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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 26 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

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That Mr Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Blackpool South in the room of Scott Lloyd Benton, who since his election for the said Borough Constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Simon Hart.*)

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start questions, I should say that Scott, who has been working in my office since I became Speaker, is crossing to another part of the House service—he is not leaving the House—and, on behalf of all Members, I thank him for his work and for ensuring the efficiency of my office.

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sentencing: Dangerous Offenders

1. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase sentences for dangerous offenders.
[902196]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): To govern is to choose. Choices we have made mean that the most dangerous offenders—the acid attackers, the rapists, the knife-point robbers—who are sentenced to seven years or more are required to spend longer in custody. The Sentencing Bill goes further: murders involving sexual or sadistic conduct will lead to a whole-life order unless there are exceptional circumstances, and those convicted of the most serious sexual offences, including rape, will serve 100% of their custodial term in prison.

Simon Jupp: I welcome the measures that my right hon. and learned Friend has outlined, as will my East Devon constituents. Rapists deserve the most severe possible custodial sentences. Will he update the House on how sentence lengths have been increased for that utterly vile crime since 2010?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that rape is an appalling crime. In 2010, the average custodial sentence for adult rape was six and a half years, and

prison governors were required to release offenders at the halfway mark. Today, the average sentence is over 40% longer, and offenders serving more than four years must serve two thirds of that sentence behind bars. As I say, we are going further still.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): For all the positive words from the Secretary of State, the reality in our prisons is that people are being sent out, and the prison estate has not kept pace with the rhetoric that we hear from the Government. The Government are constantly sending criminals on to our streets because they do not have the prison facilities to house them. Is not the reality that we need fewer fine words and more action from the Government to keep our streets safe?

Alex Chalk: That is not a fair characterisation. The capacity in our estate is much greater than when we inherited it—that is point one. Point two is that we have kick-started the largest prison expansion since the Victorian era: £4 billion has been allocated, and we have opened His Majesty's Prison Fosse Way and HMP Five Wells. HMP Millsike will open next year; we have planning permission for Gartree and Grendon Springhill, and we also have more spaces—rapid deployment cells and so on—coming on at Liverpool, Birmingham and Norwich. We believe that those who commit the most appalling crimes should be locked up for longer. As I say, it was wrong that, in 2010, rapists would be automatically released at the halfway mark. We are the Government who are putting that right.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I commend my right hon. and learned Friend for building on the work that he and I did together to ensure that the most dangerous and serious offenders spend longer behind bars. The consultation on sentencing in cases of murder concluded a few weeks ago. When can we reasonably expect a response on that sensitive and important issue?

Alex Chalk: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to say that it is a sensitive issue. As he knows from practice, those who commit the offence of murder outside, using a knife that is brought to the scene, can expect a starting point of 25 years. However, as the Gould and Devey families have made so powerfully clear, where the crime takes place inside the home, there are very difficult sentencing decisions for judges. The consultation has ended, and I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who has spoken to a number of people about it, as indeed have I. We will respond in the coming weeks, but this matter requires careful thought. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend for his work on it.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Barnaby Webber from Taunton was described by his family as an “extraordinary ordinary person”. His killer was found guilty of manslaughter, rather than murder, on the basis of being subject to paranoid schizophrenia. Barnaby's mother, Emma Webber, says it is “abhorrent” that murder charges were not pursued against her son's killer. Will the Secretary of State consider re-categorising homicide laws to introduce first-degree and second-degree murder?

Alex Chalk: There is nothing I could say from this Dispatch Box that would put right the horror that the poor families of Barnaby Webber, Grace O'Malley-Kumar and Ian Austin suffered in those appalling attacks from Valdo Calocane. The law of homicide has been considered greatly—in fact, as a Back Bencher, I led a debate on the issue of first-degree and second-degree murder. It is of course something that we keep under careful consideration; there is complexity to it, but it is certainly a matter that we will consider.

Cremation: Legislation

2. Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of legislation on cremation. [902197]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The law on cremation has been updated when needed. For example, the 2008 cremation regulations are currently being amended as part of the ongoing death certification reform. However, the primary legislation on cremation dates back to 1902, and in the light of developments since then, I believe that a more comprehensive review is needed. That is why the Law Commission has agreed to consider the law governing cremation as part of its project on burial, cremation and new funerary methods. That project has commenced, and we await its findings with interest.

Dr Evans: I am grateful for the Minister's answer. Obviously, given what is going on in Hull, there are great concerns. I know that the Minister cannot speak directly about that issue because of the investigation, but there is no formal regulation of funeral directors on these issues. Joseph Barsby, the managing director at G. Seller—a much-loved local funeral director that is at the forefront of funeral facilities in Hinckley—is very concerned, because G. Seller wants to lead, not be tarnished by being sucked into problems in the industry. Will the Minister meet with Joseph to discuss ways in which we can improve the system? Failing that, will there be a way for funeral directors to feed in information and ideas on how to improve the system?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Department has already started work on a call for evidence on where we go with the regulation of the funeral director sector; that will be issued shortly. I am more than happy to ensure that the views of any funeral director are fed in, and, of course, to meet with the firm in his constituency.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the productive and supportive way that he has engaged with me on the appalling situation with Legacy funeral directors in Hull. I am utterly committed to regulating this industry and never again allowing that appalling, heartbreaking situation to be repeated. I have heard the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), but could he speak a little bit more about timeframes? Does he agree that in the interval before statutory regulation comes in, we should encourage all funeral directors to subject themselves to voluntary regulation by one of the trade bodies, and to do everything they can to reassure the public that not all funeral directors are in a situation like the appalling situation that we have had in my constituency?

Mike Freer: If I may return the compliment, the hon. Lady has handled this appalling incident in her constituency with a great deal of skill. I am committed to working with her and the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is leading on some of the initial responses, alongside the local authority. The call for evidence on where we go on regulation will commence in the next few months; the decision, of course, will have to wait for the public consultation. This afternoon, I am meeting the two major trade bodies to discuss how they can assist with voluntary inspections, to ensure that after this terrible incident—what has been happening is quite horrific—which nobody thought could occur, we get this right, so that people have confidence in the vast majority of funeral directors, who are entirely respectable and treat the deceased with the respect and care that we would expect.

Reducing Reoffending

3. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce reoffending. [902198]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Reducing reoffending is a core mission of this Government. That is why, for example, we rolled out the genuinely transformational policy of 12 weeks' guaranteed accommodation for offenders on release, and it is why we have invested heavily in employment; there are prison employment leads in every resettlement prison. The plan is working: the reoffending rate has fallen significantly since 2010, from 31% to 25%, and in the two years to March 2023, the proportion of prison leavers in employment six months after release more than doubled.

Stephen Crabb: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his answer. He may be aware that the Welsh Affairs Committee has recently heard from businesses such as Timpson and Williams Homes about the work being done to train and recruit prisoners in Wales. While there was a lot of praise for the New Futures Network, which brokers partnerships between employers and prisons, what is being done to expand the number of release on temporary licence schemes? As we have heard, they are really important for improving employability and giving prisoners a better chance of holding down a job when they get out of the gate.

Alex Chalk: I thank my right hon. Friend for the interest he is showing in this issue. He is absolutely right to pay tribute to the New Futures Network, which does exceptional work in custody. Of course, it is very often able to liaise with employment advisory boards—local business people in the area—to ensure that prisoners are trained in the skills that they need for jobs in that area. When I went to HMP Berwyn, which is of course in Wales, one of the things that I was so impressed by is that its employment hub has a video suite, so that prisoners can be interviewed by employers on the outside. On my right hon. Friend's point about ROTL, that is something that prison governors keep under review. Certainly in the right cases, where ROTL is safe for the public, it can be a useful tool to ensure that prisoners are rehabilitated and get into work, so that they can be law-abiding citizens in the future.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that one of the ways to reduce reoffending is to break the cycle of drug misuse. The problem of course is that in too many prisons there is a high incidence of drugs getting in, so what is he doing to reduce the amount of drugs in our prisons?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Member is right: it is of course really important that we tackle drugs coming into prisons. We have rolled out £100 million in prison gate security, to ensure that there is airport-style security. There are scanners, including body scanners with very high resolution, so that people coming into jails can be scanned for illicit contraband that may be being transported internally; that is important. We are also rolling out additional technology that can scan mail for psychoactive substances impregnated into the paper. That is just one of a suite of measures that we are taking—plus there are the drug abstinence wings.

May I take this opportunity to say that I misspoke earlier? Ian Coates was the third victim of the Nottingham attacks.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee, Sir Robert Neill KC.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's comments about the progress made on tackling reoffending, but he will be aware that it remains stubbornly high. We are in an unfortunate position: we imprison more people than most of our neighbours in Europe, but still have higher rates of reoffending. Does that not posit the fact that we need to make more intelligent use of prison, and of alternatives to custody, as parts of a joined-up system? Would he agree that the Sentencing Bill is particularly valuable in this regard, and can we hope for its swift return to the House?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his excellent point. He says something with which I passionately agree: strip out the emotion and follow the evidence. The evidence shows that there are tools available to this generation of politicians that were not necessarily available 10 or 15 years ago. I am talking not just about GPS tags, which we have doubled, but alcohol tags, with which there is a 97% compliance rate. The reoffending rate among those who live with the sword of Damocles hanging over them can be much lower than for those who spend a short time in custody.

Mr Speaker: As it was his birthday yesterday, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. You are never going to let me forget about my birthday.

I very much thank the Secretary of State for his answers, and for his very clear commitment to physical and skills training. The other important issue is education. If we keep people's minds and bodies active, they will not wish to offend when they leave prison, so what is being done to help, educationally? Will the Secretary of State share the ideas he clearly has with the equivalent Minister in Northern Ireland?

Alex Chalk: Absolutely. Importantly, we are rolling out a prison education service, with a considerable sum of money—about £150 million a year, which is significant. However, it is critical to have tie-up between the local employment advisory boards, liaising with the governor, and the New Futures Network to ensure that the education provided is tailored to the jobs on the outside. People are being assisted with literacy, for example, so that they can do jobs in hospitality, kitchens or horticulture. Education works when it is tailored to job opportunities on the outside. That is how we get prisoners motivated and engaged—and yes, I am happy to engage in the way that the hon. Member proposes.

Lasting Power of Attorney Agreements

4. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to prevent the potential abuse of lasting power of attorney agreements. [902199]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): When an LPA application is submitted, there is a statutory four-week waiting period before the LPA can be registered, during which objections can be lodged. As for registered LPAs, any concerns about an attorney abusing one can be reported to the Office of the Public Guardian, which will investigate. As part of the modernisation of LPAs following the passage of the Powers of Attorney Act 2023, new identity verification processes will be introduced to further strengthen the system.

Fabian Hamilton: More than 6 million people in Britain have lasting power of attorney agreements. I have been inundated recently with so many harrowing stories from across the country of abusers targeting elderly people and stealing their estate from under their nose. Will the Minister ensure that a proper medical assessment is carried out before an LPA is activated, and that the digitisation of LPAs does not lead to families losing their loved one's estate to unscrupulous abusers?

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I am more than happy to take that away and write to him about the steps we take to ensure that that level of check is in place. I reassure the House that people can check the "use a lasting power of attorney" service on gov.uk to see where LPAs have been issued, and whether one has been issued without their knowledge.

Secure Youth Estate: Violence

5. **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to reduce violence in the secure youth estate. [902200]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): The number of children in custody has fallen by nearly 70% in the last decade, but that means that those in custody are more complex; 71% of them are detained for violent offences. Although the rate of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults declined by 7% between July and September 2023, compared with the same period in 2022, the rate of assaults on staff increased. That is why all sites have a safety strategy reflecting local drivers of violence. That includes tackling the use of weapons,

and training staff in conflict resolution. Much has been done, but there continues to be more to do, and we remain focused on doing it.

Stephen Doughty: Those strategies are clearly not working. There were 320 assaults on staff between July and September 2023, of which 24 were serious. That is a 9% increase, year on year, in assaults in the children and young people's estate. When will the Minister put in place a proper plan to cut violence in the youth estate and keep staff safe?

Edward Argar: The plan we have put in place is working, but there is more to do. The hon. Gentleman highlighted statistics that, as he will accept, I acknowledged from the Dispatch Box. We believe that our approach to tackling violence and to conflict resolution in our youth estate is right, and we will continue to press forward with it to reduce rates of assault on our hard-working and dedicated prison officers and staff.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Government have decided to change the use of Cookham Wood youth offender institution to an adult prison. That follows a lack of progress in improving young people's access to education, and increased violence on the prison estate. The behaviour management method of keeping young people in their cells has failed. This decision puts a spotlight on the wider crisis in adult prisons. When the young people are transferred, how will the Minister ensure that the practice of keeping them in their cells, and the cycle of violence, will end?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her question about Cookham Wood. As she will be aware, a number of specific local factors at work in Cookham Wood led to the urgent notification, and the challenges in addressing that. As for those young people and their transfer to other institutions, a number of them will be released before Cookham Wood closes. Those still in custody will be assessed individually, and they and their families will be engaged with to ensure that they are placed in institutions that are best suited to their needs, and that give them the greatest opportunity to progress and make positive life choices for when they are released.

Janet Daby: It is a shame that the Minister did not address the violence specifically. Violence is a challenge across the youth estate, not just at Cookham Wood. Recently, a girl with challenging behaviours and complex needs at Wetherby YOI was restrained and then stripped—not once, but twice—by male officers. In the context of rising violence and extreme self-harm, does the Minister believe that is acceptable, and what alternative provision does he have in mind other than the Keppel unit in Wetherby YOI?

Edward Argar: I did address the point about violence on the estate in response to the original question from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). The hon. Lady asked specifically about a case highlighted by the chief inspector of prisons in his recent report. What happened there was clearly against policy. It was clearly wrong and concerning, but I do

have to correct her: the individual involved was at no point strip-searched. That was inaccurate reporting. At all times, the modesty of the individual was protected with a blanket, so I am afraid that what was said in reporting that it was a strip search is not correct. Clothes were removed under a blanket in order to protect life where there was imminent risk to it. Those officers made a difficult decision in the circumstances to protect life. It is right that we look into the specifics of what happened, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor and I have done. I think we just need to be a little cautious at this point about accepting everything that was reported as fact.

Violence against Prison Officers

6. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of violence against prison officers. [902201]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): All assaults on prison staff are utterly unacceptable. That is why we have taken steps to protect our staff. I put on record something that I suspect those on both sides of the House share, which is our gratitude to all those who work in our prisons. To protect staff, we have rolled out PAVA—pelargonic acid vanillylamide—spray in adult male prisons, and body-worn video cameras. The maximum penalty for those who assault prison officers has been doubled, and we have completed our £100 million security investment programme to clamp down on the illicit items that fuel prison violence. The rate of assaults on staff in the 12 months to September 2023 was 10% lower than in the 12 months to September 2019—before the pandemic—but it is still far too high.

Chris Elmore: I know the Minister cares about this issue and wants to see solutions for how we protect prison officers across the prison estate, but according to the Prison Officers Association and the Community union, serious offences against prison officers are up 10% on last year. Some 750 of those assaults are deemed to be serious, and 23 attacks are being recorded every day on the prison estate across England and Wales. There are huge concerns about overcrowding. The level of prison officers is 10% lower than in 2010. It is positive to hear the Secretary of State talking about opening new prisons, but if there are no prison officers to work there, how will we resolve these issues? More worryingly, prison officers are taking to the media to say that they are frightened for their lives to work on the prison estate. I do not think the plan is working. I believe the Minister wants to fix it, but what is the next plan to resolve things and ensure that prison officers remain safe on our prison estate?

Edward Argar: No one, in any walk of life, should be in fear of assault at work, and that obviously includes dedicated prison officers. I have already highlighted the steps we are taking to tackle some of the root causes of that violence. We have the £100 million security measures to tackle illicit drugs and mobile phones—the sorts of things that fuel the violence—and the ability to deploy PAVA spray. The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights the importance in this context of the number of prison officers. That is why I am pleased that in the latest statistics published at the end of last year, numbers are up by 1,500, and retention rates are improving, too.

Victims of Domestic Violence: Court Proceedings

7. Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that victims of domestic violence are protected throughout court proceedings. [902202]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 was transformative with the protections it gave to domestic abuse victims through the justice system. To give just a few examples, up-front legal aid is available to all domestic abuse victims seeking a protective order, without having to establish evidence of abuse. Our upcoming legal aid means test review will significantly increase eligibility and exclude disputed assets, such as the marital home, from consideration. Perpetrators are prohibited from cross-examining their victims, and victims are entitled to the support of an independent domestic violence adviser throughout the process.

Duncan Baker: My office has recently assisted with several cases regarding the use of court proceedings involving victims of domestic abuse. In many cases, family issues are going straight to trial without any mediation, which causes far more trauma for all parties concerned. Can the Minister assure me that we will always place the victim at the forefront of court proceedings in these circumstances?

Laura Farris: It is specifically to address that issue that we commissioned our harms panel, which conducted excellent work, as a result of which the Ministry of Justice has conducted a pilot of pathfinder courts in Dorset and north Wales focused on preventing exactly this issue. Those courts have focused on creating a less adversarial system where domestic abuse allegations are investigated and resolved at an early stage without being intensified through the court. My hon. Friend will be glad to hear that so successful has the pilot been that it will now be rolled out on a national basis, starting next month with courts in south-east Wales and in Birmingham.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): In 2023, 67,938 rapes were recorded by the police, but there were just 2,008 rape convictions. It is well documented that there is not enough support for rape victims through the court process. The use of counselling notes has a chilling effect, and the long waits for their case to go to trial have an intense impact on survivors, often causing them to withdraw. What will the Minister do to ensure that victims and survivors are supported throughout the court process?

Laura Farris: It is not in dispute that rape is the most serious offence a person can experience that is not homicide. It is as a result of the implementation of the end-to-end rape review that we started Operation Soteria through the police forces. That has not just improved rape prosecutions; some forces are referring quadruple the volume of cases to the Crown Prosecution Service that they were once before, and overall prosecutions have more than doubled. We have close to 1,000 independent sexual violence advisers working in the system, holding a victim's hand from the minute they go to the police to the conclusion of the process. I met some in Hatfield last month, who told me that victims had told them

they had only stayed in the process because of that support. It is night and day from where it was in 2010. We review the outcome of the rape review every quarter, and the curve is going upwards, so of course it is a crucial issue, but one on which significant improvement is being made on every single matrix.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Domestic abuse has no place in modern society or any society. What work is happening to ensure that victims of domestic abuse are supported throughout the entire process? We have a fantastic organisation in Watford called Watford Women's Centre, which helps many abuse victims, but what are the Government doing to ensure that victims are supported throughout and that the perpetrators are taken to court and justice is served?

Laura Farris: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question. I give him a similar answer to the one I gave the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). One thing that has been transformative in victim support is the provision of not just independent sexual violence advisers, but independent domestic abuse advisers. Again, there are nearly 1,000 advisers in the system helping victims every step of the way. One thing that I am most excited about in this challenging area of the law is the pilot launching next month for domestic abuse protection orders, which will give police or victims the ability to go to the magistrates court or the family court to seek a blend of measures, whether that is a non-molestation order, an occupation order or a stalking protection order, and create positive obligations on the perpetrator, whether that is on alcohol abuse or through the perpetrator programme. There is a comprehensive package of support for domestic abuse victims.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): In Scotland, victims of rape and serious sexual assault are now able to access free court transcripts. The project will give victims free access to transcripts that previously would have cost thousands of pounds. However, the UK Government refuse to match the scheme and are only committing to a one-year pilot scheme, in which free copies of sentencing remarks will be made available to victims of serious crime. That is not good enough. It fails victims like my constituent, Juliana Terlizzi, who was charged over £7,000 to read the transcript of her rapist's trial. Ahead of Report stage of the Victims and Prisoners Bill in the other place next month, will the Justice Secretary meet Juliana and me to discuss matching the Scottish scheme, which will help get victims the justice they deserve?

Laura Farris: I reassure the hon. Lady that the Courts Minister has said that he will meet her to discuss the matter. She will know that the cost of transcription for a full trial can be as high as £20,000, but the power and impact of any trial, where there has been a conviction, is in the judge's sentencing remarks at the end, in seeing everything, and society's opprobrium is expressed through the voice of the judge. That is why we are conducting a pilot for free sentencing remarks in all those cases.

Children in Care: Family Courts

8. Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of delays in the family courts on children who have been taken into care. [902203]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): Delays in decision making during care proceedings can have a significant impact on children, and we recognise that there is more to do to address that challenge. That is why last year the Government published their response to the independent review of children's social care, setting out a programme of action to achieve better outcomes. The Department for Education is investing an extra £10 million on new initiatives to address the longest delays and meet the statutory requirement to resolve proceedings within 26 weeks.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Data from Cafcass shows that children who have been removed from their parents by the state have to wait an average of 46 weeks to get a final decision on where they will live. That is heartbreaking. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of extended family proceedings on the mental health of the children involved and their ability to access support and child and adolescent mental health services?

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady raises a very serious point. The impact on the child and the wider family is appreciated. We have invested in capacity, with more money for Cafcass, judges and recorders, and more sitting days to ensure that we increase capacity so that hearings can be heard effectively. We are also focusing on the public law outline, which sets a maximum number of hearings and the time limits, to ensure that proceedings are heard on time. If the hon. Lady wishes to raise any specific cases, I will be happy to meet her to get to the bottom of any specific problems.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Despite the response given to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), the Government are still a long way from solving the crisis in the family courts. We have heard of the 46-week average, but in 13 of the 42 designated family judge areas in England and Wales, the wait is double the statutory target of 26 weeks. Then, there are the 80,000 private family law cases that can take 45 weeks to be resolved, and the number of new cases is increasing faster than disposals. Do the Government have any concern or compassion for some of the most vulnerable children in the country who are being let down? I invite the Minister to try again and assure the House that the crisis will not get even worse.

Mike Freer: If there is a lever that I have not pulled, I invite the shadow Minister to let me know what it is, and I will address it. This Government are spending more money on attracting more judges and recorders, maximising sitting days and investing in the public law outline and, on the flip side of public family law, on private family law as well as mediation. We are investing an extra £55 million, as announced in the Budget, to address productivity and the backlogs. Every single lever that will increase capacity and productivity is being pulled, but I am more than happy for the hon. Member to share any insight with me, and I am sure that we can work on a better solution.

Crown Court Backlog

9. Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the backlog in the Crown court. [902205]

13. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the backlog in the Crown court. [902210]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): More than 90% of all criminal cases are resolved in the magistrates court, which includes burglaries, thefts, assaults, criminal damage and drugs offences. Thanks to magistrates' exceptional efforts, the caseload has come down significantly from its post-pandemic peak, and cases are being heard promptly. To help bring down the caseload in the Crown court, the Government have invested heavily to allow courts to operate at full throttle. We have recruited around 1,000 judges and tribunal members across all jurisdictions this financial year. We have kept open 20 nightingale courtrooms to boost capacity, and we are on track to increase spending on criminal legal aid by more than £140 million a year.

Stephanie Peacock: In Yorkshire, Sheffield Crown court has been forced to shut twice in the last two years due to flooding. That is in addition to the already record-breaking court backlog across the UK of 67,000 cases. What measures have the Government put in place to deal with unplanned court closures, to ensure that people still have access to justice?

Alex Chalk: One of the first things I did when I took on this role was to extract from the Treasury an additional £80 million to go into our court maintenance fund. That is important because it allows us to plan not just reactively this year, but proactively over time. That will create more efficiencies and get us more for our money, and will mean that great courts such as those in Sheffield can continue to do the business.

Debbie Abrahams: How does the backlog in criminal court cases vary by region? What discussions has the Secretary of State had with local judicial teams on prioritising and communicating those backlogs?

Alex Chalk: The senior presiding judge will keep a close eye on regional discrepancies. In certain cases, there is the power to transfer them from one court to another, but that will depend on the suitability for defendants, and witnesses and victims who need to attend hearings. It is important that we send the message from this Chamber that more than 90% of all criminal trials—the cases that people want resolved such as criminal damage, drugs matters and common assault—are dealt with in magistrates courts, and magistrates up and down our country are doing an excellent job at getting through those cases.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I absolutely endorse the Lord Chancellor's comments on magistrates working incredibly hard to clear backlogs in courts. He will have seen recent journalistic reporting relating to single justice procedure, which is an important element of magistrates' work. The principle behind the single justice procedure is good, and I have sat on cases in SJP courts, but there are some concerns, in particular around vulnerable individuals who may have mitigation that is not necessarily being addressed. Does he agree that perhaps he could remind Members that magistrates can already use their discretion to refer cases back to open court, where prosecutors can review cases to ensure that individuals who are vulnerable are not served with un-justice?

Alex Chalk: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his colleagues for the exceptional work they do to ensure that justice is done. On the single justice procedure, fairness is non-negotiable, so it is critical that every person who comes before the courts, whether via the SJP or an open court, gets that fairness. There is an issue about transparency. Some important points on that have been raised, and echoed by the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill). It is something that we ought to consider recalibrating. Everyone accepts that the SJP works well and is a useful addition. We just need to see whether it ought to be refined in the interests of promoting transparency.

End of Custody Supervised Licence

11. **Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): How many prisoners have been released early under the end of custody supervised licence scheme since October 2023. [902208]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): End of custody supervised licence began in October 2023. Analysis of and statistics on its use will be based on one year's worth of data and published on an annualised basis in line with other statistics, such as deaths of offenders in the community. We consider that to be the appropriate approach.

Chris Evans: Earlier this month, the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. and learned Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), who is in his place, said that prisons are at "bursting point", while the Prison Governors' Association said that without the extension of the ECSL scheme, our criminal justice system

"may have ground to a halt".

Meanwhile, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner labelled the plans as

"dangerous to domestic abuse victims".

Is the Minister satisfied that the scheme manages the prison population while keeping the victims of crime safe? If so, when will he release data about which prisoners have been released?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. There are a number of points there. The ECSL is a response to, yes, acute capacity challenges, but it is a targeted scheme operating in prisons as required and where necessary. I gently say to him that a similar scheme ran from 2007 to 2010. In that case, it bore significant differences to what is happening now. ECSL, as operating now, contains a range of important safeguards that were simply not in place between 2007 and 2010. The 2007-10 scheme released some people straight into the community without any supervision and led to the early release of some prisoners convicted of terror offences. This scheme is totally different. It plays a role in managing the prison capacity challenges, but it has those important safeguards in place to protect victims and society.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Our prisons are full, so much so that the Government are sanctioning the early release of inmates to make space. At what point will we prioritise the deportation of foreign criminals who are taking up one in nine of

our prison cells, so that we can get back to zero-tolerance policing and ensure that no crime is too small to go unpunished?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because she is quite right to highlight that a key element of tackling the prison capacity crisis is sending back, through deportation, foreign national offenders. She will be reassured that 18,000 have been deported in the past four years and we continue to drive that target ever higher.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is telling that the Minister is refusing to come clean with the public on how many prisoners are being released early under the scheme. As we know, the public are overwhelmingly in favour of an early release scheme if it were applied to his colleagues in a general election. [Laughter.] Does he have any intention, before that happy day, of releasing the truth about how many prisoners are being let out early?

