will decide, in a quasi-judicial capacity, whether or not I am minded to refer this merger for a further investigation by the CMA.

I will aim to publish the CMA and Ofcom reports and make a further statement on any decision I may come to as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, given the ongoing quasi-judicial nature of this process, I am unable to comment substantively on the matter of this case.

[HCWS334]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Review of Electricity Market Arrangements: Second Consultation

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): After a period of unprecedented disruption and change, our energy sector is now poised to seize the opportunities of the energy transition. We have become the first major economy in the world to halve our emissions, and today we are seeking to build on that progress with the review of electricity market arrangements (REMA) second consultation.

The options in this consultation could save consumers tens of billions of pounds. It will ensure that our electricity markets are fit for the future, and to prepare our electricity system for full decarbonisation by 2035, subject to security of supply.

Reforming the electricity market is key to delivering a low-cost system, driving down both the cost of power itself and the infrastructure needed to deliver it to consumers. The first REMA consultation sought views on the case for change, programme objectives, and a wide range of options. This consultation sets out a much sharper vision for our future electricity market arrangements, significantly narrowing down the remaining options.

The reform options in this consultation have the potential to save tens of billions of pounds from consumers' bills. Doing nothing is not an option. Existing arrangements will get harder to operate and could lock in a high-cost path to transition. Our analysis suggests that reforming our electricity markets could reduce overall system costs by £35 billion from 2030 to 2050.

This is also an opportunity to unlock massive investment in a cost-effective and secure energy system. An estimated £275 billion to £375 billion in new capacity may be required. Achieving this will require the private sector to work alongside the Government, the regulator and the system operator to help design future markets to encourage large-scale investment.

We are also taking the steps necessary to future-proof the country's energy security and keep the lights on. With electricity demand set to rise and existing gas plants nearing the end of their lives, the Government will support limited new build gas capacity in the short term, for when the sun is not shining and the wind is not blowing. This is a sensible insurance policy, and independent analysis demonstrates that unabated gas generation will continue to play an important part in the 2030s. The Government have already passed laws requiring new gas plants to be built ready to convert to low-carbon alternatives in the future, and running hours will continue to reduce as more renewables come online. This means the plans will not add to projected emissions and are entirely in line with the UK's world-leading carbon targets.

The next phase of the REMA programme will finalise the remaining policy options. We expect to provide a summary of responses in summer 2024 and move into full-scale implementation from 2025.

[HCWS333]

TREASURY

Authorised Push Payment Fraud

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): The Government take the issue of fraud very seriously and are dedicated to protecting the public from this devastating crime. According to UK Finance, in the first half of 2023 alone there were 116,324 cases of authorised push payment (APP) fraud, where a payer is deceived or defrauded into authorising a payment to a criminal.

To help combat fraud, the Government are working with industry to remove the vulnerabilities that fraudsters exploit; with intelligence agencies to shut down fraudulent infrastructure; with law enforcement to identify and bring the most harmful offenders to justice; and with all partners to ensure that the public have the advice and support they need.

Today, the Government have published draft legislation setting out their approach to allowing payment service providers to delay the processing of authorised push payments executed within the UK in sterling in circumstances where it appears there has been fraud or dishonesty. This fulfils a commitment in our ambitious fraud strategy to investigate this issue.

Currently, for most transactions, the Payment Services Regulations 2017 require that an outbound payment is processed by the end of the business day following the time of receipt of the payment order. The draft statutory instrument published today sets out that the Government intend to allow payment service providers to delay the processing of in-scope payments by up to four business days from the time of receiving the payment order. This will only be permissible where there are reasonable grounds to suspect a payment order from a payer has been placed subsequent to fraud or dishonesty perpetrated by someone else—excluding the payer—and those grounds are established by no later than the end of the next business day following receipt of the payment order. The delay may only be used where the provider requires further time to contact the customer or a third party, such as law enforcement, to establish whether to execute the payment.

Payment service providers will be required to inform customers of any delays, the reasons behind their decision to delay the payment, and what information or actions are needed to help the payment service provider decide whether to execute the order. However, this will not be required when doing so would be unlawful—for example, when doing so will contravene obligations under anti-money laundering or economic crime law.

The thresholds for any delay will ensure that payment service providers must have an evidential basis to delay a payment, while ensuring that suspicious payments are properly investigated and rejected as required. To help ensure that consumers and businesses do not incur any costs as a result of any delays to their payments, payment service providers will be liable for any interest or charges incurred by the payer resulting from a delay.