Edward Argar: It is always a pleasure to face the gentle barbs of the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known for a long time. As I have made very clear on a previous occasion in the House, and indeed just a few moments ago, we consider that an annualised publication of these statistics is the most appropriate approach, in line with the publication of similar statistics such as those relating to deaths of offenders in the community.

Legal Aid: Immigration Cases

12. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of legal aid for immigration cases. [902209]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The Legal Aid Agency monitors the provision of immigration legal aid and takes whatever actions are operationally available to it to ensure a supply of providers.

Chris Law: I was hoping for an answer but did not get one, so let me try this. While we all desperately want to see the Tories' asylum backlog cleared, this effort must be well funded and must ensure access to justice. What we have instead is an under-resourced bureaucracy and a push to make rushed asylum decisions, combined with severe difficulty in accessing immigration legal aid, and as a result thousands of asylum seekers have effectively been denied the right to legal representation. Why do the UK Government stand alone in not recognising the enormous crisis in immigration legal aid?

Mike Freer: In fact, the Government spent £44 million on immigration legal aid in 2022-23. We have increased the hourly rate for those undertaking this kind of work, and we are looking at remote access and payment for travelling. All those steps we have taken to raise the level of funding in this important area. I have to say, however, that I think it takes a particular bit of brass neck for the SNP to lecture us on the funding of legal aid. I refer the hon. Gentleman to Scottishlegal.com, which has commented on how the SNP has decimated legal aid in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Perhaps the Minister can answer this question. The Bar Council has repeatedly highlighted the fact that asylum claimants who have otherwise meritorious cases have often gone through multiple appeals due to very poor or no legal representation. That jacks up the costs for the courts, the Home Office and local authorities, all the while trapping vulnerable people in an agonising limbo. If the Government will not address the crisis in immigration legal aid because it is the right thing to do, will they at least do so because it is the financially sound thing to do?

Mike Freer: As I have said, we are already increasing the fees for those who take on legal aid work in connection with the Illegal Migration Act 2023. That is a 15% increase on the increase that we have already seen. On top of that, we are rolling out remote access to the duty advice scheme and introducing payment for travel. Those are major steps towards ensuring the availability of legal aid. I therefore do not accept the hon. Gentleman's description of the position. If he wants to start swapping comments from the Bar Council, I can quote the Scottish Bar Council's views on the SNP's record.

HMPPS Reoffending Programmes

14. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the impact of outcomes data from the Justice Data Lab on the recommissioning of HM Prison and Probation Service reoffending programmes in the last 12 months. [902211]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): Reducing reoffending is a core mission of this Government. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor said in an earlier answer, we act on the basis not of emotion but of evidence, deploying a series of carefully researched interventions from the prison employment leads to the provision of 12 weeks of accommodation post release. That is why the reoffending rate has decreased from 31% to 25% since 2010. The Justice Data Lab makes an important contribution by providing HMPPS and external organisations with a robust assessment of whether their interventions work, and we will continue to consider their work carefully.

John Penrose: I welcome the adherence to an evidence-based approach to working out whether or not these various programmes work effectively, but may I urge Ministers to go even further by ensuring that every programme we currently commission is reassessed on the basis of outcomes, and then not recommissioned unless those outcomes measure up?

Gareth Bacon: I can confirm that the Government will continue to base our investment decisions to reduce reoffending on the best available evidence at the time. We are continuously improving our evidence base, for instance through the cross-governmental Better Outcomes through Linked Data programme.

Topical Questions

T1. [902221] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Since the last session of Justice questions I have visited HMP Liverpool, a prison that received a poor inspection report some years ago, and I saw how it had been transformed. Prisoners were engaged in constructive activity in the cycle repair workshop and elsewhere, cells had been refurbished, and there was a clear sense of pride among prison officers, who were determined to deliver safety, decency and rehabilitation. Prisons as well as prisoners, it seems, can be redeemed. I have also visited Liverpool Crown court to see our "intensive supervision courts" in action, tackling the root causes of offending with treatment for addictions. In Coventry I saw rapid deployment teams of offenders who had been sentenced to carrying out unpaid work clearing up local neighbourhoods, visibly atoning for their crimes, and doing so within 48 hours of the project being nominated by the public.

I was pleased to support the important Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), which is intended to tackle abusive and chilling lawsuits. We have also brought forward legislation on litigation funding agreements to ensure that third parties can continue to fund court proceedings on behalf of individuals or small businesses. That support enabled the sub-postmasters to make their successful civil claim. Our legislation will bolster access to justice, boost our legal sector, and ensure that in our courts David can still take on Goliath.

Mr Dhesi: The Government have achieved only 5,900 of the promised 20,000 new prison places, resulting in them having to release prisoners up to 60 days early to alleviate overcrowding, thereby directly impacting on public safety. How does the Secretary of State reconcile this with the Conservative promise of being tough on crime, especially when his end-of-custody supervised licensing scheme expansion significantly deviates from judicial sentencing?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. When I was in practice, I had to listen to the then Labour Home Secretary say that he was going to cancel the three Titan prisons that he had boasted he would open. Not one was built. We have opened Five Wells and Fosse Way, and Millsike is under construction. We have more cells coming online in Birmingham, Liverpool and Norwich. We have rapid deployment cells, and we have new houseblocks in Guys Marsh, Rye Hill and Hatfield. This is the party that is delivering. We will be tough on crime.

Mr Speaker: May I gently say that there a lot of people I need to get in? If we could shorten the answers, that would be helpful.

T3. [902223] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): I recently met my constituent David Winnett, who is a family law solicitor and a member of Resolution. He told me about Resolution's vision for family justice. I wonder whether my right hon. and learned Friend is familiar with that vision, particularly the importance placed on early legal advice in family disputes. Is there scope to add Resolution's proposed scheme to the mediation pilots that the Government currently have planned?

Alex Chalk: Resolution does exceptionally important work, and in the Budget the Chancellor announced an additional £55 million of support for separating parents, including £12 million to deliver a new pilot. We are working with Resolution and other organisations to implement the pilot, which we aim to launch in September this year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): This Conservative Government promised 20,000 prison places by 2025, but so far they have only delivered under 6,000. The Justice Secretary is letting violent offenders out up to two months early because, as we found out from press briefings about dire warnings to No. 10, he has literally nowhere to put them. Instead of focusing on what happened 14 years ago under the last Labour Government, will he level with the public about the true scale of the prisons capacity crisis that is unfolding on his watch?

Alex Chalk: I have been very candid in saying that there are pressures in our prisons. But here is the thing: first, capacity in our jails is significantly higher than it was under Labour's watch; and secondly, we have a record of delivery and there will be 10,000 places by next year. Here is the really important point. There are two questions that I posed in my statement. First, would Labour have let out up to 16,000 people during covid—yes or no? We said no. Secondly, would Labour have got rid of jury trials? We did not, but the Opposition would have. If they had made the same decisions that we did, they would have faced the same pressures. This is opportunism, it is silly, and Britain deserves better.

Shabana Mahmood: Bring on the general election and I will happily answer those questions. I am not surprised that the Secretary of State does not want to acknowledge the truth. Probation officers have told me that they genuinely fear not being able to keep the public safe, because they are being forced to rush through the early release of violent men in order to free up space. He will have heard the same concerns, so what is he going to do about it?

Alex Chalk: It is really important that the public are not inadvertently misled. Early release does not apply to those on life sentences, those on imprisonment for public protection sentences, those on extended determinate sentences, any sex offenders, any terrorism offenders and any serious violent offenders. The difference between our scheme and the Opposition's is that, under their scheme, governors had no discretion to block the release of prisoners; under ours, they do. That is the difference: we prioritise public safety; the Opposition prioritise politics.

T5. [902225] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): My constituent Cindy went through hell when her daughter Victoria was brutally raped and attacked by a serial offender, Donald Andrews. Victoria took her life not long after. This monster was a regular offender before and, to add insult to injury, his whole-life sentence has been quashed and he is now applying for parole. Police psychologists and other professionals have deemed this attacker to be a high risk to society, so will my right hon. Friend make similar representations to the Parole Board—that this monster should never be allowed out?

Alex Chalk: Many people in this House will have heard about some appalling cases, but this case is truly one of the most shocking and upsetting that any of us will have encountered. I of course pass on my deepest sympathy to Cindy Legg for the tragic loss of her daughter Victoria. I can indicate that I did enter an overarching view opposing release, and I can announce that he will not be recommended for release. I hope that will be of some comfort to the family. In the Victims and Prisoners Bill we are introducing an additional safeguard: specifically, a power for the Lord Chancellor to order a second check on the release of the most serious offenders to keep the public safe.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Government's plans to introduce employment tribunal fees suggest that users should pay towards running costs, implying that only those using the system benefit from it. However, Resolution Foundation research shows that tribunals are heavily relied upon to enforce workers' rights for all. Does the Justice Secretary not appreciate that any action to deter lower-paid workers from bringing forward cases will be to the detriment of the system as a whole?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): We do not believe that a £55 claim issue fee will be a deterrent. The tribunal system costs the taxpayer £80 million a year, and we do not think it is unreasonable that those who use it should pay a small contribution. To answer the question, we do not think it is a deterrent.

T7. [902227] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The tragic reality is that when intimate partners murder, women are the victims in 90% of cases. What progress have the Government made since the Wade review on ensuring that justice is done in these cases?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): We are increasing sentences by introducing statutory aggravating factors for murders that are preceded by coercive or controlling behaviour, that involve overkill or that are connected with the end of a relationship. For manslaughter involving sexual conduct, we intend to target cases where death occurs in the context of abusive or degrading sexual conduct. We have consulted publicly on sentencing, with starting points for murders preceded by controlling or coercive behaviour and for murders committed with a knife or other weapon.

T2. [902222] **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): People want access to justice. The Women's Budget Group has found that, as a result of the disastrous Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, 85% of vulnerable women are unable to access civil legal aid and the majority of them are reaching crisis point. Does the Minister think it is right that these women are being left without basic access to justice?

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady raises an important point and I would be happy to meet her and take representations on that specific point. I will also discuss it with Lord Bellamy, who, alongside me, deals with civil legal aid.

T9. [902229] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): I thank the Lord Chancellor for meeting me and my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) to discuss the egregious case of Colin Pitchfork, the double child rapist, who has had problems bouncing in and out through the Parole Board system. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend cannot change the law on this retrospectively, but what can he do in upcoming legislation to ensure that we have the protections for our communities to make sure they are safe and that reoffenders are not released?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important case and for taking it up so powerfully on behalf of his constituents. In the Sentencing Bill, we have a proposal such that people who commit crimes of murder involving sexual and sadistic conduct will not be released, because they will be expected to serve a whole-life order. That is just, on behalf of the British people, and it also helps to keep communities such as that of my hon. Friend safe.

T4. [902224] **Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The number of outstanding cases before Gwent magistrates courts has risen by 21% in the last year alone. However, the number of magistrates is now 20% lower in the whole of south Wales. We have heard today about the great work of the magistrates courts and the fact that magistrates come from all walks of life. What are the Government doing to ensure that hard-to-reach people are offering their services as magistrates, including ethnic minorities and, in particular, younger people?

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. I lead on diversity in the Department, and a piece of work is already under way on how we can increase the diversity of the magistracy and ensure that we recruit from those hard-to-reach groups. I am more than happy to meet him to swap ideas and discuss how we can continue to change the face of our magistrates.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Does the Secretary of State for Justice agree that in England and across the United Kingdom, the ancient principle of innocent until proven guilty should be upheld and restored, and that the punishment should never be the process?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I was asked about my priorities when I was appointed to this role, and I said that the guilty should be convicted, that the innocent should walk free and that the public should be protected. It is very important that people who are accused of an offence have confidence that the process will be prompt and humane. Ultimately, the British people are fair minded. They want people to be rightfully convicted, but they also want the innocent to walk free.

T6. [902226] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): Since 27 February, there have been six sudden deaths at HMP Parc in Bridgend, and it appears that at least four of those tragic deaths were drug-related. What are the Government doing to ensure that inmates at Parc are kept safe and walk out of prison safe and well at the end of their sentence?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting a serious and important issue. I am happy to meet her to discuss it further, if she wishes.

In line with established protocols for deaths in custody, we are not able to comment on individual cases until the relevant investigation by the prisons and probation ombudsman has concluded, but HMP and YOI Parc has mobilised a range of actions to gather intelligence on drug entry points and on what has happened. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this matter privately.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When the National Crime Agency briefed Members who are interested in the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill, it estimated that between 550,000 and 800,000 serious sexual offenders are at large in this country. What are the Government doing to identify them? How many more prisons will we have to build to accommodate them?

Alex Chalk: I am proud that, since 2010, the number of people prosecuted for rape is up 32%, sentences are around 40% longer and the proportion of those sentences spent in custody has increased. We are determined to do everything possible to send a clear message that addressing serious sexual offending is a priority for this Government. We will clamp down on it, and those who perpetrate this vile crime can expect the punishment they deserve.

T8. [902228] **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation Bill, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) and which the Government now support, is a great opportunity to tackle pernicious lawsuits that seek to silence journalists, campaigners and even sexual assault survivors, but two key deficiencies—the overly subjective test and the narrow definition of public interest—mean that anti-SLAPP campaigners tell me that they simply cannot support the Bill in its current form. Ahead of the important Committee stage, will the Lord Chancellor commit to looking at the amendment suggested by the News Media Association and meet me to address its concerns so that the Bill becomes fit for purpose?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. I am aware of the issues that have been raised. There is plainly a delicate balance to strike. It is incredibly important that individuals can access the courts to get a remedy in appropriate cases, and we want to make sure that the balance is properly struck. We will consider the amendment with care, as I have with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. If the hon. Lady wants to make representations to me, I will listen to them very carefully.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Worksop witnessed the horrific murder of Pauline Quinn by a man who had been released after serving time for a double murder. The probation service has since admitted that mistakes were made. However, the public still have many unanswered questions. Does the Minister agree that, although it is understandable that all the information sometimes cannot be put in the public domain, the probation service should seek to be as transparent as possible and give communities that information, where possible?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. He is right to highlight that there are occasions when it is not possible to make all the information public, but it is important that there is as much transparency as possible. If it would be helpful, I am happy to meet him to discuss it further.

T10. [902230] **Keir Mather** (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): Selby is classed by the Law Society as a legal advice desert for housing, education and family legal aid. What are the Minister's plans to fix that?

Mike Freer: The Legal Aid Agency keeps the location of providers under constant review. We have invested an additional £10 million over the last few months in those specific types of legal aid. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I can give him the details of where the spend is going in his local area.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Joshua Rozenberg KC has presented "Law in Action" on Radio 4 over the past 20 years, and it has frequently shed important light on areas of our justice system that need attention. Does the Secretary of State share my disappointment that today's broadcast will be the programme's last, because it has not been recommissioned? Will he also pay tribute to Joshua Rozenberg for his work?

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for raising this point. Joshua Rozenberg has made a profound and important contribution to our country. Indeed, he is required reading, and I read him most days. I share my hon. and learned Friend's profound regret, and I echo his sentiments. I think the whole House will wish Joshua Rozenberg well.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): All through Lent, women nationwide have faced intimidation from the anti-choice group 40 Days for Life blocking their entrance to abortion clinics daily. Why is that happening, given that MPs voted by a ratio of 3:1 in 2022 for safe access zones, with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) being one of them?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): I concur with the hon. Lady that it is completely unacceptable that anyone should feel harassed or intimidated when exercising their legal right to abortion services. I hope she will be reassured to hear that it is anticipated that section 9 of the Public Order Act 2023 will be commenced no later than this spring. The consultation on the guidance published by the Home Office closed on 22 January and the final response will be published in due course. I must just say one thing, however: it is right that a balance will need to be struck where competing rights are engaged, including under articles 10 and 11 of the European convention on human rights.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Our probation service is in crisis, with staff overworked, overstretched and undervalued. The expansion of the early release scheme will put yet more pressure on them, so what is the Minister doing this year to help our probation staff face that extra workload?

Alex Chalk: Probation officers do an exceptionally important job, as I believe we all agree. Let me set out what we have done in respect of prison and probation staff. First, we accepted every penny of the Prison Service pay review body recommendations. We have injected extra funding of more than £155 million a year into probation. Prison officers do a tough job, as do probation officers, but I am delighted to report that the retention of prison officers is improving, with the staff resignation rate in prisons dropping from about 10.7% to 8.3%, and their numbers have increased. As for probation, we have recruited about 4,000 people in the past three years. That is positive and we will continue to support them every step of the way.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Do we have enough crematoriums in the UK, given that many families are now having to wait three, four, five or six weeks for a funeral slot? Why is there such a gap between the cheapest crematorium in the country, which charges £408, and the most expensive, in Stevenage, which charged £1,400 last year?

Mike Freer: The challenges facing crematoriums, and in fact the whole funeral sector, are being reviewed by the Law Commission. This is about not just crematoriums, but burial space. There are challenges across the whole death management landscape, to use the technical term, which is why the Law Commission is investigating and bringing forward proposals.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The fees for civil legal aid are half what they were in 1996 and the number of providers has fallen by 40% in the past 10 years. If the Minister actually wants to do something about civil legal aid, why has he kicked the civil legal aid review into the long grass?

Mike Freer: Legal aid is always under constant review and I will always take advice from those closest to it. That is why I engage with, for example, the Bar Association, the Law Society and the judiciary on what we need to do. As for kicking things into the long grass, all I can say is that I want to get this right and if that takes time, it will take time.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Debbie Abrahams.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Justice Secretary did not quite answer my question on where the 67,000 criminal cases in the backlog are, and how they are being prioritised and communicated. I do not want another historical child sexual exploitation victim to be told by a Crown court that her case has been cancelled twice because it is not a priority.

Alex Chalk: The point I was endeavouring to make, although I perhaps did not do so well, is that listing is a judicial function. We have seen the senior presiding judge make a decision that certain sex cases and those most serious rapes, for example—all of them are serious, of course—will be given an early listing. As I say, I do not have complete control over that, but I do discuss it with the Lady Chief Justice and I know that the senior presiding judge is keen to get through those cases at the earliest opportunity.

Israel and Gaza

12.39 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Israel and Gaza. As the House knows, the United Kingdom has long been calling for an immediate humanitarian pause to allow for the safe release of hostages and more aid to reach Gaza, leading to a sustainable ceasefire without a return to destruction, fighting and loss of life.

Yesterday, the international community took a significant step towards achieving that. We welcome yesterday's United Nations Security Council resolution 2728, which reflected widespread international support for Britain's position and considerable efforts by our diplomats to secure a consensus. This is an issue that can polarise and divide, but yesterday in New York there was a shared sense of purpose. I am sure the whole House would agree that we must capitalise on this moment.

We want to see an immediate, sustained humanitarian pause, which would allow for the safe release of hostages and more aid to reach Gaza. That is what yesterday's resolution called for, why the United Kingdom voted "yes" on that text, and why the Government are now focused on seeing the resolution implemented as quickly as possible. This resolution sets out the urgent demand for the

"unconditional release of all hostages".

Hamas must act on this now. The kidnapping and violence on 7 October was appalling. It has been unconscionable to hold them in captivity for so long, and it is dreadful to hold them any longer. We strongly support the intensive diplomatic efforts by Egypt, Qatar and the United States to secure their release.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Ahmad and I have met the families of hostages, and reiterated to them personally our desire to see their loved ones freed and their agony brought to an end. We urge all sides to seize the opportunity and continue negotiations to reach an agreement as soon as possible. Yesterday's resolution also sent a clear message on the need for all parties to the conflict to uphold international humanitarian law and for delivery of aid to be scaled up urgently. This requires the lifting of all barriers impeding its delivery.

Palestinian civilians face a devastating and growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. His Majesty's Government continue to reiterate these messages in their contacts with the Israeli Government, and the Government are exploring every avenue to deliver aid by land, sea and air. Last week, enough aid to feed over a quarter of a million people was delivered by land from Jordan. Britain is fully engaged in the international effort to set up a maritime corridor for aid into Gaza. Yesterday, the first airdrop of British aid by the Royal Air Force, with the support of Jordan, took place.

We regret that this resolution did not condemn the abhorrent and brutal terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October. The UK condemns these attacks unequivocally. We have been forthright in speaking up for Israel's right to defend itself and ensure such an attack can never happen again. We want Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace and security. An immediate humanitarian pause, leading to a sustainable ceasefire, is the best way to achieve a lasting peace.

We continue to work on the other core elements required for such a process to succeed. We have supported the formation of a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza under the leadership of Prime Minister Mustafa. An international support package is vital for building on Prime Minister Mustafa's appointment. We also want to see the removal of Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel. Hamas can no longer remain in charge of Gaza. Finally, we need to offer a political horizon to the Palestinians that provides a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security.

The resolution passed by the Security Council yesterday does not guarantee this outcome, but it is a significant step forward. The Government will spare no effort in building on this opportunity. We want to create irreversible momentum towards a lasting peace. Mr Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.44 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and echo his support for the formation of a new Palestinian Government, which must be supported internationally, alongside the need for a two-state solution with Israel and Palestine living side by side in security and peace. Yesterday, the UN Security Council finally passed resolution 2728 calling for an immediate ceasefire, the immediate release of all hostages and full humanitarian access in Gaza. That was incredibly welcome and overdue. It must now be a turning point.

Labour welcomes, too, the fact that the Government were able to support the resolution. It represents a major shift in Government policy, which previously called only for an immediate pause rather than an immediate ceasefire. Why were the Government not able to back Labour's motion last month? Much more importantly, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that the UN resolution is implemented in full, putting pressure on Hamas—who reportedly rejected the latest compromise—and Israel to reach agreement on a ceasefire now? That could not be more vital given the terrible human cost of the war, with more than 30,000 Palestinians dead, Israeli hostages still in chains nearly six months on from the 7 October massacre, and a man-made and preventable famine imminent.

Aid needs to get into Gaza at scale, and it also needs to be distributed. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency is unmatched in its ability to distribute aid. With just a few weeks until the new financial year, can the Minister tell us whether the UK's funding to UNRWA will resume?

The UN motion also said that all parties must "comply with their obligations under international law".

In that context, I will raise a specific incident with the Minister. On 18 January, an International Rescue Committee and Medical Aid for Palestinians compound was struck in a near-fatal airstrike by the Israeli military. The co-ordinates were known to Israel and formally de-conflicted. A British medical team and local staff were inside, who, since then, have received six explanations for that shocking incident, but the truth is still unclear. Will the Government support a full and independent

investigation to deliver accountability and reiterate that attacks on humanitarian workers are outrageous and must not happen?

The Foreign Secretary is not required to come to this House, but he is required to provide legal advice to the Business Secretary on arms exports. The law is clear that the Government cannot grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items could be used in violation of international humanitarian law. The war in Gaza has seen numerous allegations made of serious breaches of humanitarian law by Israeli forces, and the International Criminal Court is currently conducting an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by all parties in Gaza.

On Friday, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary asking him to publish the most recent legal advice he has received on this matter. So I end by asking the Minister one simple question: has the Foreign Secretary received legal advice saying that there is a clear risk that items licensed by the UK might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law? The answer is a simple yes or no.

Mr Mitchell: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his strong support for United Nations Security Council resolution 2728. He asks what the Government will do to ensure that it is implemented in full. Just as that resolution shows considerable success for British diplomatic work—particularly in New York—he and the House may rest assured that we will be doing everything we can to ensure that it is indeed implemented in full.

The right hon. Gentleman suggests that that is a reflection of Labour's position in the House. I hope that, by and large, the Labour position is supportive of the Government, but he should be quite clear that yesterday's resolution represents a tremendous success for British diplomacy. It means that the European Union, the United Nations and the United States now take our position on the priorities. I remind the right hon. Member that what we said very clearly was that we needed an immediate pause, so that we could get aid in and the hostages out,

“leading to a sustainable ceasefire”.

He will see that British position fully reflected in what was decided yesterday in New York.

The right hon. Member asks me about UNRWA. I can tell him that the interim report by the former French Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna—the final report is not due until 20 April—is now with the Secretary-General in New York and we hope to learn more about it today.

The right hon. Member refers to a specific strike, which the House has already heard about, and I agree with him entirely that we expect a full, total and definitive explanation for what happened from the Israeli Government. He asks me about arms export licensing. Let me give him a very clear response to that: we have a robust arms export licensing regime. All exports are regularly assessed against clear criteria. We regularly review Israel's adherence to international humanitarian law and act in accordance with that. As he indicated, we advise the Department for Business and Trade on the situation in-country. The DBT and its Secretary of State are the decision-making authorities, but I would

point out to him that UK exports are very small, amounting to 0.02% of Israel's military imports, and we publish a comprehensive report on official statistics every quarter.

Finally, the right hon. Member asks me to publish the legal advice. I would point out to him that no Government do that. He will recall, I think, the highly contentious position taken at the time of the Iraq war not to publish the legal advice. For a party that aspires possibly in the future to be in Government, I am sure that Labour will see the merit of these conventions.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Yesterday the UN Security Council passed a resolution for a Ramadan ceasefire—in effect, a pause. Intrinsic to that pause was the release of hostages. Can the deputy Foreign Secretary please update us on progress to get those hostages home to safety, because the resolution was very clear that that should happen immediately? Who is enforcing the immediate release of hostages? Can he also clarify whether the Government agree with the US statement this morning that the UN Security Council resolution is non-binding? How are we going to ensure that, on both sides, the return of hostages and the ceasefire for Ramadan are enacted? If they are not, I fear that the UN Security Council will face an existential crisis.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, sets out with great eloquence what the international community now requires to take place as a result of resolution 2728 being passed yesterday. As I set out in my earlier remarks, we regret that the resolution has not condemned terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October, but I want to re-emphasise that all the things that Britain has previously been calling for are now accepted and were recorded in that resolution. We will, as my hon. Friend suggests, continue to do everything we can to ensure that the resolution is implemented.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Minister for prior sight of his statement.

We very much welcome the UN Security Council resolution, which demands an immediate ceasefire for the month of Ramadan. This is an important first step in achieving the permanent ceasefire that we on the SNP Benches have been urging for several months. We also welcome the UN demands for an immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. We call on all parties to adhere to their obligations under international law, to protect civilians and to lift all barriers to humanitarian aid.

That this motion specifically demands a ceasefire makes it legally binding, and it obliges all combatants to adhere to it, yet already there is significant concern that Israel does not intend to comply with the demands. The Israeli ambassador to the UN and the Foreign Minister, Israel Katz, among others, have indicated that they will not adhere to the demands of the ceasefire, with Mr Katz stating:

“The state of Israel will not cease fire.”

[*Brendan O'Hara*]

Israel, as we know, has form for ignoring binding resolutions of the United Nations, but rarely can it have done so in such a blatant manner and with such a complete disregard for the rules on which we all rely to keep us safe.

Given that Israel has signalled its intention to ignore the demand for a ceasefire, and rather than waiting for the inevitable to happen before acting, can the Minister assure the House that, if and when Israel launches its proposed offensive on Rafah, the work will already have been done to impose immediate sanctions, including, most importantly, the banning of arms sales to Israel, and that Tel Aviv will be under no illusion as to the consequences of its actions should it ignore this resolution?

Can the Minister update the House on what discussions have been had, or are being planned with our partners and allies, to ensure that we take decisive international action should Israel breach the terms of this resolution? Finally, can he confirm whether it is the opinion of the UK Government that, should Israel not adhere to the UN resolution, it will be in violation of a binding resolution and thus stand in breach of international law?

Mr Mitchell: First of all, may I welcome the hon. Member's support for the Government's position, which has not always been the case in these statements? In particular, I welcome the consensual language from the SNP on the ceasefire, the release of hostages and getting aid in. That is very important. It means that the authority that the Prime Minister brought to this Dispatch Box, which is now the essence of this new resolution 2728, gets broad support from the House, which is very welcome.

On the remaining parts of what the hon. Member said, the Government want to try to bring people together. We want to end the violence as soon as we can, ensure that the hostages get out and aid gets in, and lift people's eyes to a political track once this catastrophe is over. That is what the Government are trying to do, and the hon. Member will forgive me for not going down the rather more divisive line that he took.

In respect of military action in Rafah, the hon. Member will have heard what the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have said about the importance of respecting international humanitarian law and the position of civilians caught out in the open there, and I hope that he will agree with that.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): The terrorist attack of 7 October on Israel has provoked widespread antisemitism in this country and around the world. The latest manifestation of that was at Manchester airport yesterday when Border Force guards made it apparent that they do not want Israeli Jews to enter this country. Two innocent victims of the music festival slaughter were berated and told:

"We have to make sure that you are not going to do what you are doing in Gaza over here."

That was to two victims of the Nova music festival slaughter. Blaming all Jews for the actions of their country is obviously antisemitic. These are people in uniform acting for this country as Border Force officers. It is a disgrace beyond all proportion. The detention of those victims for several hours was clearly unlawful.

They are being offered free legal representation, which I would urge them to take up. Can the deputy Foreign Secretary confirm that Jews and Israelis are still welcome to enter this country?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his extremely robust comments on an absolutely outrageous, shocking and disgraceful incident, which is now being personally investigated by the Home Secretary. I think everyone will condemn without reservation the extraordinary events that appear to have taken place at Manchester, which were made even worse by the details that my right hon. and learned Friend gave of the detention that took place.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I feel very uncomfortable about the Minister's comments about taking credit for the UN Security Council resolution when the UK abstained twice in the process. There is not an immediate ceasefire and, after six months, I dread to think how many Gazans have been killed or will die of starvation. Given the rapidly deteriorating situation in Gaza, does he agree that it is vital that the Cabinet Minister responsible for overseas aid makes himself available to this House for scrutiny? Surely it is not right that Members are updated on the Foreign Secretary's views via the media, rather than from his answering questions in this place. When will the Government do us the courtesy of responding to the Procedure Committee's report?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady knows that I greatly respect her and the work that she does on the Select Committee. I do not think she should feel uncomfortable, because Britain has taken a principled position that is delivered by resolution 2728, which was passed yesterday. I hope that she will join the general approval for the strong British diplomatic effort that helped to deliver that.

On the Foreign Secretary, I believe that the Government response to the Procedure Committee report is imminent. She asks about the member of the Cabinet responsible for British aid and development policy: that is me. Both I and the Foreign Secretary speak with one voice.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): A lot of points will be made today arguing that responsibility for the ceasefire lies purely with Israel, but that is simply not true. A ceasefire must take place on all sides. Those who want Israel to lay down its arms but do not insist on Hamas laying down theirs are basically saying that Israel does not have the right to ensure that its security is in place. Until Hamas dismantle their terrorist organisation, which threatens the lives of Jewish people, who they do not think should exist—they do not think the state of Israel should exist—we must ensure that any ceasefire is observed by both sides of this coin.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I hope that he will have noticed that I am trying to take a balanced approach to these matters. The reason Britain did not call for an immediate ceasefire before, as so many other countries did, was that it was perfectly clear that it was not going to happen. He will recall that, when asked about a ceasefire, Hamas made

it absolutely clear that their intention was not only to not have a ceasefire, but to replicate once again the terrible events that took place on 7 October.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Minister has said on numerous occasions that the UK has a robust export licensing regime. Many Opposition Members are not satisfied with that response. Will he finally tell us what the legal advice is on whether this country is in compliance with our obligations under international humanitarian law to ensure that those arms are not used to commit offences in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman really should not expect me to make a different point from the Dispatch Box having already set out the Government's position. That is the position of the Government, and that is what I will reiterate. On the arms export licensing and the application of international humanitarian law, I set out the Government's position clearly in my response to the shadow Foreign Secretary. I have nothing further to add to that at this time.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The UN resolution has undermined efforts to secure the release of the hostages held by Hamas, with a collapse in negotiations only today. Hamas have reiterated their hard-line positions, which were previously criticised by the United Kingdom. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the resolution will not only embolden Hamas, who hope to achieve a ceasefire without releasing the hostages, but enable them to maintain their grip on the people of Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: It certainly should not do that. If I may, I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the explanation of vote that was published at the same time as Britain supported the resolution yesterday. We said:

"We regret that this resolution has not condemned the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas on the 7th of October. The UK condemns these attacks unequivocally."

I hope that he will bear that in mind in reaching his conclusions about resolution 2728.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What is the Government's response to Israel shutting off north Gaza to UNRWA, the only aid organisation with the ability to deliver aid at scale? When will the Government reinstate funding to UNRWA to stop and alleviate the starvation of Gazans?

Mr Mitchell: We have made it clear that we will look at the interim report from Catherine Colonna, and the United Nations reports. We hope that reforms will be made in such a way that we can reinstate funding, but I should emphasise to the hon. Lady that no funding is due from Britain until the end of April. In respect of her point about the spread of UNRWA, it is the only organisation that has the assets in place—the warehouses, the vehicles, the logistical support—so it is essential that those logistical elements are available if aid is to be distributed effectively in Gaza.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Constituents have been in touch to tell me that they feel badly let down by the vote at the UN yesterday. I just do not understand how the Minister and the Foreign Secretary can say that nothing has changed in policy terms when the UK has just voted for a resolution that does not

condemn the Hamas atrocity of 7 October, and de-links a ceasefire with the release of hostages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) pointed out, does that not make it less likely that the hostages will be released?

Mr Mitchell: I do not agree with my right hon. Friend. The resolution sets out the urgent demand for the unconditional release of all hostages. We welcome the ongoing diplomatic efforts by Egypt, Qatar and the United States to that end—she will have seen the reports in the media. As I say, we have set out clearly in our explanation of vote our regret that the resolution did not once again condemn the terrorist attack, but she has heard us say repeatedly from the Dispatch Box that we do condemn it.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Over the past week, we have seen Israel continue to commit atrocities across Gaza, with the Al-Shifa Hospital besieged for several days. Medical staff from inside the hospital reported gun battles, workers being beaten, patients dying on the floor, and even execution-style killings. That is yet another example of Israel's merciless targeting of civilians. Will the Minister unequivocally condemn Israel for authorising and carrying out such heinous attacks, and make clear that hospitals and places of refuge must not be targeted?

Mr Mitchell: The House will not recognise all of the things that the hon. Gentleman has just said. Let me make it absolutely clear once again: Israel does have the right of self-defence, but she must abide by international humanitarian law.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a testament to how polarised and contested our world has become that the custodians of international security took six months to agree UN Security Council resolution 2728, which calls for a ceasefire, the release of hostages and access for aid. Does the deputy Foreign Secretary agree that it is concerning that vital UK aid has to be airdropped into Gaza by the Royal Air Force, effectively bypassing Israel? Should the new port being built off Gaza to operate the new maritime corridor become a permanent operation with inspections, allowing the international community to ensure that the scale of aid required gets into Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful to the former Chair of the Defence Committee for what he says. He is right that the best way to get aid into Gaza is by truck—by road—and that is what Britain has consistently pressed for. We know that there were 500 trucks a day before the catastrophe of 7 October. There has been an increase in March, but we are now looking at something like 150 a day. We are doing everything we can to try to ensure that we get aid into Gaza in the easiest way possible, but as my right hon. Friend said, we are also looking at all other options, including the airdrop that took place yesterday on 25 March in which the Royal Air Force dropped 10 tonnes of food. We anticipate that further airdrops will be necessary because of the situation he has outlined.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Can I set the record straight for Conservative Members that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches have been calling for

[Munira Wilson]

months for an immediate bilateral ceasefire, and that we welcome yesterday's UN Security Council resolution? However, the reality is that northern Gaza is on the brink of famine, with children dying of malnutrition, and tens of thousands of children are being killed or maimed by Israeli forces' bombardment. Does the Minister believe that Netanyahu's Government are complying with the International Court of Justice's provisional order, which states that Israel must ensure with immediate effect that its forces do not commit any of the acts prohibited by the genocide convention? If he does not think that the Israeli Government are complying with that order, what is he doing about it?

Mr Mitchell: In respect of the second part of the hon. Lady's question, let me make the Government's position clear: we respect the role and independence of the ICJ, but we do not believe, and have never believed, that the case launched now will be helpful in bringing the two parties together. She will know that the court has called for the immediate release of the hostages and the need to get more aid into Gaza, and we strongly agree with that. She will also know that the ICJ's provisional measures order is binding on the parties to the dispute as a matter of international law, but she will see that through the work we have been carrying out, we are trying to address all the points that she made in the first part of her question. We are obviously grateful for the support of Liberal Democrat Members in trying to achieve that.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I press my right hon. Friend further on the answer he gave to the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott)? The humanitarian situation in Gaza is, of course, dire. In northern Gaza, it is estimated that some 70% of the population are suffering the most appalling food shortages and are resorting to eating animal feed, bird seed and grass. Does the Minister not recognise that respected international partners such as Australia, Canada, Sweden and Denmark have now restored full funding to UNRWA, which is the most important and capable humanitarian organisation in Gaza? Does he not think that the United Kingdom should also do so as quickly as possible, and in what circumstances and under what conditions will that be done?

Mr Mitchell: At the moment, Britain does not have a requirement to provide extra money, because we have fully funded UNRWA through our commitment to that organisation up until the next financial year, which effectively means the end of April. In an earlier response, I addressed the point that my right hon. Friend made so eloquently about the requirement for UNRWA assets to be used. As he knows, we will look very carefully at the two reports I mentioned—including the interim one, which should be available in New York today—in the hope that measures will be taken that will allow everyone, not just Britain, to restore funding to UNRWA in due course.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Speaker. In the past hour, news agencies have reported that the Israeli National Security Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has told Israeli Army Radio that, "We must enter Rafah

now". Surely this announcement that a military assault will be undertaken on an area of 1.7 million displaced people is a breach of a binding UN Security Council resolution and of international law. The Minister must urgently set out what action he will consider to prevent the Israeli armed forces taking such action. More specifically, does the UK agree that should Israel proceed with this action and refuse to adhere to the demand for an immediate ceasefire, it will be in violation of a binding resolution and in breach of international law?

Mr Mitchell: Given the position that the hon. Lady has just outlined, I am sure she will welcome yesterday's resolution 2728 and the progress that it reflects. She has quoted a specific Israeli Minister, but she will know that there are many voices in Israel at this time. Israel is a pluralist democracy—the only one in the region—and we are hearing many different voices. In respect of any attack on Rafah, she will have heard the words of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and indeed myself at this Dispatch Box on the ill-advised nature of military action in Rafah at this time.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I have listened carefully to the answers that my right hon. Friend has given about the resolution passed, but it is my understanding that only a few weeks ago, the UK explained at the UN that it could not vote for a resolution that does not condemn the atrocities Hamas committed, and that simply calling for a ceasefire would not make one happen. It even said last month that such a resolution "could endanger the hostage negotiations".

As night follows day, the resolution was passed yesterday, and the Israelis have had to withdraw their negotiators due to what they have described as "delusional demands" from Hamas. Will my right hon. Friend accept that this resolution has made a material change for the worse, and that getting the hostages out has now actually been made less likely?

Mr Mitchell: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. The British position has always been very clear: we want a pause that enables the hostages to come out and enables food and vital humanitarian supplies to come in. We believe and hope that that will lead to a sustainable ceasefire, and I do not think there is anything in resolution 2728 that acts or goes against that.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The deputy Foreign Secretary stated earlier that he will expect a full explanation from Israel of the incident that was highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). That incident happened on 18 January, and the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and I raised it with the Minister around eight weeks ago. I have also been to the UN in the past few weeks and raised it with diplomats there. When can we expect an explanation of why British aid agencies have been bombed by Israel, potentially using weapons provided in part by us? Can the Minister tell me when that explanation will come?

Mr Mitchell: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for supporting the position that the British Government and I have set out—that we require an explanation from the Israeli Government of the actions

that took place. We continue to press, but she will understand that timing is not a matter on which the decision rests with the British Government. However, the Israeli Government will have heard her voice and, indeed, our voices on this matter.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The immediate impact of this resolution appears to be that Hamas have hardened their stance on the release of hostages, and the Israelis have said that they will not move until hostages are released. Apparently, the negotiations in Qatar were limited to being about only 40 of the hostages, namely the most weak and vulnerable. What is left out of the resolution is the requirement for immediate access to those hostages for the International Committee of the Red Cross, so that it can assess their condition and, indeed, whether they can travel at all. Will my right hon. Friend take action to demand immediate access to those hostages for the Red Cross, so that that assessment can take place?

Mr Mitchell: Yes. We have been absolutely clear that the hostages must be released as swiftly as possible. My hon. Friend will have seen the reports about the negotiations that have been taking place over the past few days, and while I cannot give a running commentary, I can tell him that Britain is doing everything it possibly can to ensure that those negotiations are successful. To address what he said about the resolution, no one can be in any doubt about the position of the British Government, and indeed the House of Commons, on the release of the hostages.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): We can all see the devastation in Gaza, where more than 30,000 people have been killed. Two thirds of those people are women and children, and aid is still not getting in. While that is taking place, the situation on the west bank is, equally, worsening, so will the Minister condemn the recent announcement that 800 hectares of the west bank have been designated as Israeli state land?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Member's last point, she will know what we have consistently said about the illegality of these annexations, and I repeat that today. She talks about the position on the west bank. She will have seen the extensive work that our Foreign Secretary has put in by going there, and by ensuring that Britain does everything it can to make certain that, when we have the opportunity for a political track, the Palestinian Authority is able to move forward. On the points she made about Gaza and the lack of humanitarian support, she will have seen that on 13 March, Britain pledged a further £10 million this year, taking the total to over £100 million, and that on 15 March a field hospital funded by UK aid, from UK-Med, went into Gaza. It has UK and local medics, and we hope that it will shortly be treating 100 patients every day.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the immediate humanitarian pause in UNSC resolution 2728, and I congratulate our diplomats on their role in this resolution. As the deputy Foreign Secretary has said, the key to delivering enough aid to prevent famine is the use of Israel's land corridors, so could my right hon. Friend confirm whether Israel will provide enough access to prevent a potential famine, and whether both

Israel and Hamas are committed to continuing talks during the remaining 15 days of Ramadan, with the aim of moving towards a sustained ceasefire afterwards?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for what he said about the unstinting work of British diplomats, for which our entire country should be extremely grateful—particularly the work that they have done in New York at the UN to drive forward Britain's contribution to the resolution of this matter. On the restrictions on land entry, my hon. Friend is right that we need to do more. There has been some increase: 137 trucks got in on 24 March, and 81 trucks, mainly carrying food, were able to get in on the 25th. However, we urge the Israeli Government to do more about easing the restrictions on opening hours, to limit or stop the demonstrations at Nitzana, and to do more to grant visas, as there are some 50 applications for visas pending. If all those steps were taken, it would make a material difference to road entry.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): After six months of bloodshed, starvation and the deliberate blocking of essential aid to Gaza, the UN Security Council has finally demanded an immediate ceasefire for the rest of Ramadan. However, let us be clear in this House that 15 days is nowhere near long enough to deal with the humanitarian catastrophe across Gaza. We see no meaningful end to the violence today, the 16th day of Ramadan—almost two months after the ICJ warned of the plausible risk of genocide. Frankly, that leaves the resolution ringing extremely hollow. Will the Minister heed the calls of this House and demand a permanent, lasting ceasefire, and can he explain how he expects this ceasefire, demanded by the Security Council, to be enforced if the UK Government are selling arms to the Israeli military—arms that are used to bomb Gaza and break this UN-mandated ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: I addressed the issue of the supply of arms in earlier answers on this statement. I put it to the hon. Gentleman that he is not recognising the importance of the resolution that was passed yesterday. First, it implemented the key things that Britain has been asking for, and secondly, it represents a unity that allows the issues that he and I care about so much to be advanced. I put it to him that resolution 2728 is of much greater importance than he submits.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is clear to many international partners that the UK Government must now accept that Israel is potentially committing war crimes and genocide. If there is even a chance that Israel is breaking international law by potentially committing war crimes and genocide, why will the UK Government not take all precautions to adhere to their obligations as a party to the genocide convention and the arms trade treaty, and immediately cease arms exports to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: I say to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great respect and with whom I have worked in the past, that there is something uniquely repulsive about accusing Israel of genocide, given the events that took place on 7 October, when more Jewish people perished in a pogrom than at any time since the holocaust and the second world war.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The UN Security Council has voted for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for only the remainder of Ramadan. It is almost two months since the ICJ's plausible genocide ruling, yet the killing, the destruction and the weaponised starvation go on. Can the Minister outline what conversations he and the Foreign Secretary are having with their counterparts in the United States to ensure that the UN resolution this week is implemented, and will the UK Government cease arming Israel, to ensure that the UK upholds the ICJ's ruling and its provisional measures?

Mr Mitchell: I do not precisely recognise the hon. Member's description of the ICJ interim ruling, but I welcome her support for resolution 2728 and the position of the British Government. On the work we are doing with our counterparts, not only in America but all around the world, I can assure her that it will continue with the greatest vigour.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): No matter which way we look at it, the Government's backing of the one-sided UN resolution yesterday represents an abject surrender to the demands of the Hamas propaganda machine and the cynical use of the Palestinian population as human shields. Can the Minister explain to us how such a resolution, which gives hope to the terrorists, will ever lead to the release of the hostages and ensure no repeat of the atrocity of 7 October, especially as it enables Hamas to preserve their units, regroup and re-establish their regime?

Mr Mitchell: I simply do not recognise the right hon. Gentleman's description of resolution 2728. It is Hamas who are using the Palestinian people as a human shield in the grotesque way that we see in Rafah.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I welcome the UN Security Council finally calling for an immediate ceasefire, as well as for the return of all hostages, including Palestinian children who are in military prisons. The Minister must now indicate what enforcement measures the Government will implement to escalate the pressure to stop Israel's military assault, uphold the ceasefire, and ensure that emergency assistance is provided through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency to those being starved to death.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for UN resolution 2728, which, as I set out in the statement, reflects widespread international support for Britain's position and the very considerable efforts by our diplomats to secure a consensus.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The United Nations Security Council's vote for an immediate ceasefire, the immediate release of all hostages and full humanitarian access in Gaza must be received by the UK Government as an immediate push for that UN resolution to be enacted. I hope that the Minister and the Government will act accordingly, because it is so necessary. Rather than obfuscating on the issue, will the Minister actually condemn from the Dispatch Box the recent announcement of 800 hectares of the west bank as Israeli state land? Surely this colonial-era land grab ploy, and the building of more illegal settlements, must be condemned and halted.

Mr Mitchell: The position of the British Government, and I believe of the official Opposition, has always been clear on illegal settlements, and I reiterated it a moment ago.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I, too, warmly welcome yesterday's resolution, and the change in the Government's position that supported it. As both sides are now in clear conflict, with a clear breach of a United Nations Security Council resolution that was supported by the UK, what are the implications for future UK arms sales to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support for resolution 2728, but there has been no change whatsoever in the position of the British Government. Britain has long been calling for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire, and without a return to destruction, fighting and loss of life, as the fastest way to get the hostages out and the aid in. That is what the resolution calls for and why the United Kingdom voted yes on that text. It is a very considerable tribute to the work of British diplomats around the world and in New York.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The passing of the UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire is incredibly welcome, and the issue now facing our Government is what they will do to ensure it is enforced. We saw overnight more Israeli bombing, and more killing of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. It was right that sanctions were imposed on extremist settlers last month. If the Israeli Government continue to ignore the ruling of the UN's highest body, should our Government not be clear that severe consequences will follow, including further sanctions, until Israel respects the ceasefire resolution and international law?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I dissent from the language he is using, and instead seek, as the British Government have consistently done, to ensure there is a pause that allows aid to get in and the hostages to get out, and for there to be a sustainable ceasefire. That is the right approach, and one that is substantially honoured in resolution 2728, which was passed yesterday.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): States and parties to the arms trade treaty are obliged to deny arms exports if there is an overriding risk that the arms transferred could be used to commit breaches of international humanitarian law. A Dutch court ruled on 12 February that the Government of the Netherlands must stop the export of parts for the F-35 joint strike fighter to Israel. The UK Government are also thought to export parts of the F-35 under an open general export licence. Will the Minister consider that under these circumstances we should stop the arms trade with Israel, and that at the very least this House needs a standing committee to examine arms exports?

Mr Mitchell: I have long made clear that Britain has the strongest regulatory regime in respect of arms exports. I made clear in my response to the shadow Foreign Secretary the Government's view on that issue, and I have nothing further to add to what I said then.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I heard what the Secretary of State said about his pride in the principled position that he feels the Government have taken with a ceasefire, but he will know that we can only defend international law if we uphold it. He has heard across the House concerns that UK-made arms may be being used in Gaza, and he knows full well the details of the strategic licensing export criteria. He knows that man-made famine is a violation of those human rights obligations. That is why many of us are left wondering why the Government have not suspended arms sales to Israel in light of that evidence. I heard what he said earlier about the process; I understand the process he set out. He talked about reviewing licences every quarter. One must presume, as we are coming to the end of March, that this is the end of a quarter. When will we see a report published on the matter of arms sales to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: The point I made was that we publish comprehensive official statistics every quarter. That is something we will continue to do, and I have nothing to add to what I have already said about the arms regime. The hon. Lady raised the issue of famine, and she will know that the British Government are incredibly concerned about the failure to get more food into Gaza. That is why we have been pursuing a maritime route, why yesterday the Royal Air Force dropped some 40 tonnes of food, and why we have deployed a field hospital. We will continue to do everything we can, as she would wish, to ensure that famine does not take hold in Gaza.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): The UN Security Council resolution is welcome, but it requires action by individual member states. As well as taking action on arms sales, will the UK ensure that there is no complicity with the Israeli war machine in the use of UK air bases by F-35s, or any other military co-operation with Israel as its war on Gaza continues? Secondly, will the Secretary of State ensure that the suspension of funding to UNRWA, which he recognises is the organisation best placed to deliver humanitarian aid on the ground, is lifted forthwith, given that it was solely based on Israeli allegations that have already largely been refuted?

Mr Mitchell: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's final point will resonate across the House, but I am grateful to him for his support for resolution 2728, which was passed yesterday. He will know that Britain has fully funded the money for UNRWA in accordance with its commitments, and we very much hope that the position will be clarified as a result of the two reports for which we are waiting by the time any additional British money would be due.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The UN resolution is welcome and long overdue, given the humanitarian disaster that is unfolding in Gaza, but I wish to press the Minister on the licensing of arms for export to Israel. He said that the process is robust and regularly reviewed, implying that because no action has been taken, those reviews have not raised any risks. I have previously asked him to condemn the many videos circulating on social media that show Israeli soldiers filming themselves performing acts that range from the unbelievably crass, such as posing on the bikes of dead Gazan children, to the vilely violent, such as

setting fire to food stores or bombing residential buildings—violent and potentially criminal. Will the Minister say whether he has seen those videos, and if so does he condemn them? Does he have confidence that no British exports are part of what seem to be vile and potentially criminal acts on the part of the IDF?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for United Nations resolution 2728, which was passed yesterday. She asks whether I have seen any such videos, and I have not. Were such videos to be genuine, and were they to portray what she describes, I am sure that everyone in the House would condemn them without qualification.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): In today's statement the Minister said that we need to offer a political horizon to the Palestinians, and he is asking that while those whose families, friends and neighbours have not already been killed are being bombed out of the shelters they made after being bombed out of their houses and homes. Surely only an immediate permanent ceasefire will afford the people of Palestine the opportunity to lift their eyes to an optimistic political horizon.

Mr Mitchell: The Government have set out a clear vision, together with our partners, which we are seeking to drive forward so that when this catastrophic conflict is over, everyone may focus on that political track. I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was after the second intifada that progress at Oslo was made, and we must hope that that might be possible once again. On what is happening in Gaza, I draw his attention to my earlier remarks that it is absolutely appalling that Hamas are cynically using the good people of Gaza as a human shield, as they continue to incarcerate the hostages who should be released today.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I add my voice to those of colleagues who have expressed significant and severe concerns about arms manufacturing and exports to Israel in the current context. I met a number of sole remaining members of Palestinian families who have been wiped out in Gaza. I mention that not to highlight the appalling tragedy but to focus our minds on what it means. One of them had lost all her relatives—more than 50—and is the only one of her family left. To echo the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), will the Minister reassure us on what he is doing with the international community to ensure that resolution 2728 is applied by Israel and Hamas and that we get aid into this appalling situation?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for what she said about the price of conflict in appalling individual suffering. Everyone in the House will agree with her in that respect. On arms export licensing, I have nothing to add to what I said earlier. She will, like many, welcome 2728, because it expresses, with the full authority of the United Nations, a pathway ahead. Britain will do everything it can to make sure that that pathway is pursued.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Israel has widespread control of the borders of Gaza and much of the land within it. Given that is the fact of the situation on the ground, are we not then entitled to assume that the

[Clive Efford]

restrictions on the flow of aid into Gaza are deliberate on the part of Israel? Should that not therefore make us review the sale of arms to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: In terms of the restrictions to which the hon. Gentleman refers, a little earlier I set out how I believe those restrictions can be mitigated, particularly in respect of the opening hours at various crossing points. There is also the need for more visas, some 50 of which I mentioned are pending. He may rest assured that the Government use our very strong relationships in the region with Egypt and Israel to propagate the case for more aid and more humanitarian relief getting in by all means. We also do more than that, because we were dropping food from the air only yesterday, thanks to the work of the Royal Air Force. We will do more of that if we cannot get more in through the road routes.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will remember that last week, in the previous statement, I mentioned a briefing I had attended with other Members that was led by leading aid organisations, including Oxfam, Islamic Relief and Action Against Hunger. They detailed the scale of the suffering and the scale of the man-made famine. The Minister has been on his feet for more than an hour now, and he has mentioned all the different ways we are getting aid in, but the reality is that only 137 trucks entered Gaza yesterday, according to Oxfam. We know that pre-October it was 500 trucks a day. UNRWA is unmatched in its aid distribution. The Minister has said that. Does the Minister not agree that a way to mitigate this suffering, is to restore the funding to UNRWA now?