This measure applies only to authorised push payments executed within the UK in sterling. Small, medium and large businesses, which may have numerous obligations to make timely payments to suppliers, will be able to opt out of these provisions with the mutual agreement of their payment service provider.

To monitor the impact of this legislation and ensure it is used in a proportionate manner, the FCA will engage with payment service providers over reporting requirements in respect of compliance with the new provisions.

This legislation does not make any changes to the Payment Services Regulations 2017 with regard to inbound payments, whereby a payment service provider receives a payment from another payment service provider. This is because there are already obligations under financial crime legislation for payment service providers to delay inbound payments in certain circumstances. Therefore, the Government consider that legislative change for inbound payments is not required.

The Government welcome feedback on the drafting of this statutory instrument by 12 April 2024 and will engage with the financial services industry on this. The Government will then lay these regulations before Parliament in summer 2024. It is intended that these regulations will come into force by 7 October 2024 to align with the Payment Systems Regulator's timelines for the introduction of mandatory reimbursement for APP scams.

The draft legislation and an accompanying policy note can be found at the below link <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-payment-services-amendment-regulations-2024-policy-note>

[HCWS335]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 12 March 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Exports: Small and Medium-sized Businesses

The following are extracts from Business and Trade questions on 7 March 2024.

Gerald Jones: SMEs in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney tell me of their frustrations around exporting goods and now the Government have scrapped the trade show programme, which was set up to support British businesses to attend events and win overseas orders. Will the Minister tell the House and the thousands of businesses that rely on that vital support when there will be a replacement?

Ms Ghani: UK exports are increasing. Using current prices, they are up by £21 billion compared with **2023**.
[Official Report, 7 March 2024, Vol. 746, c. 943.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Industry and Economic Security, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). The reply should have been:

Ms Ghani: UK exports are increasing. Using current prices, they are up by £21 billion compared with **2022**.

Feryal Clark: We are lucky that Enfield North has quite a lot of small and medium-sized businesses, but they are suffering because of the cost of spiralling bills and no Government support. Does the Minister think it is the lack of a Government industrial strategy or the lack of individual support for exporters that is most holding our businesses back?

Ms Ghani: That is an extraordinary statement, because in the hon. Lady's constituency **the greatest level of exports is from** professional and business services, and those exports **are increasing** not only to the EU but to countries outside the EU.

[Official Report, 7 March 2024, Vol. 746, c. 944.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Industry and Economic Security, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark). The reply should have been:

Ms Ghani: That is an extraordinary statement, because in the hon. Lady's constituency **there are exports of** professional and business services, and those exports **are** not only to the EU but to countries outside the EU.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Office for Budget Responsibility said yesterday that exports, including from SMEs, will fall even more than

expected this year; growth in exports will be less than 1% in each of the next three years; and other countries will not be hit the same way. There have been cuts in the funding to help businesses start exporting and there has been no deal with the United States, no Diwali deal with India, and no veterinary agreement with the EU to cut red tape and slash costs. What does the Minister think is the best explanation for the Government's dismal performance on exports so far?

Ms Ghani: ...When it comes to exports, we are exporting not only into the EU but outside the EU. As I said earlier, professional and business services **are increasing** outside the EU by **19%**.

[Official Report, 7 March 2024, Vol. 746, c. 944.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Industry and Economic Security, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). The reply should have been:

Ms Ghani: ...When it comes to exports, we are exporting not only into the EU but outside the EU. As I said earlier, professional and business services **exports increased** outside the EU by **23% in the 12 months to September 2023**.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Dementia Care in Hospital

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on Dementia Care in Hospital on 6 March 2024.

Helen Whately: ...we have been putting in place changes to Care Quality Commission regulation to make visiting a fundamental right, a fundamental part of care and a fundamental standard of care to ensure better access for loved ones to their family members in care homes and in hospitals. I know in particular how important that is for people with dementia, among others. The CQC **is consulting** on the implementation of the regulatory change, which will be live shortly.

[Official Report, 6 March 2024, Vol. 746, c. 939.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately):

An error has been identified in my speech in the debate on Dementia Care in Hospital. The correct statement is:

Helen Whately: ...we have been putting in place changes to Care Quality Commission regulation to make visiting a fundamental right, a fundamental part of care and a fundamental standard of care to ensure better access for loved ones to their family members in care homes and in hospitals. I know in particular how important that is for people with dementia, among others. The CQC **has consulted on guidance** on the implementation of the regulatory change, **and that guidance** will be live shortly.

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**not later than
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