Mr Mitchell: The funding to UNRWA from Britain has not stopped; we are paid up effectively until the end of April. Let me reassure the hon. Lady that as soon as we have seen the two reports to which I have referred, I very much hope that, subject to the necessary changes being made, we will indeed be able to commit to the future funding that she and I would like to see in the right circumstances.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): It is becoming increasingly apparent that Israel has no intention of complying with international law. It is refusing entry to International Criminal Court investigators; it has flat out denied the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice; it has not adhered to the legally binding orders from the ICJ advisory opinion of 26 February; and, it has ignored other UN resolutions calling for access to humanitarian aid. What else can the Government do to put pressure on Israel to adhere to international law?

Mr Mitchell: As I have set out previously to the House, we have previously assessed that Israel is committed and capable of complying with international humanitarian law, and that is kept under review. Were there to be any change in the position and view of the British Government in that respect, we would inform the House.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On that matter, the Government do sometimes publish legal position statements. According to the Cabinet Office, on

11 December 2023 the Government published a statement of the legal position in relation to the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, and it published a similar legal position statement when introducing the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill in July 2022. Will the Minister publish such a statement setting out any breaches of international law by any parties in the Israel-Gaza war?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman, who is an enormously distinguished lawyer, is well aware that we do not disclose our internal legal advice, and that has consistently been the position of Governments of both the major parties. We have no plans to change that position.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Minister has repeatedly said that international humanitarian law must be adhered to, but those words are meaningless unless they are followed by action, so what consequences will the British Government introduce for any country found guilty of committing war crimes by the ICC, such as by the deliberate withholding of food and aid to another country?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady invites me to qualify or add to the words I have already used to answer that and similar questions. I am sorry to disappoint her, but I am not going to do so.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): For what will soon be six months, this Government have repeatedly rejected calls for an immediate ceasefire from MPs and aid agencies, so I welcome the changed position taken at the Security Council yesterday. However, I am confused by this insistence that the Government's position has not changed. Can the Minister clarify that he is calling for an immediate ceasefire, that the UN resolution is binding and must be implemented immediately, and that there are consequences for non-compliance? Any dither and delay, including with UNRWA, means more innocent civilians killed and more children starving.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is not right in what she says about there being a change in the Government position, for the reasons that I have repeatedly set out. The United Kingdom has long been calling for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire, and that is what resolution 2728 seeks to deliver.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I understand what the deputy Foreign Secretary says about wanting both sides to acknowledge United Nations Security Council resolution 2728, but he must know that the people in Gaza facing starvation, going to bed every night wondering whether it will be their last, do not have the power to bring the hostages back. The people who have the power to bring the hostages back are sitting in five-star hotels in Qatar, so it is useless to allow the aid for people in Gaza to be blocked by Israel, and for them to continue to be on the end of a bombardment, while somehow suggesting that they are masters of their own destiny. Will he say what this Government will do in the event that Israel continues to ignore a binding United Nations Security Council resolution?

Mr Mitchell: The remedy for what the hon. Gentleman so eloquently describes in his question rests with Hamas and the negotiators in Qatar. If they release the hostages and a pause is agreed, that will lead to the resolution of all the points that he has so rightly made.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I have heard what the Minister said about not releasing legal advice, which is clearly disappointing for Members in this House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has already said, the Government have issued legal advice in the past, and this is a matter of great interest to my constituents. If a country took offensive action contrary to a UN resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire, I would not need to see the legal advice because that would clearly be a breach of UK arms export licences.

Mr Mitchell: I note that the hon. Gentleman is disappointed that we will not release the advice, but I can only point to the precedent to which I referred earlier—one that has been strongly endorsed on both sides of the House.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The appalling deaths of children in Gaza have brought condemnation from around the world and, of course, immense psychological trauma to their families and friends. On 27 February, I asked the Minister whether he would recognise that the killing of 12,000 children shows clear evidence of collective punishment. The Minister did not answer my question. That figure has risen with the deaths of a further 1,000 children, so will he now answer my question and recognise that the killing of 13,000 children shows clear evidence of collective punishment?

Mr Mitchell: No, I will not do that, but I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in calling for Hamas to release all the hostages they are holding as swiftly as possible, so that the other points in the statement, which I hope I have set out clearly to the House, can be achieved.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The deputy Foreign Secretary rightly referred to the devastating and growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the urgent need to increase the delivery of aid by land, sea and air. He mentioned that the first delivery of UK aid by the Royal Air Force took place yesterday. Does he anticipate that future air drops will increase in frequency until such time as the barriers to the delivery of aid via land are lifted?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the delivery of aid from the air, for numerous reasons that hon. Members will understand, as suboptimal. The key way of getting urgently needed aid into Gaza is by truck and by road, but needs must, which is why the RAF was able to deliver some 40 tonnes yesterday. If the position continues as it is, Britain expects to get aid into Gaza by sea and air as well as by land.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Minister said there was precedent on the non-publication of legal advice. There was a precedent set—you and I were here, Mr Deputy Speaker—in the debate on the

Iraq war, when the legal advice was fully published. That was to provide protection for the Government and Members of the House in their deliberations, as well as to provide advice. Does he not appreciate that we now have the Security Council resolution and the ICJ decision, which mean that any actions by a Netanyahu Government against those decisions and that judgment will actually be portrayed as war crimes? Any Government that supply arms to that regime therefore can be equally accused of war crimes, and any Member of the House supporting the Government in those actions is open to that charge as well. Does he not appreciate what Members are saying to him about the rule of law and the importance of the House abiding by the rule of law?

Mr Mitchell: The Government are second to none in seeking to uphold the rule of law, and that point has been consistently reiterated from this Dispatch Box. The right hon. Gentleman raises once again the issue of the Government publishing legal advice and cites in aid the advice published by the then Labour Government in respect of the Iraq war. I do not think that is a wise avenue to go down.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Armed Forces Minister has stated that Israeli military personnel have been training alongside UK armed forces. As a result, we clearly want to know what purpose that had, what operations those individuals have been involved in, whether they have impeded the delivery of aid or, indeed, have perpetrated suffering against the people of Gaza, and how that complies with international humanitarian law.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear me say that the British military forces always comply with international humanitarian law and are absolutely required to do so. I am sure she will note, like me, that when it comes to the issue of targeting and military operations, just as Britain uses extensive military lawyers and legal advice in making those decisions, so too do the Israeli Government.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): We desperately need an immediate ceasefire, the immediate release of all hostages and full humanitarian access in Gaza, as the UN Security Council resolution now calls for. I recently met Medical Aid for Palestinians, which talked about the severe difficulties with rules on aid. More widely, we know that aid agencies have reported that the list of goods allowed into Gaza by the Israeli Government is difficult to access and can change without warning. Will the Minister put pressure on the Israeli Government to publish an official list and one that includes all the nutritional and medical aid that is needed?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government and the department within the Foreign Office that deals with humanitarian aid and planning look all the time at all those matters. The hon. Gentleman raises specifically the issue of medicines, and I hope he will be pleased to see that Britain deployed a field hospital on 15 March funded by UK aid under UK-Med. As I mentioned earlier, UK and local medics will be working there and will be treating—fairly shortly, I hope—100 patients a day.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers. Will he confirm what discussions have taken place and what actions have been agreed to ascertain whether there is any assistance we can provide to ensure that Israel is in a position to safely end the conflict, having achieved security for their nation and their people?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He will know that it is a central aim of Government policy to ensure that both Israel and Palestine can live safely and securely side by side behind secure borders—the implementation of the two-state solution. Everything the Government do is designed to try to advance that objective, which I know he strongly supports.

Brendan O'Hara: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister repeatedly said that neither has he seen, nor is he in possession of, Catherine Colonna's interim report, suggesting instead that it had only been delivered to the United Nations in New York. Could he clarify whether he or his officials are in receipt of the interim report, have seen it, have had a read-out of it, or have been made aware of its contents? If any of that is true, why has it not been delivered to the House, particularly given that this is the last sitting day before recess in this financial year? It is hugely important that the House is aware of that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Mr O'Hara, that is not a point of order for the Chair; it is an endeavour to extend the questions on the statement. If the Minister wishes to respond, I will allow him to do so.

Mr Mitchell: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman. He rightly says that today is the last day before the House rises for the Easter recess. That is why, in discussions with the usual channels, the Government offered this statement today, which I very much hope he welcomes. My understanding is that the interim report from the former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna was received by the Secretary-General's office yesterday. It is my hope and expectation that the British Parliament representative at the United Nations in New York may be able to have sight of it today, but neither I nor officials in London have had sight of the report as things stand.

Mr Deputy Speaker: On Members' behalf, I thank the Minister of State and those on the Opposition Front Bench for remaining for well over an hour and taking the relevant questions.

Building Safety

1.59 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the continuing work to fix buildings with unsafe cladding across England, and the Government's increasing determination to enforce against those who fail to take responsibility.

Since the beginning of 2023, there has been a step change in all aspects of remediation in England, from a limited programme to full coverage of all residential buildings over 11 metres; from developers not taking responsibility to their now being responsible for £3 billion of remediation across more than 1,500 buildings; from just over 1,600 buildings in remediation programmes last year to over 4,000 now; from 783 buildings having started or completed work in February 2023 to over 1,800 now; and from only 461 having completed last February to 863 now. Every month more buildings are identified, and more are beginning and completing works. That means that for some, albeit not all, the end is in sight.

From the start, we have prioritised the remediation of the highest risk buildings. Ninety-eight per cent of high-rise buildings with the most dangerous Grenfell-style aluminium composite material cladding have either started or completed work. Of the 10 occupied buildings remaining, two will start work this month and enforcement is being taken against a further six. Substantial progress can also be seen for buildings over 18 metres, with over half of known buildings having either started or completed work. The much more extensive work required for buildings between 11 metres and 18 metres is well under way. Since the full launch of the cladding safety scheme last July, over 400 buildings in the scheme have live applications. Grant funding agreements have been completed or are being signed for 152 buildings, and works have started on site for the first building. A further 4,000 buildings are being investigated and, where necessary, will be invited to apply to the scheme in the months ahead.

Further transparency is being brought to the social housing sector. Registered providers report that work has started on 525 buildings as of the end of November 2023, up from 394 at the end of August 2023. A further 200 have now been completed. For the first time, last Thursday we published detailed information on a provider-by-provider basis, which will be updated quarterly to ensure that residents can track what their individual provider is doing on remediation. While many buildings are being fixed or, better still, have completed remediation, there remains a reducing core of building owners who continue to hold up remediation. That is unacceptable. The Government continue to do whatever is necessary to change that.

All building owners must step up, do the right thing and fix their buildings without delay, or face the consequences of their inaction. The Government are leading the way on enforcement, with strategic interventions by our recovery strategy unit targeting the most egregious actors who are unwilling to make their buildings safe. The RSU was key to forcing Wallace Estates to agree to four remediation orders, ensuring that 400 leaseholders will be safe in their homes. Our legal action forced

Grey GR, a subsidiary of Railpen, to fix building safety defects at Galbraith House within three weeks. The first trial against Grey GR for Vista Tower in Stevenage is imminent. Nine remediation contribution orders were taken out against three further organisations last week, including developers, to recover funds paid out by both taxpayers and leaseholders to fix buildings. We will continue to take action against those who do not step up to their responsibilities.

Colleagues in the fire and rescue services and local councils are critical to the fight to ensure that residents are safe, and we are working with them to increase action. Many councils and fire and rescue services are doing a good job, but some need to do more. Over the last year, the additional funding that we have provided for councils has meant that the pace of enforcement has stepped up markedly. Councils are informing us of enforcement action at a rate of four per week, compared with one per month in 2022, and we expect that to accelerate further. To support that, today we are publishing our first league table, outlining where enforcement is being taken so that residents can see exactly what is happening and where. We will regularly update the league table to ensure that the public remains sighted on their authorities' enforcement activity.

Our focus now is on more, and more consistent, enforcement. Last week, I met the Building Safety Regulator and sector leaders to discuss how we can build a shared plan to increase the pace of remediation further. Today, I am announcing a number of initiatives to boost enforcement: a further £6 million to council enforcement teams, the development of a new regulatory protocol for greater consistency and a new fund that partners can access for legal support in complex cases.

For a task as big as this, remediation of buildings with issues was always going to take time. There is no doubt that in some parts of the sector it is still taking far too long. Yet already, almost 60,000 homeowners have peace of mind that remediation is complete, and a further 300,000 dwellings are well on the way to the same.¹ Every week that goes by, more is done: there are more starts and more completions and, vitally, more of those who are unwilling to do the right thing are being exposed. We will not stop until we have fixed cladding issues. Today, I hope the House can see the real and accelerating progress that is being made.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

2.5 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Let me start by thanking the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I must be clear that I do not share his enthusiasm that the end of the building safety crisis is somehow near, and neither do campaigners up and down the country, including End Our Cladding Scandal. Just last week, new Government figures, to which the Minister referred, showed that only 21% of high-rise blocks have been fully—I stress, fully—remediated. We are now nearly seven years on from the Grenfell fire, the tragedy where 72 people lost their lives, yet hundreds of thousands of families and individuals are stuck in flats with dangerous, flammable defects, whether cladding, missing fire breaks or wooden balconies. The toxicity of this crisis goes on and on.

Everybody deserves to feel safe in their own home. Despite years of reactive policies from the Government, and now billions of pounds committed through a plethora of funds to fix unsafe homes, progress remains painfully slow for far too many. All of that means that far too many people are living in fear of their lives every day. What those families need is action now to speed up remediation and to hold all those responsible for the building safety crisis to account. Action is needed for all those trapped in unsafe buildings facing eye-watering bills, whether for the black hole of service charges or for insurance premiums. They simply have no control over their future. Action is needed to let the residents of these buildings finally turn the page.

I am disappointed that today's statement is not much more than a rehashing of statistics and data points that were put in the public domain last Thursday. I am particularly disappointed that it does not include the second staircase guidance, which is desperately needed. The Minister will know that the absence of that guidance has held up the construction of thousands of safe homes across the country. In London alone, the Mayor has said that the botched implementation has stopped at least 38,000 homes from being built. During the delay, key design details have been missing, and both house builders and local authorities have been left in limbo. What is more, some sites have completely ground to a halt. What exactly is taking so long? How many buildings nationwide does the Minister estimate have been held up? It would be useful if the Minister could provide an update on the position on personal emergency evacuation plans, which many campaigners continue to push.

Moving onto the specifics of today's announcement, I welcome the new initiatives to boost enforcement, but they would more effective if they were part of a broader strategy instead of being reactive, piecemeal announcements. The initiatives are just a drop in the ocean of what is needed. While I welcome the support for council enforcement teams, the Minister and the Government simply cannot pass the buck. The Department needs to play a more active and robust role. I welcome the new regulatory protocol for greater consistency, but I would like to see the details and a timeframe. The Minister rightfully calls out some owners and developers, but will he also call out the manufacturers and make all those responsible for the building safety crisis pay?

Finally, I want to mention the scale of the problem with insurance premiums, which the Minister will have seen reported in *The Independent* earlier this week. It is constantly raised with me and I know it is raised with the Minister, too. He will be aware of allegations of profiteering and the many thousands of pounds being paid in premiums, in some cases going up by 1,000%, even when buildings have been remediated and made safe. He previously mentioned pooling schemes. The industry has put forward its own scheme, which will go live on 1 April. Residents and campaigners are not convinced that it will bring premiums down, so I would like an update from the Minister today.

The Minister will not need reminding that today's announcement is just one cog that needs to be turned to solve the building safety crisis. I look forward to working constructively with him to do the right thing for the hundreds of thousands of people still trapped in the building safety crisis. I look forward to the Minister's response.

1.[*Official Report*, 15 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I welcome the elements of his remarks that confirm that we are making progress. I will comment on some of the others in a moment. I take it from his reference to the statement being just a “rehashing” of stats that he is pretty content that the stats are moving in the right direction. Indeed, part of the point of today’s statement is to highlight that we have made significant progress in recent months and over the past year, while still recognising, as I did in my opening remarks, that there is much more to do. There are clearly actors who are not doing the right thing, and we are trying to take systematic, consistent and coherent action against them.

I just caution the hon. Gentleman that I did not indicate that the end of the building safety issues is near, despite both of us sharing the desire for that to come as soon as possible. I did, however, say that progress was being made. To get to the end point, we must make progress. I think what the statement demonstrates, just like the written ministerial statement in October, is that we continue as a Government and as a country to make progress.

The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights that this has taken time, but if we look at individual funds, we can see that those that were open the earliest are now coming to a conclusion. For the ACM fund, 98% of known buildings are remediated or on the way to being remediated. That was opened in 2018-19. For the building safety fund for buildings over 18 metres, over half are either completed or on the way to being completed. That was opened in 2020. So, again, there is progress. These things take time. They are often very complicated. Unfortunately, we often have to drag freeholders to do the right thing, for example to encourage owners of buildings between 11 metres and 18 metres to get involved in the fund. We are doing that as actively as we can. There is work to do, but further progress is being made.

The hon. Gentleman raises the specific question of second staircases. The statement is an update on building safety, but I will extend the scope slightly. We have committed, having already provided some information in recent months, to providing further information on second staircases by the end of the month. I can confirm that that will occur this week.

On enforcement, I gently say that it is absolutely incorrect to talk about reactive, piecemeal announcements. If we go down the list of what is being announced in the league table today, we can see clear evidence of progress being made all across the country: London Fire Brigade, 94 statutory enforcement notices; Greater Manchester, 32; East Sussex, 26; West Yorkshire, 14; and Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, 11. I could go on and on and on. There are multiple pages here where we can see progress. The Government are making the information as transparent as possible, so that residents who are impacted can understand where their individual local bodies are and hold them to account where necessary.

Finally, on insurance premiums, the hon. Gentleman and I share a great deal of focus on trying to make things move as quickly as possible. I completely agree with him that progress needs to be made. I am pleased that the industry has announced the launch of its industry-led insurance premium scheme, from 1 April next week. Bluntly, it has taken too long. I have spent an awful lot of time over the past few months encouraging

the sector to do that. From the moment it opens, we will monitor extremely carefully what the impact will be on the most affected buildings. I hope we will be able to say more about that in the coming months. I encourage colleagues who have insurance concerns—many Members in the Chamber have already raised them with me—to continue to raise them. Where remediation is under way or has concluded, we would expect some form of accommodation to be made against the premiums in those buildings unless there was a good reason not to do so. If hon. Members have individual examples of where that has not occurred, I would be very grateful to receive them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is some years since our late colleague, David Amess, led a few of us who were interested in fire safety even before Grenfell.

We must remember that in the months after Grenfell, everyone backed away thinking that residential leaseholders would be the only people who would have to bear the £10 billion to £15 billion cost of remediation—and that was before we knew all about the other fire defects, which our building control standards and inspections had allowed to accumulate over the decades. We should all hang our heads.

The Minister rightly talked about needing more transparency. I say in passing, although it is a very serious point, that anyone who looks at page 3 of the *Financial Times* today, on the possible future policy on ground rents, will see an indication that people who own such buildings—the pension funds, the Long Harbours of this world, the Tchenguizes’ interests and others—ought to be looking at their own social and environmental responsibilities, getting rid of ground rents and spending their money on making buildings safe for everyone to live in.

Cladding groups and leaseholders’ groups deserve praise, as do the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the present chair of the Government’s Leasehold Advisory Service, who can point out some of the things that have not yet been done. This is an interim statement and we look forward to hearing more, whether by written or oral statements, but may I say to the Minister that the one group that seems to have been let off is the insurance companies who backed the developers, architects, surveyors, builders and component suppliers?

The Government should find a way to take together the potential claims of all the residents, tenants, leaseholders and owners of properties, and have a roundtable with insurance companies and get the billions of pounds out of them that they would have to pay if it went to court, without paying the lawyers half the money.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. He has had a long-standing interest in this issue and in leasehold on a broader basis. He is absolutely right to highlight the tireless work of so many people across the country, including the groups and organisations that came together, both on the leasehold side, which he is involved in, and on the cladding side. They did not want to have to come together and spend so much time to make progress and end our cladding scandal, but they work incredibly hard to ensure that we make progress. I am grateful for all their constructive work

with us. It is absolutely the case that more needs to be done, but as the statement outlined, week by week and month by month, we are making progress. I hope we can do more in the months ahead.

Finally, my hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on leasehold and highlights his thoughts very clearly. No decisions have been taken. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been clear about his own personal views. I know my hon. Friend's views will have been heard as a part of the discussion.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): One of my priorities in Battersea is to ensure that everyone has a safe, decent and affordable home. However, seven years on from the devastation of the Grenfell fire, many of my constituents are still living in unsafe buildings. Government support has so far been available for buildings 11 metres or over. It beggars belief that that is the case. Can the Minister be clear about what the Government are doing to ensure that prioritisation for funding is allocated according to risk, so that all households are protected, including the many in my constituency that are below 11 metres?

Lee Rowley: With the greatest respect, I do not think it does beggar belief that a line has been drawn at 11 metres. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady is chuntering from a sedentary position; I had hoped that she would listen to my answer in the first instance before making comments on it.

This is a relatively recognised and relatively long-standing position. Following the commitment given by my predecessors back in 2022, when we have received concerns about buildings under 11 metres we have taken action. We have looked at those buildings and have commissioned reports when that has been necessary, and in the overwhelming majority of cases it has subsequently been confirmed that they do not require remediation. If any Members have outstanding concerns about buildings less than 11 metres high, I encourage them to get in touch and we will happily look at them in more detail, because if the trajectory that we have seen in the cases that have been raised with us so far already is followed, it is highly likely that life-critical safety concerns will not be visible once we have done so.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): There is a complex interplay between what the Minister has said today about building safety, cladding and remediation and the agenda relating to the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, which, of course, many of us in the Chamber are still right behind. Will the Minister please reassure us that the Government as a whole remain committed to this vital transformative and conservative agenda?

As the Minister himself has said from that Dispatch Box, there is no prouder word in the English language than “freeholder”. We want to see more freeholders liberated from the tyranny of the ground rent grazers and some of the deep-pocketed people in this so-called sector who are now trying to make out, if the reporting is accurate, that if we press ahead with our reforms to reduce ground rent to a peppercorn, the whole sector will be destabilised and the Minister's vital work of remediation will somehow be affected. I, like many others, do not accept that assertion in any shape or form—it is, of course, complete nonsense—but will the Minister please reassure me, and many others, that we

will continue to reform this sector and liberate the leaseholders so that they can own their properties, while also continuing to make them safe?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is right to say that the work that has been put into the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, and the measures that we have introduced in it, will be transformative for leaseholders. I know that, and I know she knows that, because she was the person who put in the work in the first place, and I pay tribute to what she did in this role previously.

My hon. Friend is also right to draw attention to the link between those who have been impacted by cladding and leaseholders in general. It is through reforms such as those in the Bill that we will be able to bring even more transparency, including on insurance, which the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) rightly raised. That applies not just to leaseholders who are impacted by cladding remediation, but to leaseholders in general. We will ensure that they know what they are paying for and can fully recognise whether the arrangement is fair or not.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for meeting leaseholders from Barrier Point in my constituency last week.

During a Zoom call last night, leaseholders from Waterside Park made it clear that although the original builders and the current freeholder had agreed on the specification of the work to be carried out, the work itself was being held up by quibbling between their respective lawyers over details. Is there anything that the Minister or his Department can do to knock heads together and get this long-awaited work under way?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for highlighting the inherent challenges that may feature in processes that involve a lot of actors, a lot of complexity and often a lot of money, but it is absolutely the Government's view that they must proceed as expeditiously as possible and that the organisations and actors involved in them should not hold them up unnecessarily. There must be a reasonable accommodation for reasonable discussions, but the overarching objective to ensure that buildings are remediated, and to allow leaseholders to get on with their lives even more than they are able to do at present, is paramount. If there are particular concerns or particular issues from which the right hon. Gentleman, or any other Member, thinks we can learn in order to improve the policy, I shall be keen to hear about them.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The cladding safety scheme is meeting the cost of addressing fire safety risks associated with cladding on residential buildings over 11 metres high, but that does not include low-rise buildings. The Minister has been contacted by Barnet Council following an investigation of a fire at a low-rise residential property last year, which established that 459 properties in my constituency constituted a category 1 hazard as defined by the Housing Act 2004. The council says that the remedial works will cost each homeowner £23,000, an unaffordable amount for many of my constituents. While low-rise buildings pose less of an escape hazard than high-rise buildings in the event of a fire, the widespread existence of cladding defects is a result of regulatory and industry failure and was not caused by actions taken by my constituents. Does the

[*Dr Matthew Offord*]

Minister agree that that is simply not fair, and will he draw up proposals as a matter of urgency to assist my constituents in this endeavour?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter of low-rise blocks. According to the evidence that the Department has seen when looking at properties less than 11 metres high, it remains the case that the overwhelming majority do not require fire safety remediation, but I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about that in more detail. It is important that we continue to highlight the lower likelihood of a problem such as we are discussing today, but it is also important that there are routes to redress. The extension of the Defective Premises Act 1972 provides an opportunity in that regard. It is important for residents, leaseholders and others to be aware of such avenues, and I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those further as well.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for the meeting I had with him and his staff recently about an issue facing my constituents. It concerns Galliard Homes and residents of Drayton Park in my constituency, who have been denied access to necessary information. Galliard Homes claims that the fire safety regulations have been adhered to, but that is hotly disputed by just about everybody else. As a result the residents are paying vastly enhanced insurance rates and are unable to move, unable to sell their homes, and unable to move on with their lives in any way. That is causing unbelievable levels of stress, of which many Members are well aware from events in their own constituencies.

The Minister is engaged with the issue and fully understands it. May I ask him to do two things? First, will he release all the information about the fire safety assessment so that an air of transparency surrounds all this? Secondly, will he ensure that the developer, Galliard Homes, steps up to the plate and does the remedial work that is necessary to bring down insurance costs and enable the residents to move on and get on with their lives?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for highlighting this issue, and I am also grateful for the meeting that he arranged with the representative of the leaseholders and the time that he gave for us to go through it. It is very useful to work through individual cases: although they are often the trickiest, the knottiest and the most challenging, it is important for us to understand the policy implications.

Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman—without going into the details of the individual property, which I should be happy to discuss with him separately—that in general we seek to be as transparent as we possibly can, hence the publication of some of the additional data today. We remain committed to making progress on both individual buildings and properties as a whole, and I hope that both the property and the developer that the right hon. Gentleman has highlighted will make progress as soon as possible.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his update, but it appears from his statement that there are still two tall buildings with ACM cladding

on which no work is going on and on which the Government have taken no action; I should be grateful if he could clarify that. Another issue that arises directly from his statement is that there are now 4,000 homes between 11 and 18 metres high whose residents will probably not be able to get a mortgage, insure their properties or sell them. Will he speed up the process of assessing those blocks so that the residents can feel safe, and if work is required on them will he ensure that it is carried out speedily, so that homes are made safe for the residents and for whoever they sell them to?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for the question. On my hon. Friend's first point, there are 11 buildings that have not started or finished their ACM remediation. One is not occupied. Of the remaining 10, work will commence on two in the next few weeks. Eight buildings will be remediated at a further date, and the remaining two have enforcement action being taken by the relevant authorities. Although I would like the number to go down to zero at the earliest possible opportunity, the situation is better than it was when we provided the update in October, and I expect the number to continue to move on a positive trajectory in the months and weeks ahead.

On my hon. Friend's point about the 4,000 buildings that are being reviewed, we provided a further 1,000 potential leads to Homes England, which is leading on the cladding safety scheme, a number of months ago. A significant number were found to not require any remediation. Although I cannot comment on where the 4,000 will land, it is likely that a large number of them will not require remediation in the end, so I encourage residents not to worry about the number, but to see what comes out of the process.

Since December 2022, we have also taken action to make sure that we are starting to separate the need for remediation on properties from people's ability to get on with their lives. The mortgage sector has been freed up to allow people to take mortgages, to remortgage and to move properties when big life events happen, and we hope that that will continue. I am monitoring, on a month-by-month basis, the large banks and building societies that are providing mortgages, and I can see that progress is being made.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Master Gunner Place in my constituency is in need of remedial work, and the residents have been supplied with a letter of comfort from the developer to say that it will cover the costs. My constituent has written to me to say that his service charge has gone up by 360% in the last eight years. In the last year alone, it has gone up by 107%. He is now paying a £6,000-a-year service charge, even though Hamptons says that the average cost in London for a similar-sized property is £1,700. My constituent says that the additional costs are building safety-related. What does the Minister have to say about that? Can anything be done to stop developers recouping their costs in this way?

Lee Rowley: The first thing we need to do is bring greater transparency to service charges, which is what we are trying to do through the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill. Assuming that progress is made in the other place, I hope that it will be on the statute book as quickly as possible, and then it will be clear exactly where such costs come from.

The second thing that is that our colleagues in the Financial Conduct Authority are bringing in the fair charging regime to make sure there are no inappropriate commissions and that, from an insurance perspective, exchanges are not under way with brokers, which will hopefully reduce the costs.

The third thing is the industry-led insurance scheme, which should hopefully bring down insurance costs for those who are most exposed. However, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we need greater transparency and a greater understanding of where these costs are going, and we need to make sure that freeholders and managing agents are following the law, which is very clear about the kinds of costs that can and cannot be allocated. If there is something specific about the building he mentions that the Government can look at, I will happily talk to him separately.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the Opposition Front Bencher and the Minister for their participation in the statement.

Points of Order

2.33 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to raise a point of order regarding last night's debate on the motion to appoint an acting Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Following an intervention from the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), I wish to express the Opposition's concern. At the root of our concern is the lack of information on why No. 10 has not provided its seal of approval, when it has been cited that the House should lead on the role. We were told that the Prime Minister has had the nomination since January. As the Minister said, the process must be followed thoroughly and diligently, but some questions remain.

What processes have yet to be completed? Has a representative from No. 10 and the chair of the appointment committee met to discuss the delay? If so, what were their conclusions? Given that Parliament is the lead on this appointment, when will Members receive an update? As Members from across the House liaise with the ombudsman regarding constituency queries, this issue is important. Mr Deputy Speaker, could you please advise on whether you have received notice of an upcoming ministerial statement on this matter in the first week back after the Easter recess? That would be three months after No. 10 received the committee's recommendation.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Would it be in order to reveal the identity of the person concerned? I notice that that did not happen yesterday, but it is well known who that person is and how well qualified he is for the post for which he has been recommended.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank both hon. Gentlemen for their points of order, and I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for giving notice of his. While the House Administration does take the lead—

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am on my feet.

While the House Administration does take the lead in the appointment process, it is not a matter for the Chair of the House. The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent has put his point on the record, and I am sure that the House authorities will be able to advise him on how to pursue the matter further.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The law around marriage is part of my portfolio as a shadow Justice Minister, but I would like to seek your advice this afternoon—don't worry, it is not marital advice that I require. Given my portfolio, would it be in order for me to invite you and perhaps Members from across the House to congratulate a very special couple, who will mark their 70th wedding anniversary tomorrow? They are particularly special, as they are my own mum and dad, Jean and John Cunningham, who were married all those years ago. I am extremely proud of them for reaching this remarkable milestone, and I am pleased that I have been able to share this news with the House.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is outrageously out of order—[*Laughter.*] But I am equally sure that the whole House will want to associate themselves with his remarks about his mum and dad. I add my personal congratulations as well.

Sammy Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last Thursday, the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), made a statement announcing the laying of regulations for the implementation of the Windsor framework, which he stated was part of the Government's commitment to safeguard the Union—although I think the two things are contradictory, given that the Windsor framework actually divides the Union. In his statement, he sought to justify the fact that Northern Ireland would be subject to some aspects of EU law, and he gave the example of its exclusion from the ban on live exports of animals, which I opposed in this House.

In his statement, the Minister claimed that the Government had offered to establish a sectoral roundtable to consider analysis of the proposed trade ban, but this invitation has not yet been taken up by any of those proposing the ban. I was the one who moved the motion in the House. The Minister in the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs had written to me to suggest having a roundtable with the Ulster Farmers Union, and he indicated that the Government had statistics that showed why Northern Ireland should be excluded from the ban. I wrote back to him on 30 January, asking for that information to facilitate the discussion at the roundtable.

Despite that, the Minister claimed that there was no response given, so he gave the impression that I was not prepared to challenge, debate or discuss the implementation

of EU law in Northern Ireland. I want to know how that can be corrected. I have corrected it on the record today, but I would like the Minister to correct the wrong information that he gave in his statement. It is quite clear that a letter went to the DEFRA Minister to which he has not responded, either by supplying information or by setting up a date for a meeting so that it can be made clear that there is no unwillingness to discuss the implementation of EU law in Northern Ireland with the relevant Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving at least some notice of his point of order, although I have to say that he has gone rather wider than the information with which I was originally provided. I hope that he informed the Minister that he intended to refer to him in the House.

Sammy Wilson indicated assent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you. That is not actually a matter for the Chair, but the right hon. Member has put his case on the record.

BILL PRESENTED

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE
(REQUIREMENT TO SHARE APPARATUS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Emma Hardy presented a Bill to require providers of electronic communications networks to grant access to their apparatus to other such providers in certain circumstances; to prohibit the installation of new electronic communications apparatus where services can be provided by sharing apparatus; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 21 June and to be printed (Bill 196).

Disposal of Waste (Advertising and Penalty Provision)

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

2.40 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in Bill to make provision about the advertising of waste disposal services; to require local authorities to issue fixed penalty notices under section 34 of the Environment Act 1990 in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

We need a zero-tolerance approach to the criminal elements in our society who are turning our neighbourhoods and rural beauty spots into rubbish tips. No longer should our inner cities, suburbs, towns, villages, and rural lanes be seen as dumping grounds for illegal waste. We need to build on the work we have already done on tackling fly-tipping and putting the tippers out of business.

Shockingly, there are over 1 million incidences fly-tipping every year. Government and local councils spend hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money every year on cleaning up illegal waste sites across the country. It is a blight that not only tarnishes the beauty of our landscapes but inflicts profound harm on local environments and presents many risks to public health. Fly-tipping ranges from household items to industrial waste. It is discarded at best carelessly, but sometimes very deliberately in our forests, fields and riversides, and even in densely populated urban areas.

First and foremost, let us acknowledge the environmental and human toll of fly-tipping. Toxins and pollutants contaminate the environment, and wildlife suffers as animals are exposed to hazardous materials. Furthermore, fly-tipping poses a significant threat to public health. Dumped waste can contain harmful chemicals and often hazardous materials. These pollutants leach into the environment, contaminating the air we breathe, the water we drink and the soil that sustains us. All of this carries the risk of illness, disease and infection, not just to humans but to domestic animals, pets and wildlife. This is a vicious cycle, and we need to break it.

Fly-tipping also blights neighbourhoods and the urban environment. It drives down property values, discourages investment, and creates an environment for crime. The unsightly mess left behind by fly-tippers creates a sense of neglect and decay, decreasing any sense of local pride and fostering a culture of apathy and resentment. I am sick to death of the mindless idiots who dump their rubbish on Peterborough's streets. Fly-tipping is seen in both rural and urban areas, and it is simply not fair on hard-working people that their neighbourhoods are constantly the victim of this appalling behaviour. Moreover, the cost of cleaning up illegally dumped waste falls on those taxpayers, diverting resources that could be better spent on essential services and infrastructure.

What can we do about this pervasive problem? Of course, it begins with raising awareness and fostering a sense of accountability. We must educate our communities about the consequences of fly-tipping and instil a collective commitment to responsible waste management. People want to take pride in their areas, but as well as education there must be a much higher degree of deterrence. Local authorities must enforce the existing stringent laws against illegal dumping, impose severe penalties on perpetrators and deter future violations. Furthermore, we must invest

in accessible and affordable waste disposal services, providing viable alternatives to illegal dumping. At the same time, we must ensure that these services for disposing waste legally are properly regulated.

If I went on the internet, I would find hundreds of services that would take my rubbish away for me, but how do I know where it is actually going? Who is to say that the company I have paid to dispose of my waste will not just drive five minutes down the road and dump it in a field? The problem is that consumers do not always know who is qualified to do what, often through no fault of their own. They just want their waste taken away as soon as possible. This can lead to non-registered companies operating illegally and dumping household goods.

The Government's own statistic is that 68% of all those advertising waste disposal are not registered and are therefore trading illegally in newspapers, online and in shop windows. Even political activists fall foul of this. I had a lot of fun when a large number of "Vote Labour" posters appeared on the private land of a business in Peterborough back in 2022, but it portrayed the serious point that this political activist was a victim of the criminality behind those adverts.

At this point, I would like to recognise Martin Montague and Jo Smith of ClearWaste, who are sitting with us in the Gallery today. Martin and Jo have been tireless advocates for action on fly-tipping for over five years, and the fly-tipping app ClearWaste has gathered significant attention and has become a top 10 app. If Members have not got it, take a look. It is one of the simple ways to ensure that you are using a licensed waste removal organisation, and you can also report fly-tipping on it.

My Bill will require the display of a valid waste transfer licence for all waste removal service advertisements up front. This would further significantly limit the avenues for illegal operators and would help people not to unwittingly use illegal operators and unintentionally contribute to the scourge of fly-tipping. The Government have taken significant action over the last few years. Maximum penalties have been increased, and a ban on DIY household waste charges means that households no longer have to pay to get rid of small-scale DIY waste at council recycling centres. Funding has been made available to local authorities for trial projects including CCTV, AI and education, but there is much more to be done. My Bill will help to ensure a zero-tolerance approach to fly-tipping.

The Government need local authorities to act. I would like to pay tribute to Councillor Ishfaq Hussain, Councillor Bryan Tyler, Councillor Chaz Fenner and Alex Rafiq, who have been amazing champions in Peterborough for strong action on fly-tipping in urban settings, and to Councillor Steve Allen and John Peach, who have done the same in rural areas.

On the issue of councils acting, the second aspect of this Bill would make it mandatory for local authorities to issue fines in cases where the evidence for fly-tipping is clear on both public and private land. There has been great progress in many areas, but it is still far too hit and miss. Scores of local authorities do not prosecute a single case a year. This is unacceptable and we can no longer tolerate town halls turning a blind eye. At the moment, a zero-tolerance approach in one area simply means that a large-scale criminal enterprise can move

[Paul Bristow]

its operations to a different area. Only a consistent national approach to enforcement will put fly-tippers out of business.

Winning the war on fly-tipping is a daunting challenge, but it is one we cannot afford to ignore. I would like to pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) and for Bury North (James Daly) for their support. This Bill would not be here right now without their unflinching support for these measures to tackle fly-tipping. Through this Bill we will close the loopholes that allow fly-tippers to advertise their criminality online, and we will force local authorities to fine perpetrators on both public and private land. To end this scourge, we need a zero-tolerance approach.

I have been fortunate enough to take two Bills through the House in my time as an MP. The Ballot Secrecy Bill, introduced by my noble Friend Lord Hayward, tackled family voting and those who would attempt to subvert our democratic processes. The Local Government (Pay Accountability) Bill tackles excessive town hall pay and the need for transparency. It has passed its Second Reading. Now, fly-tippers and criminals who dump their rubbish are firmly in my sights and I hope that the Government and all hon. Members will join us in the fight against fly-tipping.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paul Bristow, Chris Clarkson, Sara Britcliffe, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Lee Anderson, James Daly, Alexander Stafford, Greg Smith, Jill Mortimer, Dr Caroline Johnson and Danny Kruger present the Bill.

Paul Bristow accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 May, and to be printed (Bill 197).

Pedicabs (London) Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Roger Gale): I remind Members that, in Committee, Members should not address the Chair as “Deputy Speaker”. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. “Chair”, “Madam Chairman”, “Madam Chair” and “Mr Chairman” are also acceptable.

Clause 1

POWER TO REGULATE PEDICABS

2.51 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move amendment 9, page 1, line 8, at end insert—

“(2A) When making or exercising its functions under pedicab regulations, Transport for London must have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 7(1).”

This amendment requires Transport for London to have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State in relation to the making of pedicab regulations and exercising TfL's functions under those regulations.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 1, page 1, line 9, after “must” insert

“carry out a public consultation including details of the proposed licensing framework and”.

This amendment would require Transport for London to carry out a public consultation before making pedicab regulations and would require that consultation to include details of the proposed licensing framework.

Amendment 2, page 1, line 10, leave out “whoever” and insert

“the London Pedicab Operators Association, Cycling UK and whoever else”.

This amendment would ensure that the London Pedicab Operators Association and Cycling UK would be consulted by Transport for London before TfL makes pedicab regulations.

Amendment 21, page 1, line 10, leave out “whoever” and insert

“local authorities, elected representatives, and whoever else”.

This amendment would require Transport for London to consult with local authorities and elected representatives as well as anyone else it considers appropriate before making pedicab regulations.

Amendment 4, page 1, line 10, at end insert—

“(4) Transport for London shall not make provision for regulating pedicabs in public places in Greater London until the Secretary of State has issued guidance under the provisions of section 7.”

This amendment would ensure that no regulation could be introduced by Transport for London until the Secretary of State for Transport had issued guidance to Transport for London about the exercise of their functions under pedicab regulations.

Clause stand part.

Amendment 8, in clause 2, page 2, line 4, at end insert

“or at a level that enables investment in pedicab infrastructure in Greater London”.

This amendment would allow pedicab licence fees to be set at a level that enables investment in pedicab infrastructure in Greater London.

Amendment 6, page 2, line 29, at end insert —

“(d) designate sites to be used as pedicab ranks.”

This amendment would allow Transport for London to use pedicab regulations to designate sites as pedicab ranks.

Amendment 12, page 2, line 29, at end insert—

“(d) make provision for the designation by traffic authorities of places where pedicabs may stand for hire.”

This amendment allows for the regulations to make provision for the designation by traffic authorities of pedicab stands.

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 17, in clause 3, page 3, line 11, at end insert—

“(2A) The regulations may only create offences relating to the use of a pedicab for any of the following purposes—

- (a) carrying passengers for hire or reward;
- (b) travelling to carry a passenger or passengers for hire or reward;
- (c) returning from carrying a passenger or passengers for hire or reward; or
- (d) plying for hire.”

This amendment ensures that offences created by pedicab regulations only apply when the pedicab is being used to carry passengers, when travelling to or from carrying passengers, or when plying for hire.

Amendment 14, page 3, line 20, at end insert

“, provided that equivalent conduct committed by the driver or rider of a motor vehicle is subject to a civil penalty.”

This amendment provides that civil penalties relating to pedicab drivers may only be used if equivalent conduct committed by a driver or rider of a motor vehicle would be subject to a civil penalty.

Amendment 15, page 3, line 22, leave out from “immobilisation” to end of line 24 and insert

“and seizure by a constable in uniform or by a civil enforcement officer of any pedicab that—

- (a) is being used in a manner that is causing alarm or distress to members of the public, or
- (b) is being driven in a manner that—
 - (i) contravenes section 35 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861,
 - (ii) contravenes sections 29 to 32 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, or
 - (iii) in the case of a mechanically propelled pedicab, would amount to a contravention of sections 29 to 32 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 if committed on a pedal cycle without mechanical propulsion, if the driver has been given warning on a prior occasion by a constable in uniform or a civil enforcement officer that the driver is using or driving the pedicab in a manner described in this paragraph or paragraph (a).”

This amendment ensures that the powers to immobilise and seize pedicabs are assigned to police constables in uniform or to traffic officers duly authorised by local authorities, and that they are proportionate to the powers to immobilise and seize motor vehicles in section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002.

Clause 3 stand part.

Clause 4 stand part.

Amendment 18, in clause 5, page 4, line 17, leave out from “means” to the end of line 21 and insert

“a pedicab, as defined in section 1(2), which conforms to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles Regulations 1983;”.

This amendment defines “power-assisted pedicab” as a pedicab which conforms to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles Regulations 1983.

Clause 5 stand part.

Clause 6 stand part.

Amendment 3, in clause 7, page 4, line 32, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to issue guidance to Transport for London about the exercise of their functions under pedicab regulations.

Amendment 19, page 4, line 32, leave out “may” and insert

“must, within six months of the passage of this Act,”.

This amendment requires the Secretary of State to issue guidance to Transport for London about the exercise of their functions under pedicab regulations within six months of the passage of this Act.

Amendment 10, page 4, line 32, leave out “the exercise of” and insert

“making pedicab regulations and exercising”.

This amendment clarifies that the Secretary of State’s guidance to TfL encompasses the making of pedicab regulations, as well as the exercise of its functions under those regulations.

Amendment 11, page 4, line 37, at end insert—

“(3A) In preparing guidance to be issued under this section, the Secretary of State must have regard to the following objectives—

- (a) the benefits to the environment, economic vitality and the health and quality of life that properly regulated pedicab services can provide;
- (b) the safety of pedicab drivers and passengers;
- (c) the need to minimise danger, disruption and disturbance to the public;
- (d) the reasonableness of pedicab fares for the passengers, riders and operators of pedicabs;
- (e) the designation of places where pedicabs may stand for hire;
- (f) the need for licensing and other charges or requirements imposed on pedicab riders and operators, and the penalties for contraventions of offences created by pedicab regulations, to be reasonable and proportionate to the risks that pedicabs pose to their riders, passengers and the wider public.”

This amendment defines the objectives that the Secretary of State must have regard to when drawing up guidance on pedicab regulations, including to take into account the benefits that properly regulated pedicabs can provide.

Amendment 5, page 5, line 6, leave out “whoever” and insert

“the London Pedicab Operators Association, Cycling UK and whoever else”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to consult the London Pedicab Operators Association and Cycling UK as well as anyone the Secretary of State considers appropriate before issuing guidance.

Amendment 7, page 5, line 6, leave out “whoever” and insert

“with local authorities, elected representatives, and whoever else”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to consult with local authorities and elected representatives as well as anyone the Secretary of State considers appropriate before issuing guidance.

Clause 7 stand part.

Amendment 16, in clause 8, page 5, line 8, at end insert—

“‘civil enforcement officer’ has the meaning given by section 76 of the Traffic Management Act 2004;”.

This amendment is linked to Amendment 15.

Amendment 13, page 5, line 17, at end insert—

“‘traffic authority’ has the same meaning as in section 121A(1A) and (2) of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984.”

This amendment is linked to Amendment 12.

Clause 8 stand part.

Clause 9 stand part.

Clause 10 stand part.

Government amendment 20.

Clause 11 stand part.

New clause 1—*Protection of children and vulnerable adults*—

“(1) The Policing and Crime Act 2017 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 177, in subsection (6), at end insert—

(g) the Pedicabs (London) Act 2024”

This new clause includes this Bill in the definition of “taxi and private hire vehicle legislation” for the purposes of section 177 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017. This permits the Secretary of State to issue guidance to public authorities exercising licensing functions so as to protect children and vulnerable adults.

New clause 2—*Licensing functions under pedicab regulations: protection of children and vulnerable adults*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must issue guidance to Transport for London under the provisions of section 177 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 as to how its licensing functions under pedicab regulations may be exercised so as to protect children, and vulnerable individuals who are 18 or over, from harm.

(2) The guidance must include a requirement for enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks to be a condition of licensing.

(3) The Secretary of State must arrange for any guidance issued under this section, and any revision of it, to be published.”

This new clause is linked to NC1. It would require the Secretary of State to issue guidance to TfL as to how its licensing functions under pedicab regulations may be exercised so as to protect children and vulnerable adults from harm, including compulsory DBS checks.

New clause 3—*Conditions of licensing: Disclosure and Barring Service check*—

“(1) Any provision related to conditions of licences under section (1)(a) may include a requirement for pedicab drivers or operators to have enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks.

(2) The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision that is consequential on this section.

(3) Regulations under this section must be made by statutory instrument and may not be made until they are approved by both Houses of Parliament.

(4) Regulations under this section may amend, repeal or revoke provision made by or under any legislation passed before this Act.”

This new clause enables TfL to include DBS checks as a condition of licensing for pedicab drivers or operators in any licensing provision made by Transport for London. It also permits the Secretary of State to make regulations to make any consequential provision.

Sir Christopher Chope: I begin by putting on record my appreciation for the positive way in which the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), has engaged with our deliberations on this Bill.

As discussed on Second Reading, the differences of opinion on the Bill centre around whether its consequence, deliberate or otherwise, will be to legislate pedicabs out of existence. Pedicabs are to London what gondolas are

to Venice. They are an essential part of the colour and vibrancy of our capital city. The *Evening Standard* recently warned of the damage being done to London’s nightlife and the night-time economy, and pedicabs are an essential part of that economy. I am sure we would not want to do anything to further undermine the viability of that night-time economy.

Is this Bill the equivalent of a morphine syringe driver to kill off pedicabs, or is it a necessary protector of responsible pedicab operators? Both I and, I think, the Minister want it to be the latter, and so does Cycling UK, which has a membership of some 70,000 cyclists—it is quite a large organisation—as well as the London Pedicab Operators Association.

I expressed my concern about over-regulation on Second Reading, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who asked the Minister for an assurance that

“when this regulation comes into force, it will be light touch and not onerous, so that we do not kill this young and perfectly acceptable industry?”

And the Minister replied:

“The answer is yes and yes.”—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2024; Vol. 746, c. 375.]

That clear and unambiguous response is extremely welcome.

It is important that we are able to deliver on that commitment. The question often arises of whether we can trust Transport for London. Those of us who live in London during the week, and others who are resident in London throughout the year, are quite concerned about Transport for London’s failure to listen on issues such as the ultra low emission zone extension and the proliferation of 20 mph zones.

Transport for London produced an outline of how it will use the process of regulation, which it will be given under this Bill, in January 2022, and it was updated in February 2024. The Minister made arrangements for the new draft to be circulated to all interested Members. Unfortunately, and I know it was not his fault, the draft was circulated not with his letter but late on Thursday, about half an hour after the House had risen and the deadline for tabling amendments had passed. My amendments therefore take no account of that document. Had I seen it before the deadline, I might well have tabled additional amendments.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I accept my hon. Friend’s point that there was an issue with the TfL regulations not being provided until Thursday. He may recall that he was involved in meetings with me and TfL on my private Member’s Bill back in 2021–22, when my office emailed him the same draft regulations on 20 January 2022. He has had a couple of years to read those regulations, which I do not believe have been changed.

Sir Christopher Chope: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but the draft regulations have been changed to take into account the discussions on the Bill in the other place. As she confirms, a document existed in 2022 yet, when I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister asking for the draft regulations to be made available, I was told that they were not available. It is important that draft regulations are shared with all legislators and are not the subject of private meetings.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) is as eager as anybody to ensure that Transport for London's intentions are explored so that we can be sure that it genuinely wants to retain the benefits of having a lively and vibrant pedicab industry in London. I will address the content we have now seen in the potential licensing framework for pedicabs in London, because I do not think it will excite much support from people who are keen to defend the interests of genuine pedicab operators.

There is an issue with the ability of pedicabs to lawfully ply for hire in London. When people think of pedicabs, they think of going up to the driver of a stationary pedicab on the side of a London street and asking for a ride. I am not aware of any statement from the Government suggesting that they believe that pedicabs should not be lawfully available to ply for hire yet, when one looks at the draft regulations, one can see that Transport for London is raising the question of whether or not pedicabs should continue to be able to lawfully ply for hire.

I come to another area of concern. Currently, there is no regulation of fares for private hire vehicles, and for good reason. As the document sets out, we do not have to regulate the fares of private hire vehicles because they are subject to a lot of competition. Yet the draft regulations suggest that TfL would wish to regulate the fares of pedicabs, even when they are being used, in essence, for private hire.

3 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that in a previous debate on the Bill a great deal of concern was raised by a number of hon. Members from across the House about the conduct of some pedicab drivers and the level of fees sometimes levied on passengers, some of whom were tourists who were unaware of the nature of the business they were getting into? I believe the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) raised that issue in the previous debate.

Sir Christopher Chope: I accept that, but those concerns relate to the use of pedicabs when they are plying for hire, and people then getting into them and being—to put it colloquially—“ripped off.” There should be regulation of fares in those circumstances, but where the pedicab is a private hire vehicle—where an agreement has been made prior to its hire—the terms and conditions will be a contractual arrangement between the hirer and the pedicab operator. That is exactly equivalent to what happens in the private vehicle hire sector at the moment, where there is no regulation of the fare. I do not understand why TfL is seeking powers to regulate the pedicab fare even when that is a private hire arrangement, rather than the subject of a hire arrangement made on the street.

Page 5 of the potential licensing framework for pedicabs in London states, “TfL would seek to introduce controls on fares for pedicabs, including fares for pre-booked journeys.” That is completely inconsistent with the point TfL makes in the previous paragraph, which says, “TfL does not regulate fares for private hire vehicles. As private hire vehicles are pre-booked, passengers are in a position to make a consumer choice before hiring the vehicle. Private hire vehicle fares are thus set by the

operators in a competitive market, which allows price to be one of the factors passengers take into account when choosing which operator to book with.” So why is TfL seeking to introduce controls on fares for pre-booked journeys?

The next issue of concern, which has not been resolved, is whether pedicabs should be able to charge per passenger. Currently, taxis cannot charge per passenger; they charge per journey. One can understand why, because the taxi is licensed for a certain number of seats—for example, five—and the number of passengers does not make much difference to the speed of the vehicle. The situation for pedicabs is significantly different, because taking four passengers in a pedicab requires a lot more cycling effort from one person than one passenger does. So surely it is reasonable that pedicabs should be able to charge per passenger, rather than just per journey irrespective of how many passengers are there.

Alarming, the potential licensing framework makes reference to the possibility that TfL might require pedicab operators to accept any fare that was offered. So if a group of people got together and said, “You’ve got four seats in your pedicab, we wish to take all four of them and we require you to take us to Leicester Square”, the pedicab driver would be required to accept those four people, who might be heavy. That would be the case despite his wish to have only one or two people in his pedicab because he was not sufficiently fit to transport all four people in his pedicab. Those are further concerns I have about what is contained in these draft regulations.

The cycling fraternity are very worried about pedicabs being legislated out of existence, which is why they have argued that the pedicab regime should be national, rather than limited to London, and that it should not be an extension of the rules relating to taxis and private hire vehicles. I tabled a question to the Minister following his helpful intervention on Second Reading, when he talked about the issue of licensing authorities across the rest of the country and referred to paragraph 8.3 of his Department’s publication “Taxi and private hire vehicle licensing best practice guidance for licensing authorities in England”, which was updated on 17 November. In that update, the Department advised that licensing authorities “should make appropriate adjustments” to take into account the demand for pedicab services in their area.

During the earlier debates, we had heard that some such areas include Oxford, Salisbury, Bristol and Cambridge. So I tabled a written question to the Secretary of State asking

“what information his Department holds on (a) the number of pedicabs outside Greater London that are licensed as (i) taxis and (ii) private hire vehicles and (b) the number and proportion of those pedicabs that are in (A) Oxford, (B) Salisbury, (C) Bristol and (D) Cambridge; and if he will make an assessment of the potential impact on the number of licensed pedicabs of paragraph 8.3 of his Department’s guidance entitled Taxi and private hire vehicle licensing best practice guidance for licensing authorities in England”.

The answer I received from the Minister on 25 March rather ducked the question:

“Outside London pedicabs can be licensed as taxis. Pedicabs cannot be licensed as a private hire vehicle as legislation defines a private hire vehicle as a motor vehicle. The Department for Transport issues guidance on licensing taxis and private hire vehicles to authorities who should consider the recommendations made and their obligation under the Regulators’ Code to carry

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

out their activities in a way that supports those they regulate to comply and grow. The Best Practice Guidance...sets out that where there is local interest....licensing authorities should make appropriate adjustments...Subject to the legal requirements, it is for licensing authorities to consider”.

What the Minister did not say was what impact, if any, the change in the best practice guidance that he issued has had on pedicab operators or on people being able to start pedicab operations outside London. The answer, as far as one can gather, is that outside London there are no licensed pedicab operations, because, despite the Government’s apparent best intentions, those who wish to operate pedicabs outside London using the taxi and private hire vehicle regulations are unable to get their operations off the ground. That is largely because of the regulatory burdens and the costs associated with insurance, apart from anything else.

There are those who believe, as I do, that pedicabs are a highly environmentally advantageous means of transport: the pedicab driver is taking good exercise in cycling his pedicab and it is not causing any emissions. In addition, pedicabs enable people to get from one part of London to another and to have an enjoyable experience. In the same way that not many people in Venice use gondolas as a means of getting from A to B quickly, pedicabs are not used as an alternative to the bus or the underground. They are there for a bit of fun and recreation. Why would this Conservative Government want to legislate them out of existence? I do not think they want to do that, which is why I have proposed a series of amendments designed to tighten up the pedicab regime.

My first amendment

“requires Transport for London to have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State in relation to the making of pedicab regulations and exercising TfL’s functions under those regulations.”

My point is that the making of the regulations is what is important rather than the exercising of the functions under them, so the amendment requires Transport for London to have regard to that. That links to the requirement in amendment 19 to ensure that the Government produce the guidance within six months of the Bill receiving Royal Assent. Without that provision we could have a situation where the Government are required by law to produce regulations, but there is no time limit on that.

As an example of how time lapses, I remember that just over five years ago, on a Friday in this Chamber, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) brought forward a Bill to control bad behaviour by rogue parking operators, who can cause abuse at the behest of transport organisations, access driver and vehicle details, and impose severe penalties, including enormous fines, on alleged miscreants who have parked on private property. The Government assured us that a code of practice would be drawn up, and I put forward an amendment specifying the period within which that should be done. I was assured by the then Minister—none other than the person who is now our Prime Minister—that my amendment was unnecessary, but five years later that code of practice has still not been produced, to the frustration of motorists up and down the country. That is why we need to include an amendment that specifies the timescale within which the Government must produce their guidance.

Amendment 19 suggests a timescale of six months. Transport for London could introduce its regulations thereafter, having taken into account the Government guidance. Clause 7 is purely permissive: it permits, not requires, the Government to issue guidance to Transport for London. It is essential that the Government issue guidance that ensures Transport for London realises it will not be allowed to prevent pedicabs plying for hire in London; it will not be able to require pedicab operators to put a maximum of four heavy people in their cab and not get any extra fee for transporting them; and it will not be able to require other potentially damaging provisions in the draft regulations.

3.15 pm

My next amendments relate to consultation. Amendment 1

“would require Transport for London to carry out a public consultation... to include details of the proposed licensing framework.”

It is clear from the document that has been produced that Transport for London is intent on doing that, so I will not press that amendment. However, we need to be more specific about the people with whom the consultation should be carried out, so amendment 2 says that the consultation must include

“the London Pedicab Operators Association, Cycling UK and whoever else”.

Currently, the Bill says:

“Before making pedicab regulations, Transport for London must consult whoever it considers appropriate.”

Why is that so vague? It needs to be much more specific. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) has tabled an amendment that deals with the same concerns. She seeks to spell it out in a slightly different way, but her amendment 21 reflects our joint concern.

Amendment 4 provides that

“Transport for London shall not make provision for regulating pedicabs in public places in Greater London until the Secretary of State has issued guidance under the provisions of section 7.”

As I have said, if we have a requirement for the Secretary of State to issue that guidance within six months, that point is covered off as well.

The London Pedicab Operators Association and Cycling UK have raised the issue of where pedicabs will be able to stand. We already have taxi ranks. If we are to have a properly functioning pedicab regime in central London, there needs to be some provision for the designation of places where pedicabs may stand for hire. Amendment 12 requires that the regulations

“make provision for the designation by traffic authorities”

of pedicab stands. When one walks around London these days, one often finds the pavements littered with bikes, many of which have fallen over and some of which are still on their stands. They obstruct the pavements and there does not seem to be any effective regulation of them. It would be ironic if Transport for London were to single out pedicab operators as not being able to have anywhere to put their pedicab and rest while plying for hire, while the users of what I still call Boris bikes seem to be able to dump their bikes wherever it suits them in London, causing obstruction to the highway and pavement.

Amendment 17 would ensure that the offences created by the pedicab regulations apply only when the pedicab is being used to carry passengers, when travelling to or

from carrying passengers, or when plying for hire. Many pedicabs are used for the transport of goods around London, which is obviously an environmentally friendly means of doing so. Concern has been expressed that if the regulations are designed only to protect passengers and their safety and security, there could be a situation that we do not want to see where the pedicab driver who is just carrying goods finds himself subject to the same potential offences as those carrying passengers.

Nickie Aiken: It is important to note that Pedal Me, an organisation that carries out freight deliveries via pedicabs, has always been supportive of the Bill, because it firmly believes that there should be regulations and that the whole industry should be properly regulated. It already ensures that its drivers are properly checked and safe, and that its vehicles undergo regular, proper security and safety checks. It is an important point to make that parts of the industry—particularly those that carry freight—are supportive of the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, which is similar to one made by the London Pedicab Operators Association, which has been campaigning for 20-plus years to have proper regulation of pedicabs so that its business can be carried out in a lawful and responsible way and not be plagued by rogue operators. It is good to hear that the organisation to which she referred is of a like mind. Indeed, I think nobody across the House is against the idea of having some regulation of pedicabs. The difference is in whether we want to introduce safeguards that will prevent those regulations from being so stringent that they regulate pedicabs out of existence.

When my hon. Friend and I had the discussion to which she referred earlier, she was unfortunately unable to commit—in what was her Bill at that stage—to including provisions that would have set that out in clear language. I suspect that was because, as we know, one of the organisations that would like to legislate pedicabs out of existence is the London Taxi Drivers Association. That is perfectly understandable—it is much easier for its drivers if they have fewer competitors on the streets—but we owe it to the people who have transformed transport for people in the centre of London, particularly in the late evenings and past midnight, and have introduced this alternative: namely, the provision of pedicabs.

Amendment 15 would ensure

“that the powers to immobilise and seize pedicabs are assigned to police constables in uniform or to traffic officers duly authorised by local authorities, and that they are proportionate to the powers to immobilise and seize motor vehicles in section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002.”

I hope that that is a no-brainer and that, in responding, the Minister will be able to assure us that exactly that will happen in practice. At the moment, it is not clear in the regulations that Transport for London has that in mind. It seems to be keen on the fixed penalty notice regime, with all the potential injustice that flows from that.

Amendment 18 is on how we define a pedicab. The amendment would ensure that power-assisted pedicabs—pedicabs not just driven by human effort but assisted with a battery—are defined as a pedicab that conforms to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles Regulations 1983,

thereby securing some consistency across the regime. As you will know, Sir Roger, a power-assisted pedal cycle under those regulations is not allowed to go more than 15.5 mph, although apparently quite a lot of them do. I have seen cyclists going a lot faster than 15.5 mph, but Transport for London has it in mind in the draft regulations to require pedicab operators to install equipment—in effect a speed limiter—that would prevent the pedicabs from going faster than 15.5 mph. That must reinforce the case for saying that electrically assisted pedicabs should be regarded as electrically assisted cycles rather than as other sorts of powered vehicles. There is a clear distinction in law between vehicles subject to the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles Regulations and those that are not, which could be regarded as ordinary motor vehicles.

Whether we define a pedicab as a cycle or as a motor vehicle will have significant implications in third-party liability insurance. One of the biggest constraints on pedicab operators is the cost of insurance. The regulations will rightly require insurance, but it is important that they should be drafted in such a way as to make it easier for the costs of that insurance to be less penal than they might otherwise be if pedicabs were defined as equivalent to an ordinary vehicle.

I have referred to amendment 19, and amendment 3 offers a less preferable alternative.

Amendment 10 would clarify that which is not clear in clause 7: that the Secretary of State's guidance to Transport for London should encompass the making of the regulations as well as the exercise of the functions under those regulations. You will appreciate the difference between those two propositions, Sir Roger. I look forward to hearing whether the Minister can provide us with some reassurance in relation to that guidance.

Amendment 11 goes back to the objectives of this Bill. Chris Smallwood, the spokesman for and on behalf of the London Pedicab Operators Association, has written to me to express his support for my amendments, and he has suggested a number himself. He has said that he has had introductory meetings with officials from TfL. He names them, but I will not repeat their names in the House. He says:

“A concern was that when questioned about the objectives that TfL's regulations are seeking to achieve, they”—

those officials—

“talked only about the safety of pedicab drivers and other road users, which of course is a very important objective, and is reflected in our proposed amendment on the objectives for the Regulations. However, they seemed reluctant to acknowledge that a well-regulated pedicab sector could provide health, environmental and other benefits, and that securing those benefits should also be an objective.”

He went on to say:

“It's not essential that this should be written into the Bill itself, if the Government states that these objectives be written into their guidance to TfL.”

3.30 pm

I hope that, in his response, the Minister will be able to assure us that those objectives will be written into the guidance to Transport for London, because it appears from what is being said by TfL officials, representatives from Cycling UK and the London Pedicab Operators Association that that is not common ground at the moment, which it should be. I hope that my amendment 11,

which sets out the issues to which the Secretary of State must have regard when preparing the guidance, is both helpful and constructive.

Amendment 5 repeats the point made earlier about the need to consult with the London Pedicab Operators Association, Cycling UK and whoever else is thought appropriate. Amendment 16, which is linked with amendment 15, would define a “civil enforcement officer” as having the same meaning as is given in section 76 of the Traffic Management Act 2004. Amendment 13 would insert a provision that a “traffic authority” has the same meaning as in section 121A(1A) and (2) of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984.

Let me turn now to the new clauses and amendments put forward by other Members—I look forward to hearing their contributions. I fear, however, that the collective consequence of those amendments and new clauses would be to make it even easier for pedicabs to be legislated out of existence, rather than facilitating a positive regime, which is what I want, where pedicabs are welcomed, encouraged and enabled to contribute to the life of London. At the same time, the Conservatives would be seen to be supporting the hard-working small businesses that are involved in this perfectly legitimate activity.

I say good luck to all those who wish to promote the cause of pedicabs not just in London, but across the country. Hopefully, in due course, the Government will ensure that pedicabs become a much more widespread means of transport in places where they are not currently used, despite the efforts of a few entrepreneurs, I hope the Government will introduce appropriate regulations so that it will be not just London but the United Kingdom that is prided across the world as having this very important form of transport.

Mr Evans, may I say what a pleasure it is to be speaking with you in the Chair? However, having said that, I am very grateful to Sir Roger for not having interrupted me once during the time that I have been speaking. I hope that that is an indication of the genuine good will that exists across the House about the importance of this issue and how we need to get to grips with it and resolve it amicably.

This issue has been going on for more than 20 years. As I mentioned on Second Reading, it could have been dealt with in the 2005 private legislation, which was brought forward by London authorities. It has never been implemented because there has always been a conflict between those in London who want to legislate pedicabs out of existence and those who wish to have a properly licensed regime with good, effective and proportionate regulation. On that basis, I commend my amendments to the Committee.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): If no one else wishes to speak, we will come to the Front Benchers. I call the shadow Minister.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in my inaugural Committee of the whole House on behalf of the official Opposition. As we set out on Second Reading, Labour is clear that the Bill can help to sustain a thriving London pedicab industry that is also safe and trusted by its customers, and we support its progress. However, there are two areas in which Labour believes that the Bill can be

improved: pedicab infrastructure, and the crucial safeguard of requiring enhanced disclosure and barring service checks for pedicab drivers.

Amendment 8, which was tabled in my name and those of my Front-Bench colleagues, would enable Transport for London to use pedicab licence fees for investment in pedicab infrastructure in London. Alongside passenger safety and unregulated fare charging, one of the biggest issues presented by unregulated pedicabs is the nuisance of operators blocking pavements and roads as they ply for trade. The Heart of London Business Alliance, which represents over 600 businesses across London’s west end, is clear that pedicabs frequently block pavements and roads outside many of its members’ premises. That can cause chaos at busy periods, such as when many hundreds of people are filing out into the street after a west end show.

The amendment would enable Transport for London to use fees levied from pedicab licences to invest in infrastructure that supports the industry. That infrastructure could include designated pedicab ranks in certain areas, designed to relieve the nuisance of blocked pavements by giving operators a specific area in which to pick up customers. TfL has already set out in its potential licensing framework that it will consult stakeholders on the provision of pedicab stands. I hope that the Heart of London Business Alliance, along with other associations and bodies, including the London Pedicab Operators Association, can feed into those discussions.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a good closing speech on why regulation is important. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and I share the view that the Bill strikes the right balance between allowing a sustainable and supported pedicab industry to develop, and giving Transport for London the powers that it needs to ensure that the sector runs safely. Does he agree?

Simon Lightwood: I agree, but there could be enhanced DBS checks, which our new clause 3 would provide for.

As I have said, TfL has already set out in its potential licensing framework that it will consult stakeholders, and I hope that that will include the London Pedicab Operators Association. Of course, although it is vital that fees are set at a level that enables investment, they must remain proportionate. We are trying to provide for a prosperous pedicab industry, after all, so we must ensure that fees are not prohibitive. Clause 2(4) already provides for TfL to set fees at a level that enables the recovery of costs incurred for administering the licensing scheme. Licensing fees being set on a cost recovery basis is fair and proportionate. Amendment 8 to clause 2(4) would simply grant TfL a degree of flexibility while acknowledging the benefits that investment in pedicabs infrastructure can have.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech clearly setting out the importance of having the right balance. Does he agree that, from this work in London, lessons could be learned for other towns and cities around the country, and that encouraging the pedicab industry and other delivery by bicycle in a sensitive way around the country could generate a great number of local jobs and remove fumes and other menaces from the public realm?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend makes a very important point; hopefully, during TfL's consultation, it will engage with those other organisations to ensure maximum benefit. Labour's priority, after all, is to grant TfL the flexibility it needs to implement a regulatory regime that promotes safety while also allowing the regulated pedicab industry in London to flourish. Naturally, infrastructure such as pedicab stands would be competing against many different demands for the use of central London's kerbsides, and it will remain TfL's responsibility to work with local authorities on where infrastructure can be viably located.

Some hon. Members may not agree that this Bill is an appropriate place to discuss pedicab infrastructure. Labour believes that on the contrary, the conduct of pedicab drivers and the safety of the public are undeniably linked to TfL's ability to fund and make provision for infrastructure that supports a regulated pedicab industry. Amendment 8 clarifies one potential revenue stream for the provision of that infrastructure, and I hope the Government will consider its merits carefully.

I now turn to new clauses 1 to 3, which stand in my name and those of my Front-Bench colleagues. All three new clauses concern the safety of children and vulnerable adults using pedicabs. As we heard on Second Reading, and as has been reported widely in the media and by numerous stakeholders, misconduct by pedicab operators arguably provides the strongest case for the desperate need to regulate the industry. Blocking streets and pavements, reckless driving and noise nuisance are all important areas that regulation will address, but they pale in comparison with the vital responsibility we have to ensure that TfL has the power to ensure public safety effectively. As TfL's proposed licensing framework sets out, that emphasis on safety will be its guiding principle for pedicab regulations.

At the front and centre are eligibility requirements for operators and drivers. TfL has set out a raft of proposed licensing requirements, including alignment of visa status requirements with taxi and private hire licensing, English proficiency, and highway code and hazard perception awareness. That is of course welcome, but TfL is also clear that it would like to see compulsory enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks for pedicab drivers, again in line with the taxi and private hire requirements. That should be a vital component of ensuring the safety of pedicab customers, but TfL has explicitly stated on page 5 of its draft licensing framework that it would require changes in legislation, because while clause 2(6)(a) of the Bill empowers TfL to regulate licensing eligibility, enhanced DBS checks may not form part of those requirements if TfL does not have the right powers. Those difficulties were raised in the other place and were acknowledged by the Lords Minister himself.

The draft licensing framework also makes a clear distinction between basic and enhanced DBS checks, and explicitly states that enhanced DBS checks for pedicab drivers would be TfL's preference. I say for the benefit of colleagues that an enhanced DBS check may show information held by local police forces on individuals. That intelligence may prove vital when deciding whether to award a licence to a pedicab driver, and it is absolutely right that TfL should be able to require enhanced checks. While enhanced DBS checks are not a panacea, they are clearly an important component of thorough

eligibility requirements. Labour recognises the need to balance getting the Bill swiftly on to the statute books with the need to ensure that it conveys sufficient powers to TfL to truly make pedicabs a trusted and safe mode of transport in London. If TfL does not have the right powers to vet pedicab drivers through enhanced DBS checks, that will threaten its ability to truly implement a watershed regulatory framework.

Labour's new clause 1 would add this Bill, upon Royal Assent, to the list of existing taxi and private hire vehicle legislation under section 177 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017. As colleagues may be aware, section 177 empowers the Secretary of State to issue statutory guidance on how licensing authorities can ensure the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. Including pedicabs in the list of licensed activities covered by the statutory guidance would be a crucial step towards a safer pedicab industry.

Labour's new clause 2 is designed to build on new clause 1 by turning the Secretary of State's power to issue statutory guidance to TfL into a duty. Crucially, under subsection (2), this guidance would also include a requirement for enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks to be a condition of a licence. In concert with new clause 1, this new clause would equip TfL with the powers it needs to properly regulate in the name of safety by including enhanced DBS checks as a baseline standard for driver eligibility.

3.45 pm

Finally, Labour's new clause 3 would insert into the Bill the power for TfL to make enhanced DBS checks as a condition of a licence to operate a pedicab, and provides for the Secretary of State to amend the relevant secondary legislation to facilitate this. It is important to emphasise once again that these are powers that Transport for London has explicitly said it wants to use.

If we are to truly place safety at the heart of these regulations, TfL must have the power to mandate an enhanced DBS check for all pedicab drivers, and the three new clauses provide a way to achieve that. However, in the spirit of getting the Bill on to the statute book as urgently as possible, if it is clear that these amendments do not have the support of the House, I am content to not push them to a vote.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I wish to address all the amendments that have been put down by all colleagues. I am conscious that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) representing the Liberal Democrats is not present, but I will deal with her amendments 21, 6 and 7 very briefly. On her amendment 21, the consultation will happen as she seeks. On her amendment 6, clause 2(7) addresses her concerns on that. On her amendment 7, I believe that that is covered by clause 7(6).

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) has put forward a number of amendments. He and I have discussed this on a previous occasion and prior to today, and I will address a couple of his key points. They were made in the best possible way and in the right spirit, being conscious of what was discussed in the other place. On his new clause 1, we believe it is not necessary given that clause 7(2) already achieves the policy intention by specifying that the Secretary of

[*Guy Opperman*]

State's guidance may include guidance about TfL's functions. The key point is that we believe clause 7(2) addresses the overarching themes.

The crucial point the hon. Member wants to make is about DBS checks, and I acknowledge that point. Clearly, there are the primary checks we have repeatedly discussed in the past, but I am strongly instructed that the appropriate way to deal with these matters is to make amendments to the exceptions through the Police Act 1997 (Criminal Records) Regulations 2002, under the negative procedure, and the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975, under the affirmative procedure.

I can tell the Committee that the Home Office and, in particular, the Ministry of Justice are currently considering a range of proposals for changes to such eligibility, and we are looking to bring forward a consolidated package of changes in due course. I am not able to do that at this stage, and I do not feel that this Bill is the right venue to do it. However, the hon. Member's point is well noted, has been taken on board and is very much live in the Ministry of Justice's considerations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), in his typical way, made a heartfelt speech setting out his genuine concerns and his genuine desire to ensure that there is a pedicab business on an ongoing basis post regulation. I welcome his concern on that point, and as a strong Conservative I want to see exactly the same as him. I put that on record, and I make it very clear that we want a thousand flowers to bloom and we want pedicabs to continue on a long-term basis.

I know there is a desire to trade who said what over the last few years, but I want briefly to put on record some of the comments from some of the key organisations engaged here. Clearly, the London Pedicab Operators Association has made a variety of comments down the years. On 7 November 2023 one of the spokesmen, Mr Schroder, stated:

"It's handy for us to have legislation and rules and regulations for the operators which includes insurance... we've been competing against operators who don't follow any rules, who can do what they want, and that makes it difficult... It's a shame that they don't involve the industry in making the decisions, because then it's take it or leave it."

Mention was made of Mr Smallwood, who stated in August 2022 that he was "optimistic" because probably for the first time, all parties have a determination to finally establish a bespoke regulatory regime for pedicabs that extends throughout the country. He said this was a "positive and exciting" opportunity, and perhaps a singular chance in the foreseeable future to resolve this long-standing issue. He added—I think this is relevant to consideration of whether we are creating a bespoke arrangement to allow an organisation to continue in a safely regulated way—that regulations across Europe and the USA are simple, straightforward and effective. Clearly it is possible to regulate pedicabs and at the same time to allow the industry to flourish.

Matt Rodda: Will the Minister reflect on the benefits of this regulatory approach being brought forward to look at other comparable new and emerging forms of transport, particularly electric bikes and scooters? There is a great deal of concern among my constituents and

others that we need a sensible approach to these new vehicles that encourages the use of more modest and environmentally friendly transport, but that also keeps them off pavements and avoids people being scared to walk down the street. Will he commit to looking into that important matter as well?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to go somewhat beyond the Bill, and I will try to address that issue in a couple of ways. Clearly, the Department for Transport must look at all types of vehicles, in whatever shape or form, that utilise the roads, including cycles and various types of scooter and the like. It is complex legislation, as we are showing by dealing just with the simple issue of pedicabs, but it is unquestionably the case—I speak as the Minister who answers for accessibility issues—that this cannot be the long-term situation. I accept that a research project is ongoing in respect of these alternative vehicles, but that cannot be the case long term.

It is my humble opinion that we have an unregulated system where vehicles can be deposited on the pavement, and those who have accessibility issues, or who are blind or have other disabilities, are unquestionably compromised by that. There must be regulation going forward. I am keen to see that but again—this slightly touches on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch—there has to be a way to get the right form of regulation to allow this to go ahead. To be fair to successive Mayors of London, having what are sometimes called Boris bikes, and sometimes called other types of bikes, with a docking station, has been exceptionally successful at getting people out of a bus or car, and it is the right thing to do. I am utterly on board with what the hon. Gentleman says. It is for all parties to look at their transport manifestos, but it would unquestionably be my view, as a very junior and humble Minister, that we must consider that issue.

Ben Knowles of Pedal Me stated that pedicabs

"have been undermined by the business models under which they're run and by the lack of regulation... So I'm really excited to see this regulation coming in because I think it might help boost standards across the industry and turn it into the reputable, useful service it always should have been."

To assist my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, and all colleagues, I asked TfL to update, improve and enhance its draft regulations, and I wish to try to address that briefly. I do not think I have ever come across a Bill that is so brief but has such detailed draft regulations for pre-scrutiny. I have done this job for 14 years, and I have never seen such copious detail.

Nickie Aiken: My hon. Friend is making an important point. I have not always seen eye to eye with the current Mayor, but on the regulation of pedicabs we are absolutely at one. I know from his transport strategy that he wants to encourage more cycling and more green transport, which pedicabs are. The last thing the Mayor of London wants to do is eradicate pedicabs, and the fact that these draft guidelines have been put together and that the Mayor has worked closely with the Department for Transport make it clear that they want this regime to work.

Guy Opperman: May I put on record my agreement with my hon. Friend? The Department for Transport and TfL have worked closely to make progress. There is a desperate desire to get regulation ongoing, so that

pedicabs can go forward as a properly regulated business. To be fair, TfL has put that in writing, and I briefly mention the comments at paragraph 2, which states

“we recognise the need for regulations to not only improve safety but to minimise the other associated negative impacts pedicabs have on London, from congestion on streets and pavements, to loud music causing public nuisance or disproportionate fares undermining London’s reputation as a global tourist hub. Once this behaviour is effectively managed through a regulatory regime however, we believe there are a number of benefits pedicabs may have, especially in central areas, where these services could offer a green and space efficient option.”

I do not think TfL could have been any more clearer about its intent to have a regulatory regime, but also a safe regime.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Minister for making those points, and I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). It is fitting, as we are coming to the last few debates in the Chamber before Easter, that the Bill has been resurrected perhaps five times. We are nearly there. On what the Minister has just outlined, does he agree that there is cross-party support for seeing a pedicabs industry that works, that supports customers and drivers, and that can flourish? Unfortunately, the current situation is causing tensions, hence why we need this legislation passed quickly.

Guy Opperman: It is unquestionable that this Bill has cross-party support. Even my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, who has understandable concerns, is supportive of light-touch regulation on an ongoing basis.

May I just address a couple of extra points? It is on the record that the Bill does not require a statement under section 13C of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which is good news.

I will be moving my amendment 20. As for my hon. Friend’s amendments, I regret that I will disappoint him, as I do not agree with them, but I will deal with them briefly. Amendment 9 is covered by clause 7(5). Amendment 1 is covered by clause 1(3), which requires a statutory public consultation. We have the updated and published February 2024 guidance. On amendment 2, those bodies will be consulted, and no reasonable consultation could possibly go ahead without them being involved. Amendment 4 is dealt with by clause 7. Amendment 12 is the same issue as raised by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney).

On amendment 17, the Bill is unquestionably for pedicabs transporting passengers. Amendment 14 is dealt with by clause 3(5). Amendment 15 talks about what would happen in practice, but it is dealt with by clause 3(6). Amendment 18 is dealt with by clause 1(2), which defines pedicabs as a pedal cycle or power-assisted pedal cycle. The term “power-assisted” captures the point raised by the amendment, and is broader than “electrically assisted”. Amendments 3 and 19 have been dealt with previously, but clearly the Secretary of State must have the power to assess this process once the Bill has progressed. Amendment 10 is about guidance not circumventing consultation and regulation. Amendment 11 is dealt with by clause 7(1).

Sir Christopher Chope: Will the Minister assure me that under no circumstances will the Government allow Transport for London to prevent pedicabs from being able to ply for hire?

Guy Opperman: With great respect, this matter should be dealt with through the upcoming consultation. TfL could not be any clearer than the introduction to said consultation, where it states that it wishes pedicabs to continue. It is unquestionably the case that they will have to manage the number of pedicabs there are, but, with great respect, that is dealt with in both the introduction and the subsequent matters. After all, that is the point of a consultation. There should be an open consultation discussing the matter with all the particular individuals relevant to it.

In those circumstances and, with due respect, I invite all colleagues not to press their amendments, and I commend the Bill to the House.

4 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: I thank the Minister and everybody who has participated in the debate. On the last point about plying for hire, it seems as though Transport for London is actively contemplating a situation in which no pedicabs will be able to ply for hire. Page 8 of the consultation states, “If, following consultation, pedicabs are allowed to continue to ply for hire”. That envisages a situation in which they might not be allowed to ply for hire. Unless they can ply for hire, that is the end of pedicabs as we know them.

The proof of the pudding will be in the eating on this matter. I have seen over the years in London how we had a Greater London Council that interfered and acted against the wishes of the people. We now see Transport for London alienating a lot of people over the ultra low emission zone extension and its proliferation of 20 mph limits. I suppose we must trust Transport for London to ensure that it actually does what it says it will do, but I am grateful to the Minister for pointing out that he and I are *ad idem* in our determination to ensure that there is a vibrant, lively and continuing pedicab industry in London. In those circumstances, I will withdraw my amendments because there is no need to take the matter any further, but I look forward to the consultations that will flow on those regulations. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): Just for the record, Sir Roger told me that you were gloriously within order throughout speaking to the amendments.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11

SHORT TITLE

Amendment made: 20, page 6, line 1, leave out subsection (2).—(Guy Opperman.)

This amendment removes the privilege amendment inserted by the Lords.

Clause 11, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

4.3 pm

Guy Opperman: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I would like to place on the record my gratitude to colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who has fought nobly to bring forward this vital legislation to the good burghers of London on an ongoing basis, through thick and thin, through private Member's Bill, through fair winds and foul. She has done a phenomenal job.

It is rightly said that this is a cross-party Bill. I thank Transport for London for its work with the Department for Transport and my officials, who have done a fantastic job to take it forward. It is right that I mention my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who tried to introduce this legislation previously. Fundamentally, this legislation has been overdue for well over 20 years. It is an important but discrete piece of legislation, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.5 pm

Simon Lightwood: I will keep my remarks brief, as this is the penultimate main business before the Easter recess, and far be it for me to delay colleagues returning to their constituencies. I am grateful for all hon. Members who have participated in the Bill's progress, particularly the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I am grateful for the hard work of colleagues in the other place, which meant that the Bill came to us in a much improved state, specifically by adding the provision for the regulation of noise nuisance. Their efforts to pressure the Government into changing their approach on requiring parliamentary approval ensured that the powers are fully devolved to Transport for London. That is commendable.

As I set out on Second Reading and again in Committee, Labour supports the Bill. For years there have been calls on the Government to grant Transport for London the powers it needs to regulate this industry. Labour welcomes the Bill as that will finally become law, and a regulated pedicab industry in London will soon emerge, but it has taken far too long to get here.

I must repeat what I emphasised on Second Reading: there is no doubt that the Bill is hugely welcome to London's west end and a handful of other London areas, but these measures should have been introduced as part of a far wider transport Bill. Elsewhere in transport policy there remains desperate need for major transport reform, particularly on e-bikes and e-scooters, but the Government continue to duck that responsibility and have refused to use this opportunity to bring forward a long-promised and long-delayed transport Bill.

I have been listening carefully to the Minister's arguments, and I welcome the Government being content that TfL can mandate enhanced DBS checks for pedicabs under current private hire vehicle legislation. It is regrettable that proposed new clauses 1 to 3, all pertaining to the safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children, were not accepted. TfL itself has indicated throughout its draft licensing framework that passenger safety will be its guiding principle, and it is keen to incorporate enhanced DBS checks into licensing conditions under clause 2(6)(a), but believes that it currently does not have the powers to

do so. Each of Labour's new clauses offered a different way forward to incorporating enhanced DBS checks into TfL's regulations.

It is disappointing that the Government have not taken the new clauses forward, but Labour welcomes the opportunity that tabling them has presented to facilitate a discussion on the importance of TfL having the powers to integrate enhanced DBS checks into its licensing regime. I welcome the exploration of alternative means, as the Minister described, to achieve the same objectives. In the light of that, I gently ask the Minister to meet me at his earliest convenience to discuss this issue further, and to identify ways that we can work together on a cross-party basis to grant TfL the powers it needs to keep customers safe.

Overall, this Bill is welcome, if not long overdue. It is a great addition to the statute book. Once again, I thank all hon. Members and Lords in the other place for their involvement, in addition to the Clerks and stakeholders who have helped us scrutinise the Bill effectively.

4.8 pm

Florence Eshalomi: It is great to see progress on this Bill. I want to start by congratulating my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), on first introducing the Bill. I congratulate her on her persistence in getting this hard, long-awaited Bill to its last remaining stages. Like her, my Front-Bench colleagues and the Mayor of London, I have long supported the Bill as a means of giving Transport for London real power to regulate our pedicabs.

I will keep my remarks short. As others have highlighted today, the Bill highlights the serious problem of the unregulated regime for pedicabs in my constituency and other parts of London. My support for the Bill does not come from wanting to see pedicabs banned for good in all forms from our streets. Instead, like everybody else, I want a properly regulated industry that works for everybody. Unfortunately, what we have currently is one that creates tensions. Businesses see their pavements blocked and consumers discouraged, and residents are disrupted by excessively loud music during unsociable hours. Passengers face hiked, or even extortionate, fees for really short journeys. Most importantly, drivers themselves are forced to work in dangerous conditions and are undercut by those who cut corners in maintenance.

The Bill, with support from the Department for Transport, the Mayor of London and cross-party councils across London, strikes the right balance in allowing a sustainable and supported pedicabs industry to develop and flourish. We have waited far too long for it to be passed. While we have been waiting, we have continued to see people being ripped off, and consumers and visitors deterred from coming into the heart of London. We want more tourists bringing their families and their money, but when they have a bad experience, that spreads faster than the good experience. It is therefore really important that we continue to work together in the spirit of cross-party collaboration, and ensure we put an end to unregulated practice and get the Bill on to the statute book.

4.10 pm

Nickie Aiken: I cannot quite believe we are here, to be honest. Mr Deputy Speaker, you have spent many a Friday in the Chair listening to me make the argument

for why we need pedicab regulation. It has never been about eradicating pedicabs. It has always been about making them safer for the tourists who use them and for the drivers who drive them, and making Westminster a much more pleasant place to live, work and have a business.

People do not appreciate that in the west end of London there are thousands of people living in social housing, whether in Soho, Fitzrovia, Covent Garden or Marylebone. They have no choice where they live. They are given a home in a social housing block, whether via the council or a housing association, and they are not able to move. Often, they have to live with horrendous experiences that a minority of pedicabs ply: the loud music played for hours on end in the early hours; tourists ripped off; and so many other examples.

We must continue to grow the London economy, especially the central London economy, which has taken such a battering following covid and the energy crisis. We need to ensure that when tourists come here they have a fantastic time. I personally fully believe that licensing for pedicabs will improve the offer. It will ensure that people enjoy it and that they have a special time in London.

I am absolutely delighted that, after four private Members' Bills, the Government accepted the need for the Bill. I reiterate my thanks to those in No. 10, Will Tanner and James Nation, for all the support they gave me, and to the Prime Minister, who was fully behind it. My greatest thanks go to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who has really worked me on this. I thank him so much. I thank the shadow Front Benchers for their support and my dear friend the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi)—people talk about having friendships in the Chamber, and I am so proud to have her as a friend. I would also like to thank all the organisations across the west end—the Soho Society, the Marylebone Association and others—who have been behind me all the way. I honestly believe the Bill will make a huge difference, so I thank everyone again. For the people of the west end, this will make a huge difference.

4.13 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: I, too, add my thanks to the people involved in this issue. In particular, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for the way in which she has taken forward the interests of her constituents. I am disappointed, in a sense, that she has decided to throw in the towel and not stand again at the next general election. Perhaps in her retirement from the House she will be able to become a licensed pedicab driver herself—[*Laughter*—]and thereby be able to use her knowledge and experience. She certainly will not have much difficulty in being able to pass the regulatory requirement of knowing the location of central London and how to get around it.

I also thank the London Pedicab Operators Association and Cycling UK, both of which have helped me in putting questions about the Bill. I think it important for awkward questions to be put to those who are promoting legislation such as this, and I have found it disappointing that a number of London Members have not questioned any of it. I think that today's interchange between the

Minister and me should concentrate minds on ensuring that the regulations, when they are finally implemented, do exactly what we want them to do, so that we are able to have a thriving pedicab industry and activity throughout the country, rather than just in London. As we have heard, that is already the case on the continent and in North America.

Soon after I was elected—a long time ago—I started to take my two children on a tandem trailer, with my wife and I on the tandem. As a result, my commitment to cycling knows no bounds and cannot be questioned. I hope that the Bill will reinforce the strong case for cycling, and encourage more people to take the strain and allow others to join them. Indeed, an increasing number of parents are now taking their children to school and on outings on the back of their bikes, and good on them for doing so.

It may have taken 20 years for this legislation to get here, but reforming legislation is an iterative process. Twenty-odd years ago the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association was completely against the idea of pedicabs, but I hope we will find that it now tolerates and indeed accepts them, and perhaps we can encourage taxi organisations outside London to welcome this very valuable alternative form of transport.

4.17 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I will be brief, because I had not intended to speak, but having followed the debate, particularly in Committee and on Third Reading, I want to thank my hon. Friend—I say that with such heartfelt meaning—the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who has demonstrated the power of this place. We talk about coming here and making tangible change, but what has happened today—in addition to the commendable work that my hon. Friend has done, along with the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), in producing this legislation—just goes to show that despite the bandying around and argy-bargy that sometimes happens, we can make truly bring about real change.

I must also put on the record how sad I am to lose my hon. Friend from this place, and how much of a loss it will be. She represents, without doubt, the best of this place and, if I may say so, the best of our party. I want to say how proud I am to have watched her take the Bill forward over the last four years in the way that she has. The fact that she has been able to do this for her constituents constitutes a monument to her and a legacy. I simply say to her—and I think we would all agree, across the House—that she should be very proud of what she has done today, because she has followed this through and won it for her constituents. She has done what all of us in this place set out to do, and I think that her constituents will be proud of her and grateful as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are all going to miss you, Nickie—although obviously I will be going out to Dubai to stay for a few weeks.

Nickie Aiken: I will have a room ready for you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Here we go!

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with an amendment.

National Networks National Policy Statement

[Relevant document: Ninth Report of the Transport Committee of Session 2022-23, National Networks National Policy Statement, HC 903, and the Government response, Session 2023-24.]

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I beg to move,

That this House approves the National Policy Statement for National Networks, which was laid before this House on 6 March.

It is me again—it is déjà vu all over again. I will be brief in my opening speech. I stand here today as the Minister in the Department for Transport who is responsible for infrastructure planning and delivery, although some of my colleagues handle some of the other key development consent orders in that respect.

The national networks national policy statement, or NNNPS, provides the planning framework for determining applications for nationally significant road, rail and strategic freight interchange projects. These are schemes determined under the process set out in the Planning Act 2008. The NNNPS sets out why we need to develop these networks, and how applications for projects will be assessed. It does not set out locations where national network development will take place, neither is it a transport strategy governing wider transport policies, such as active travel. The existing NNNPS was designated in 2015, and approximately 30 road, rail and SRFI schemes have gained consent since then.

The draft NNNPS was subject to public consultation. Alongside that, the Transport Committee, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), undertook an inquiry into the draft. We have made a number of changes in response to the Committee's work, and I want to put on the record that I am grateful to the Committee for its careful consideration of all the issues raised through both written and oral evidence. I would like to apologise on the record to the Committee, because our initial response to its report did not include a response to one of its recommendations. Today, I have laid in the House an amended version of the response, which responds to all the recommendations, including the recommendation concerning the application of the NNNPS to other consenting regimes, such as under the Transport and Works Act 1992. The NNNPS already provides guidance to applicants on that point, and we believe that this strikes the right balance.

You will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we have invested £24 billion in the country's most important roads through the second road investment strategy, and are committed to the next five-year plan for maintaining and enhancing the network. In Network North, we have recognised the importance of local road infrastructure by providing major increases in funding for the major network programme, with some £900 million extra in the midlands and £1.4 billion extra in the north to support regional connectivity and growth.

Our railways are a vital part of the country's transport infrastructure, and well-targeted rail investments play a crucial role in growing the economy and meeting the connectivity needs of customers and businesses. We also want to ensure that we support freight in all its

forms. Freight trains carry goods worth over £30 billion per year across a range of different commodities—specifically, supporting construction and intermodal flows, which can include customers' goods.

It is right that we provide a planning policy framework that enables us to deliver projects and investment as quickly as possible. The revised NNNPS does that, and I commend this statement to the House.

4.22 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I had anticipated a slightly longer opening speech from the Minister. Nevertheless, here we are today to debate a new national networks national policy statement, a decade after the previous statement was published in 2014. The right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) originally promised that the Government would review the NNNPS in July 2021, but here we are, nearly three years on from that promise and a decade on from the last published statement. Perhaps the Minister could explain why it took so long to get to this point.

The UK committed to reach net zero by 2050 when we signed the Paris agreement in 2015. It is not good enough that it took nine years for net zero to finally be integrated into the NNNPS. Since 2015, we have moved backwards on net zero. Just look at the Prime Minister's delaying of the end of the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans. This rowing back on net zero is not just a disaster for the planet; it will worsen the cost of living crisis for drivers, with an estimated cost to consumers of an eye-watering £13 billion in higher fuel costs as a direct result of the Prime Minister's decision.

Then there is the mess he made of HS2. The irony and symbolism of where he made the announcement is lost on no one: a disused railway station at the end of the proposed line. Everyone recognises the impact of the decision on net zero. Even the writers of "The Thick of It" would have dismissed such a plotline as far too implausible.

Freight trains have 76% fewer emissions than the equivalent road transport capacity, but because of the Prime Minister's chaotic decision making, half a million more lorry journeys will add to the clogging up of our roads every year by carrying freight that could have been delivered by rail. I wonder whether the Minister will respond to that point about rail freight.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman has raised a legitimate point about HS2. Clearly the Prime Minister's decision on 6 October was to redistribute that funding to a variety of projects, particularly in the north, but what is the Labour party policy? Is its manifesto proposal to continue with HS2 and the second leg or not?

Bill Esterson: It is a shame that the Minister did not stand up to announce that the Government had found some miraculous way of returning to the consensus. We know that the Conservatives have taken a wrecking ball to the HS2 project, and that they blew the budget, which is why they cancelled it, so we are not going to be able to revive it. After the rushing through of the fire sale of the land, the downgrading of ambition on major stations such as Euston and the reallocation of funding originally meant for HS2, which I think he referred to in his speech, there is no way we would be able to revive it.

Is it any wonder that the Transport Committee has warned us that there is still a lot of catching up to do when it comes to our climate change commitments and to ensuring that we deliver major infrastructure projects on time and to budget? The Transport Committee's members made their concerns crystal clear when they said that

“the Government should have been proactive and reviewed the NPS upon the introduction of Net Zero targets, and should do when any changes are made to net zero target policies”.

Yet the latest national networks national policy statement still leaves gaps, notably in its admission that

“residual carbon emissions as an impact of NSIP”—

nationally significant infrastructure project—

“schemes are acceptable”.

There is a further lack of clarity over what “residual carbon emissions” means in practice, and the policy statement does not offer a process to distinguish between acceptable residual emissions and emissions that would mean carbon targets would not be met. The Transport Planning Society has even warned that the contradiction between the NNNPS and the transport decarbonisation plans is “potentially incredibly dangerous”.

We all know that our planning system is broken, with too many projects bogged down in development limbo for years on end as they wait for a decision, but the Transport Committee has warned that the gaps in this policy statement that I have just identified could lead to even more costly and time-consuming legal challenges to major projects on climate grounds. This would slow down our snail's-pace planning system even further, and it is the taxpayer that would pay the price for the delays.

The flaws in the statement do not stop there. The Government have failed to take into account local authority-level targets and carbon budgets, to ensure that the local level impact of major development projects is taken into account. Meanwhile, Midlands Connect warns that sub-national transport bodies have also been snubbed. Many of these bodies have already developed strategic transport plans at regional level to support economic growth and reduce carbon emissions. They should not be ignored.

The National Infrastructure Planning Association has highlighted a lack of clarity in a number of areas, such as the frequency with which policy is reviewed, and the need for further detail to be published. The organisation warned that “weak links” ultimately result in

“delays to decisions on DCO applications”.

It warns that those delays to development consent orders could

“slow down the delivery of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects”.

So will the Minister tell us whether the Government are going to take the action that is needed so that Britain does not fall even further behind in the development of vital national infrastructure?

On the subject of existing delays to planning, the planning process has already become cumbersome and slow under this Government, with the time taken to grant development consent orders increasing by 65% since 2012, to more than four years. In response to the Transport Committee's report, which flagged the planning

system as a key source of delay in delivering infrastructure projects, the Government themselves even admitted that they recognised

“the need for modernisation and reform to the planning system”.

I have covered the shambolic approach to HS2, but a whole range of other major infrastructure projects that the Minister's Department is supposedly committed to delivering have seen soaring costs and repeated delays. Years of failure to deliver rail infrastructure upgrades such as the midland main line have robbed communities of the benefits of better transport services.

The Minister mentioned his so-called Network North proposal, but I remind him that 85% of its projects are reannouncements. Much of the investment is not even in the north. In fact, some of it includes filling potholes in London—I do not think it is just north London, either.

Although the headline figure masks the fact that the money is spread over 11 years, as we established at Transport questions on Thursday, the average annual funding is equivalent to only a third of last year's increase in the backlog of local road repairs. The consequences of these failures are not theoretical but all too real. Communities are being denied the huge economic opportunities that transport infrastructure projects can deliver, and they are currently stuck relying on creaking Victorian infrastructure.

The reality is that this Government's track record on delivering nationally significant infrastructure projects is woeful. Today's debate should be an opportunity to review and to learn from what has gone wrong after 14 years of delays, failures to deliver, constant policy changes and contradictions. Unlike this Government, Labour is committed to meeting our climate obligations and to getting Britain building again.

We recognise the need to address the bottlenecks on our rail network to cut congestion and emissions, which is why we have committed to a credible and transformative programme of transport infrastructure investment to link our towns and cities, particularly across the north and midlands. We also recognise the need to deliver for drivers by cutting congestion, improving the state of public transport and removing the barriers that are blocking the electric vehicle charging infrastructure roll-out.

Labour will do what this Government have failed to do by reforming the broken planning system to ensure that upgrades and progress on our transport infrastructure are actually delivered. Labour's plan for government will accelerate infrastructure delivery, extend the reforms in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 and ensure that the action plan for the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime covers the Transport and Works Act 1992, the Highways Act 1980 and the hybrid Bill process. We will encourage active travel, support public transport and give local authorities the power to better integrate their local transport networks.

We have launched an independent review of transport infrastructure. Driven by industry experts, the review will explore how transport infrastructure can be delivered on time and on budget, learning lessons from the mess that this Government have made of major projects such as HS2. We will update all national policy statements within six months of taking office to ensure they help, not hinder, the construction of important transport infrastructure projects.

[Bill Esterson]

Labour is serious about learning the lessons from the staggering failure of the last 14 years. We accept that this national policy statement improves on what came before in some areas, which is why we will not oppose it today, but the Minister really should set out why he believes that the policy statement's lack of clarity on crucial points, particularly on climate change commitments, will not worsen the delays that are already slowing our planning system to a crawl.

If the Minister cannot or will not provide those answers today, Labour will look again at the provisions when we embark on our own review of the national policy statements. As we seek to ensure that we both respect our climate change commitments and deliver on our mission to get Britain building again, Labour does not accept the managed decline of our vital infrastructure. We will not accept barriers and blockages to the upgrades we need for smoother, greener transport and to enable everyone to benefit from the enhanced economic opportunities that will follow from better transport connections.

Britain is the country that gave the world the railways. We can and should be leading the world on delivering better, greener transport infrastructure. In government, Labour will make that a reality.

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

4.34 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to make a short contribution to this debate. As the Minister alluded to, the Transport Committee conducted the scrutiny of the draft national networks NPS. We concluded it in October last year and published our recommendations. Before I get into the substance of my remarks, let me take this opportunity to place on record my grateful thanks to the Clerk of the Committee, Judith Boyce, her team, all the advisers we had and the witnesses who gave us evidence. Particularly on topics that can be very technical, their support and guidance was invaluable, and I thank them all for helping me in this work.

The review of the NNNPS was overdue and I am glad that the Government appreciated that there was a need for an update. I am also grateful that they accepted one of our central recommendations: that the NNNPS should be placed on a five-yearly review, with a shorter review term if that is justified by policy changes. That does not mean we should look forward to a complete handbrake turn revision of the NNNPS, but it is important that there is the opportunity to consider the wider policy environment and Government priorities.

I also very much welcome the Government's acceptance of some of our other recommendations, with the first being that the NNNPS should, for clarity, explicitly state the Government's understanding of the legal precedent for permitting major infrastructure schemes that increase emissions where that increase is judged as not likely to harm the achievement of a national target. Secondly, the Government accepted that they should publish their own estimated congestion forecasts for the strategic road network. Thirdly, they accepted a reinstatement of wording on sites of special scientific interest. The draft

did not contain that and without it developers may have been able to argue that the impacts of a project on biodiversity would not need to be mitigated. I am particularly grateful that that wording has been reinstated.

Alongside the Government's response to our recommendations, we heard two welcome announcements. The first was of a review of the transport infrastructure legislation to seek more effective delivery of future nationally significant infrastructure projects. Perhaps most significant was the announcement by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, that a wider independent review would be set up, headed by Lord Banner, on speeding up the delivery of major infrastructure projects. Over many Governments, there has been a frustration that significant projects required for the country take too long, so looking at ways to speed this up is very much to be welcomed.

I just want to caveat that welcome with a suggestion that we also need to look more widely at the strategic decision-making process for transport and related infrastructure. The NNNPS and the two reviews I mentioned look at the "how" of transport infrastructure project delivery but less at the "why" and the "should". One recommendation we made, which the Government rejected, was that they should be more transparent in the decision-making process on potential alternatives to nationally significant infrastructure project choices. The rejection of that recommendation raises a concern with me, as transport projects are not just put in place for the sake of it; we do not build a new railway, road, port extension and so on just because it is good in itself. These projects are there for a purpose; they are there to support wider policy objectives. Be it in supporting trade, housing and economic regeneration, decarbonisation or many other things, transport does not sit in glorious isolation from other policy objectives.

I question whether we, as a country, have had the right decision-making process in place, over many decades, to appraise and evaluate different projects, in order to ensure joined-up thinking on policy across Government. To help explore that, one of the Committee's current inquiries is on strategic transport objectives. I do not yet have any recommendations to make, as we are still part way through that inquiry. It looks at a number of issues in the round, including policy development, what decisions should be made centrally or at a devolved level, and how to inject longer-term certainty into the system to help lever in additional private investment.

Transport will always fall below more immediate and electorally saleable spending. Whether that spending is on the health service, the police, defence or a range of other areas, transport will always be lower down the priority queue under any Government. By their very nature, projects last well beyond the course of a single parliamentary or governmental term, so having that longer-term perspective is important. In addition to our inquiry, the Liaison Committee is undertaking an inquiry on strategic thinking to ensure the way that the Government are wired enables a longer-term planning perspective.

I wanted to place those points on the record. In a 90-minute debate we are not going to be able to get into all the whys and wherefores, but I welcome the revision to the NNNPS and the two related reviews that the

Government have announced. It is two cheers from me, though, because there is another element that we need to consider. I look forward to the work of my Committee and others contributing to that debate.

4.41 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be able to speak briefly in this afternoon's important debate on transport infrastructure. It is a great pleasure to follow the Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). I will be brief, but I want to make a number of points to support the shadow Transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), and to highlight the importance of investing in infrastructure to support economic growth.

First, I will raise a few points that matter to my constituents, some of which are immediate because they happened this week. There were severe delays on the Great Western main line yesterday. A number of colleagues, myself and many thousands of commuters were left waiting for long periods, in some cases up to two hours, because of a problem with the electricity supply to the overhead wires. That has happened a number of times before for various reasons. I urge the Minister to consult with the Rail Minister and feed back the serious concerns of travellers on this vital piece of infrastructure. The line connects London with towns in the south-east, such as Reading, and is of strategic importance across the whole UK, connecting Wales, Bristol, the south-west and parts of the midlands with the capital city. It is vital that train travellers can rely on this excellent service, which normally allows swift and easy access to the heart of London. It is now supported by the Elizabeth line, which is a huge benefit to us all. However, there has been a series of issues with the overhead wires, which I hope the Minister will flag up. Will he or a colleague write to me to update me on the problems experienced by passengers and to highlight the action being taken to address them?

On a related issue of regional and national infrastructural importance, I wanted to flag up the importance of getting a sensible policy on smart motorways. In my part of England, we have had a smart motorway installed along the M4 from west London as far west as Theale, just beyond Reading. Unfortunately, the work was carried out using the revised specification, which puts refuges up to a mile apart. In my opinion and that of many critics, that is too far apart to be genuinely safe. Will the Minister look at that policy again? Other parts of the south of England have been affected by a similar approach to upgrading the motorway, such as the M27 around Southampton, Portsmouth and neighbouring towns. Again, unfortunately, when the work was carried out, a revised spec was used rather than the original one, which had more frequent refuge points. Will the Minister write to me and colleagues on that matter, which is of great importance to our region and to the country as a whole?

Those two significant issues relate to existing infrastructure. My third issue relates to forthcoming infrastructure. I urge the Minister to implore his colleagues to get the Government's act together on the electrification of vehicles. Obviously, the Government backtracked on the 2030 target—sadly and wrongly, in my opinion—and in addition they have made matters worse by not achieving

the intermediate steps they set out such as putting in a suitable number of charging points at motorway service areas. Range anxiety continues to be a major problem and is delaying the purchase and uptake of electric vehicles in many cases. It would be good if the Minister updated colleagues on progress.

I understand that the Government have not achieved their target of about six charging points in each service area—that seems a low bar—and that we may have something like four per service area on average at the moment. Even if six were achieved, that would be way below the potential needed for vehicles if they are truly to be electrified quickly and effectively so that we can hit our targets for tackling the climate emergency and boost British production of electric cars, which is a success story in our motor industry.

Those are some key strategic issues. If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will mention some areas not directly covered by the policy statement but that many consider strategic priorities. We have the appalling state of the road network as a whole with the increase in potholes, which has possibly been exacerbated by heavy rain and frosts this winter. That is a huge challenge for the country as a whole. It affects many motorists, with people having to pay for expensive repairs, and it is a huge safety issue for both motorists and cyclists. I urge the Minister to look at that again, as well as at the speed at which the backlog in potholes is being tackled, and to support local authorities taking a more progressive and imaginative approach. My council, Reading Borough Council, has approached potholes with an “invest to save” mentality, doing large sections rather than just filling in individual potholes, and that seems to be tackling the backlog more effectively than some neighbouring authorities—Oxfordshire and Wokingham in particular—which are somewhat behind with their pothole filling.

Other matters that many people see as strategically important but are not under the statement's remit include the encouraging of walking and cycling. Only 1% of the transport budget is spent on those important areas, yet their benefits to the country are huge. As we heard earlier when considering the Pedicabs (London) Bill, shifting people from cars to cycling allows more road space for those who do have to drive—we are not able to create much more road space—takes pollution out of the atmosphere, which is vital, and can improve road safety and people's health and fitness. That is hugely important for the country, yet it gets only 1% of transport spending. Surely we should be looking at that again and trying to encourage it.

That includes improving safety in particular for pedestrians and for women at night by improving lighting, crossings and other measures. In my constituency, I commend local councillors, and Will Cross in Redlands ward in particular, who has ably championed the need for a pedestrian crossing on Upper Redlands Road. It should not take that much effort from a dedicated councillor to deliver something like that; it should be much more routine, with more pots of money available, and be considered in aggregate a national priority. Even if individual schemes are small, their overall effect is significant.

Thank you for indulging me slightly on those last few points, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the chance to speak and appreciate the Minister offering to write to me on some of the more immediate and significant matters.

4.48 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I have just a short contribution to make. The “National Networks National Policy Statement” refers at paragraph 3.2 to the fact that

“Population growth and economic growth are the most critical influences on travel demand.”

We know that the Government are much preoccupied with the need for economic growth. I wish them well, and I hope that we make a lot more progress than we have, particularly in economic growth per capita in the last 10 years. However, on the other aspect, we do not have any national policy statement about population growth, yet it is fundamental to all policy making done in government and in this House. Why do we not have a national policy statement about population growth? How is it that we have, by happenstance, allowed our population to increase by the best part of another million over the past 18 months? How can that continue? There is a reference in the document to projected growth over the next 20 or 30 years, but there is no basis for that.

It seems to me that underlying all our policymaking should be a policy about population growth. How many people do we wish to have in our country? What do we think is the sustainable maximum population? How is that population going to be looked after in terms of the age profile? Are we encouraging more of our own people in this country to have children and sustain the population in that way, as they do very effectively in Hungary? Or do we have a different policy, which, effectively, is to import labour into this country, thereby increasing the population exponentially?

I am not expecting my hon. Friend the Minister to come up with a definitive answer on this, but I think the point is worth raising. Why is it that we have a national policy statement on national networks, but we do not have one on population growth? I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we will be able to get one quite soon.

4.51 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Once again, the Government seem to be dodging scrutiny. This national policy statement for national networks has significant implications for the delivery of our climate and environment targets, yet rather than giving MPs the opportunity to properly debate it, this Government have, it feels to me at least, rather cynically left the approval of it to the very last minute before the Easter recess, when many colleagues have already returned to their constituencies. There are barely 10 people here in the Chamber this afternoon.

There are many concerns, in my view, about this particular statement, but I wish to focus in my brief intervention on the climate and nature consequences. As the Minister is well aware, when the review of the NPS was announced in July 2021, it was explained by the then Secretary of State on the basis that the 2014 NPS predated the UK’s commitment to net zero by 2050, the sixth carbon budget and the transport decarbonisation plan.

Aligning the NPS with our climate targets is, of course, absolutely essential, not least because about 10% of the UK’s CO₂ emissions come from driving on the strategic road network and, according to the National

Audit Office, transport-related emissions between 1990 and 2022 were reduced by just 11%—the lowest of any sector. There is a real problem here and, frankly, this policy statement fundamentally fails to rise to the occasion and to the challenge that that poses.

In its 2023 progress report to Parliament, the Committee on Climate Change recommended what it called

“a systematic review of all current and proposed road schemes”, with only those that

“meaningfully support cost-effective delivery of Net Zero and climate adaptation”

to be taken forward. Perhaps the Minister can explain to me why his Department has refused to undertake any assessment, and why the NPS essentially reverts to the current pre-net zero carbon test. In the absence of such a review, can he explain how he plans to close the gaping delivery gap when it comes to cutting transport emissions?

Just last week, the Green Alliance think-tank published the latest update of its net zero policy tracker, which revealed that transport accounts for 70%—yes, 70%—of the overall policy gap for delivering the fifth carbon budget, so this is a huge issue, with 37% of the required emission cuts having absolutely no policy set out for them. Crucially, Green Alliance suggests that measures such as reviewing road building and redirecting funding into public transport would help to close the policy gap, so why is it not in this plan?

Rather than making our constituents ever more dependent on private cars, this NPS should have set out the need for bold rail and urban transport upgrades. It should have been about levelling up public transport outside London and improving cross-country rail. The first priority of the transport decarbonisation plan is modal shift, yet the NPS has no target for that. In fact, seven of the eight Department for Transport scenarios on which it is based assume exactly the wrong kind of modal shift—in other words, a shift to cars. Will the Minister explain why the statement does not reference the 2030 target for 50% of urban journeys to be made by active travel?

Looking at our environmental targets, it is profoundly disappointing that the NPS fails to set out the implications of the new Environment Act 2021 targets at the strategic or scheme level. It is just not good enough to simply have due regard to some of the targets.

Not only is this NPS unclear—as observed by Professor Stephen Glaister, former chair of the Office of Rail and Road and director of the RAC Foundation, who told MPs that

“I do not see clarity in that draft myself”

but it fundamentally fails to set out a new direction of travel to ensure the delivery of our climate and environmental targets. In the age of climate crisis, we need more than passing references to net zero and muddled attempts to justify the roads programme. We need urgent and bold action to decarbonise the transport system. This statement clearly does not provide that.

4.56 pm

Guy Opperman: I will try to address some of the points that have been raised.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), mentioned freight. He will be aware that we published the future freight strategy,

which is a long-term plan, in June 2022. It was developed with industry and sets out a cross-modal approach to achieve the long-term vision of a freight and logistics sector that is economically efficient, resilient, environmentally sustainable and valued by society. I am the co-chair of the Freight Council, alongside Isabel Dedring, who is an independent industry representative. The “Generation Logistics” campaign, which we hosted in the House of Commons, and the work that the Road Haulage Association and others are doing to drive forward true change in freight should genuinely be admired.

Turning to the points raised by the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), I take his two out of three cheers as being damned by faint praise. However, at the same time, no one is pretending that the statement is perfect. It is a work in progress—we all understand that. The document runs to over 100 pages and has been available for public consultation and oral hearings, and the Transport Committee has done an assessment of it, to which the Government have responded, so with respect, it is a substantial approach to this particular issue. I endorse the comments that he made about the future plans.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), whom I will insult by calling a friend of mine, raised a number of points, and I will ensure that the Rail Minister responds to him. On the electrification of vehicles, I push back gently. One has to be aware that the network of publicly available charge points is rapidly increasing, with almost 57,000 installed—a 47% increase since March 2023. Clearly, more can be done—no one would dispute that—and I echo and share his desire. He makes the fair point that we need more charging points, and I take that on board. As for the Great Western delays, the Rail Minister will respond on that.

The hon. Member for Reading East and others raised the state of the roads. The allegation was made that there is no vision either to support local authorities or to address that, and that there is no long-term levelling-up plan for the north. With respect, the Prime Minister’s decision on HS2 has done a number of key things. The first, obviously, is that £8.3 billion has gone out to local authorities up and down the country, responding to the HS2 profile over 11 years. On average, that is a 30% increase in funding over the past year for every local authority—genuinely game-changing amounts of money—and the long-term funding pattern allows local authorities to invest in the future. That is something that every local authority says it wants more of.

Turning to the aspiration to support the north, one of the key decisions was to ensure that almost all of the HS2 money was spent in the north and/or the midlands as the areas affected by HS2. That is why the money is going into Network North and into the local transport fund that was announced, which has seen hundreds of millions of pounds going out to lots of different local authorities. Some local authorities have seen their transport budget increased by nine times.

The types of announcements that the Government have made also outline their direction of travel in relation to this issue. With respect, I will outline five things that the Government have done in the past 10 days alone. I was proud to announce the safer roads fund, which is spending a further £35 million in multiple locations across the country to try to enhance their road safety. Last Friday, the Secretary of State announced the ZEBRA

scheme—for those who do not know, that is the zero-emission bus regional areas. There are dozens of locations up and down the country with hundreds of zero-emission buses funded and supported by this Government.

On Saturday, I announced active travel fund 4, which is worth £101 million, and saw some of the schemes that are being put in place in Darlington with the excellent Mayor, Ben Houchen, and my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson). I have also been with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) to see the £1.2 million that is going into the Medway active travel scheme. Clearly, the Automated Vehicles Bill is something that this Government have also championed.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): Hear, hear!

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend and co-Minister, and partner in optimism—I think that is the best way of putting it—is addressing some of those points.

There was further criticism in relation to the issue of climate change. I would gently push back: clearly, there has been a lot of change in Government policy since the national networks national policy statement was designated in 2015, particularly the Government’s commitment to achieving net zero by 2050. The transport decarbonisation plan, published in 2021, set out how transport’s contribution to net zero will be delivered, and the Environment Act 2021 introduced a more stringent approach to environmental protection and opportunities for enhancement of the natural environment. We have also seen the publication of road investment strategy 2 and the integrated rail plan, as well as support for rail freight, including the announcement of the rail freight growth target in December 2023. The NNNPS has been reviewed to reflect those changes in Government policy and to remain a robust framework for decision making on nationally significant infrastructure project schemes. Clearly, there are ongoing challenges in certain courts to the development of roads, and we await the decisions of those courts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) tempted me to become the Home Secretary. As we all know, the chances of that are our old friends slim and none, but I will take up with the Home Secretary the question of whether there should be a population growth assessment.

I thank all colleagues for their contributions today.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No. I genuinely commend the NNNPS, which is a mighty piece of work, to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the National Policy Statement for National Networks, which was laid before this House on 6 March.

PETITIONS

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

5.3 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I wish to present a petition on behalf of those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal, particularly on behalf of my constituents Mary Grindley and Lee Moorey. Lee was a pupil at the Treloar’s boarding school, where many

[Clive Efford]

children with haemophilia were given contaminated blood products. Mary was married to her husband John, who died of AIDS aged 41. Mary has campaigned tirelessly for justice for her husband and thousands like him for over 40 years.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Eltham,

Declares that people who have 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.

[P002934]

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I rise to present this petition, owing to the Budget's failure to allocate any 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 to establish a body to pay compensation, as an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill. With two victims of the scandal dying every week, on average, justice delayed is justice denied.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock

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.

[P002946]

Rent and service charge increases in Lewisham East

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of Phoebe's Place residents in Lewisham East. It recognises that my constituents who live in shared ownership housing in Catford are being affected by rent increases of 9% and service charge increases of up to 62% by their housing provider, Moat Housing. I understand that the building needs to be maintained. However, this huge rise is not the fault of the residents, and Moat Housing must ensure that residents are not left with sudden unexpected costs. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons calls for Moat Housing to review its decision, and that any increases this year and in future years remain at very least in line with inflation.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Lewisham East,

[Declares that Moat Housing has written to inform the residents in Phoebe's Place, SE6 2FA, which was developed in 2021 of 27 Flats as part of the affordable housing scheme, regarding increases in rent ranging from 8.6% to 9.4%, and increases in service charge, ranging from 30.3% to 65%; notes that this exceeds current levels of inflation; and further that the petitioners believe that the proposed rent and service charge increases are not justified nor affordable.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to call on Moat Housing to review their decision and that any increase in this year and in future years remain at the very least in line with inflation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002948]

Public Transport: Carshalton and Wallington

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

5.8 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, as we approach the recess, may I wish you and all colleagues a very happy Easter?

Today, I would like to address the adequacy of public transport in my Carshalton and Wallington constituency, which is one of the worst boroughs for public transport connectivity in Greater London. Being able to move around quickly and conveniently, as well as easily to commute to jobs and businesses across London, is vital for a vibrant economy and community, and my constituents living on the edges of London and Surrey deserve the same levels of connectivity that the rest of our capital enjoys.

I would like to mention a variety of areas of public transport from trains to buses, the Overground and, of course, our roads. There are also areas where transport provision could be much strengthened, and I will no doubt touch on some of those a little later. My constituents in Carshalton and Wallington have been deprived of consistent and reliable public transport by the Mayor of London, backed up by a Liberal Democrat council. Rather than help improve our connectivity, the Mayor and the council have overseen the shelving of the tram extension; the scrapping entirely of the Go Sutton bus; the possibility of reducing bus services such as the 410; the scrapping of the 455, and replacing it with an inconvenient existing route; and all this while bringing in the so-called Superloop, which is just the rebranding of an existing bus route.

Before the pandemic, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) were keen to begin discussions on an extension to the London Overground from West Croydon to Sutton, but the sheer mismanagement of TfL's finances by the Mayor means that is now unlikely. To almost no one's surprise, the Mayor is asleep at the wheel, otherwise occupied with his vanity projects, and too busy imposing the ultra low emission zone on my constituents. He seems content to leave my constituency stranded without a public transport system that it can be proud of.

Since the pandemic, rail services to stations at Carshalton, Wallington, Hackbridge and Carshalton Beeches have been running at a reduced level. Regular, consistent services are vital to connect my constituents with employment, education and essential services in other parts of London, and of course Surrey. That reduced service means fewer trains from Carshalton to London Victoria. Indeed, something like half the existing services are running, which has meant a significant reduction in accessibility and convenience. Off-peak services from Carshalton Beeches and Wallington to West Croydon and beyond have been reduced from six to four trains per hour. Fortunately, Thameslink services to Blackfriars have remained unchanged, which offers some semblance of stability, but the overall picture paints a concerning narrative of dwindling connectivity and accessibility for my constituents.

I have long campaigned for, and been successful in convincing rail operators to restore, some of the peak-time services post covid, as well as extending the number of carriages on some peak-time services. However, those services are still too far from what they used to be, and my mailbag is often filled with correspondence from constituents who have been unable to board extremely busy weekend rail services made up of just four or five carriages. I would appreciate any support the Minister can provide to help convince rail operators to restore more peak-time rail services, as well as adequate numbers of carriages on trains and adequate weekend services.

Staying on the topic of rail, I wish to thank Network Rail and Govia Thameslink Rail, which operates Southern and Thameslink, for their continued engagement with me in a number of different areas. One of those is the southbound platform at Hackbridge station, and we have now secured funding to fix what I call the Hackbridge gap problem. That gap is a huge step down from train to platform. It is extremely dangerous, and many people have fallen down. The issue has become so serious that some people have had to travel on to the next stop at Carshalton, and come back to Hackbridge via the northbound line because they simply did not feel safe disembarking from Hackbridge station. I am glad that we have secured funding to do that, and I look forward to seeing the project get under way.

I have also been campaigning hard for step-free access to the southbound platform at Carshalton Beeches station. We have put in several Access for All applications over the years, and I hope that the Minister will give some indication as to when the next round might be available for comment. I sincerely hope that we will be successful this time round, so that once again people do not have to travel on to Sutton, the next station, and come back to Carshalton Beeches the other way in order to disembark safely.

Moving slightly outside my constituency, if I may, another area that would greatly improve transport for my constituents—indeed, this is probably the major sticking point when it comes to increasing rail capacity for my constituency and most of suburban London—is the Croydon area remodelling scheme, which is the major junction on the Brighton main line and the suburban rail network in south London and the home counties. The project does a number of things. It would upgrade East Croydon station and the surrounding rail infrastructure to enhance capacity and efficiency, and it encompasses several pivotal elements, including the revitalisation and renovation of the station itself, the remodelling of Selhurst junction, which is where trains are becoming congested, and the expansion of railway tracks north of East Croydon.

The capacity issues that that project would resolve are often the sticking point for running more rail services in the region. Indeed, GTR and Network Rail have spoken regularly about their ambitions to make suburban rail services a lot more like the metro system that we have on the London underground—a sort of turn-up-and-go system, rather than the strict and limited timetable we currently have.

By delivering on the Croydon area remodelling scheme, or the Croydon bottleneck, we would help alleviate the congestion, which would be good not just for my constituents, but for the majority of London and the south-east. It would unlock rail capacity all the way

[Elliot Colburn]

down to Brighton and parts of the south coast, as well as in the capital. In the words of the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman):

“In the current economic context, it is more important than ever for the enhancement schemes we take forward to be affordable and respond to changes in demand for travel”.

That is exactly what the Croydon area remodelling scheme would deliver.

Moreover, as we await updates to the rail network enhancements pipeline, it is essential to acknowledge the broader context in which the Croydon area remodelling scheme operates. The Government’s commitment to rail enhancements, shown through the Network North announcements, reflects an effort to modernise and expand railway infrastructure across the country, and they should be commended for that. The Croydon area remodelling scheme would bring a more efficient, sustainable and interconnected transport network to London and the south-east, and show clear improvements, not least to rail capacity, for my constituents in Carshalton and Wallington.

Finally, I want to talk about connectivity by road, which is still the most common form of transport in my constituency. The one thing that is attacking my constituents the most and causing them the most grief is the dreaded expansion of the ultra low emission zone. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who brought in a Bill to overturn ULEZ. It was incredibly welcome that the Government gave it their backing, but very disappointing that Labour and the Liberal Democrats tried to prevent the Bill from progressing. In fact, Labour Members talked out the Bill to prevent its passage through this House.

As the Secretary of State has rightly said, ULEZ is a cruel form of taxation affecting the poorest in society and hitting heavily those who have older motor vehicles that they simply cannot afford to upgrade, with or without a scrappage scheme. My constituents regularly raise their concerns about ULEZ with me, and I completely agree with them. As I have stressed, the Mayor fails to acknowledge the poor connectivity of Carshalton and Wallington. On top of that, he has decided to tax the most hard-working, poorest Londoners. It is time that the pollution argument that is often made when it comes to ULEZ was eradicated. Genuine concern for the environment would involve a complete ban of non-compliant vehicles, not a charge to use them. Provided that Khan finds himself with an additional £12.50 per car in the TfL coffers, people can drive as they please.

The evidence is clear from the Mayor’s own impact assessment and assessments that have been done since that this is not about air quality, but about the Mayor’s inability to manage TfL’s finances. The expansion scheme was roundly rejected by the people of London, as can be evidenced through his consultation, yet the Mayor, backed by the Lib Dems and the Greens in City Hall, all gleefully voted in favour of it. In fact, the Lib Dems boasted that it was their idea in the first place. The Mayor went ahead with this tax on motorists, and he did not even mention it in his manifesto to get elected.

I urge caution to those voters who are now being told by the Mayor that he will not bring in any more charges if he gets re-elected—do not believe it. We know that

the Mayor of London is currently looking, and has employed people in TfL to look, at a pay-per-mile scheme, which means that every single car driver in Greater London will be charged not only for using their car, no matter whether it is compliant, but for how long and how far they drive it. We must reject that. We must get rid of the Mayor of London on 2 May and replace him with someone who will not charge car drivers, and that is Susan Hall.

Between 26 September and 6 November, in the early stages of the expanded ULEZ, something like 2,700 fines were issued in Sutton, and nearly 100,000 in London as a whole, once again proving that ULEZ is simply a money-making scheme. I have heard from many of my constituents that they have not been accepted for the scrappage scheme. Only about a third of applications in my borough have been accepted so far, yet these people simply cannot afford to upgrade their vehicles. That places a huge burden on people and is a threat to their livelihoods.

The ULEZ charge means that elderly people are isolated in their homes because they cannot afford to get in the car and leave, and people are not coming to visit them. Small businesses either have to pass the £12.50 charge on to their customers or absorb it, at a time when they are struggling as well. It means the Royal Marsden cancer hospital has to refund cancer patients £12.50 a day to come to Sutton to receive treatment for cancer. The NHS should not be having to reimburse ULEZ charges to cancer patients. There should not be ULEZ charges on cancer patients, and yet that is the reality we live with in Sutton. Nurses, doctors, teachers, parents, charities and businesses are all being affected by the ULEZ charge, and hard-working Londoners deserve better.

To conclude, I ask the Minister whether he will continue to work with me to see what we can do to improve public transport connectivity at a time when the Mayor is clearly not interested in doing so, and when the Lib Dems gave up on my area a long time ago. I very much welcome the Minister. He has been a great friend to Carshalton and Wallington. He has visited before in other Government roles, so I would be delighted to welcome him back to see the transport opportunities in Carshalton and Wallington.

Will the Minister reiterate from the Dispatch Box that the Mayor’s unwanted ULEZ charge on Londoners does not help my constituents? Labour should have backed the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford last week. The ULEZ charge places a burden on people at a time when they can least afford it. We should be looking to increase the public transport connectivity of London, rather than attacking those who cannot change to an alternative.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the ever-present Minister, Guy Opperman.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): There is a sense of déjà vu for you and me, Mr Deputy Speaker, because the last debate before the House rose for Christmas featured yourself as the Deputy Speaker; the Transport Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), honourably fighting the fight on

behalf of the Department for Transport; and my good self, making the case at the Dispatch Box on an Adjournment debate. It is a privilege and honour to be the last Minister to speak at the Dispatch Box before Easter.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), who said at the outset that we need to wish everybody in the House who works so hard to keep us safe in this place that we cherish, love and adore a very happy Easter and a gentle rest over the Easter holidays, so that we all emerge recharged, rebooted and ready to keep the flavour of democracy alive on an ongoing basis, because that really matters. Having the opportunity to address the House, make the case for democracy and for individual constituents, and bring their concerns, hopes, fears and aspirations to this place is something we should all cherish and adore.

It is a great honour and privilege to respond to my hon. Friend. I have visited his constituency in the past; I would be delighted to visit it again, and I look forward to doing so in the next few weeks. To answer his three points at the outset before I get into the nuts and bolts of the issue, I would be delighted to work with him on the causes he has set out and delighted to visit soon.

I am also delighted to make the case that ULEZ is a blunt instrument, and we will discuss that in a bit more detail, although I assure the House that we will not spend the next two hours and seven minutes discussing it. ULEZ is a blunt instrument that needs to be taken in the context of the individual circumstances of the Londoners and outer Londoners whom it affects. It needs to take into account the impact it has on low-income and public sector workers, because the stats on that are genuinely horrifying. It is not something—with great respect—that is being dealt with sensitivity. It is not being done under the Mayor's manifesto. I was the Minister who responded to the Bill last Friday on behalf of the Government, and I will touch on that in some detail.

My hon. Friend raised a number of issues, which I want to address. The first is the issue of the Mayor and his finances because, as my hon. Friend will be aware and as the Secretary of State has put on the record in writing, the Mayor had to be bailed out by a multibillion-pound settlement due to his mismanagement of his funds. Clearly, that has had an impact on the provision of bus services, which are key. As the Minister for buses, I am passionate about buses and the growth in bus services post covid. I am alarmed and concerned to hear about the litany of bus services that have been lost in my hon. Friend's constituency due to the actions of the Mayor.

I regret to say that I have no power whatsoever to intervene in the mayoral zone to address any of the bus losses or to nudge individual operators to make changes. I will come to rail in a second, because we have some power there. I know that my hon. Friend has worked with the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), in copious detail to address those issues. That is the reality of the mayoral situation on buses, and it is of great concern.

Only yesterday, I met my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) to have an hour-long discussion with bus operators to thrash out difficulties and try to find a way for the bus service improvement plan and bus service operators grant to address particular issues. That ability does not exist, unless the Mayor provides the right sort of assistance and prioritises the constituents

of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington. On buses, regretfully I am powerless to intervene, but his constituents have the ultimate power to do so, and I urge them to do that for the reasons that he set out and that I utterly endorse. I put my backing behind Susan Hall.

I know that my hon. Friend has worked with the Rail Minister over a period of time to try to improve and enhance the rail service that his constituents sometimes have enjoyed and sometimes have not. As someone who commutes in from south London when I am here in Westminster, I have experienced some of that pain. I accept that there are ongoing difficulties, some of which have been addressed—he rightly identified the companies that have assisted him and played ball. We are at about 85% of pre-covid numbers. I assure him that the Rail Minister is happy to meet him, operators and particular cohorts of constituents and councillors to discuss potential improvements and further ongoing work that can be done.

My hon. Friend raised the important issue of the Croydon area remodelling scheme. I agree that it is clearly a massive improvement and enhancement that we should get behind. Such an investment will be a massive improvement and be of wider benefit to his constituents. On the other rail and infrastructure projects, he talked about Govia Thameslink Railway—GTR. He has worked closely with that operator on the services that it provides, particularly the busy weekend services between Carshalton and London Victoria, which are vital. He rightly made the point that timetable changes will take effect from June 2024, and services will run with eight to 10 carriages, rather than five as some did previously. I am sure that he will welcome the additional capacity for passengers using those services. We require all train operators to continually review the services they provide so that their timetables reflect changing passenger demand, carefully balancing cost, capacity and performance.

My hon. Friend raised Access for All, which he has championed repeatedly. He would love me to triumphantly pull out the Oscar-winning envelope from this Dispatch Box and confirm the campaign that he has fought for so assiduously for so long. I regret that I cannot do that today, but in time-honoured tradition I can confirm that the next announcement on extending Access for All and improving rail accessibility will be made very shortly. He has made his case repeatedly. If he has not again met the Rail Minister who oversees that issue, I will personally communicate that to him, so that he fully understands how much it matters to my hon. Friend's constituents and how brilliantly he has made the case.

On ULEZ, there are a number of myths I want to address. We need a genuine discussion on this issue. My hon. Friend spent about five minutes of his speech on it, and I want to spend some time on it in response. The principle of having a clean air zone in the centre of a city is, I think, utterly without dispute. The Government legislated for that, and local authorities and mayors agree with it. For those of us who are right in the heart of the city in Westminster, the original congestion zone makes total sense and is fully understandable. There is an argument—it is a hard argument to make, but there is an argument—that there was authority to extend it out to the south circular and the north circular, and that that would be a wider congestion zone. But it is patently clear from reading the present Mayor of London's manifesto—I spent

[Guy Opperman]

rather too long reading it; an hour and a bit of my life I will never get back—that there is no argument whatever for the extension that has taken place. My hon. Friend rightly talked about the consultation and the responses to it. The best I can do is make two points.

First, take the congestion zone in Bristol, which is clearly relatively successful. It was introduced with due consideration of businesses and people living in the heart of the city, trying to keep a vibrant city going. That congestion zone is one mile by two—basically, two square miles. The London congestion zone has now gone up to approximately 600 square miles. It is 50 miles by 50 miles. The impact on the wider economy of London—park for a moment the air quality, because he rightly addressed that—is obviously massive. Everybody who lives and works in London can see that. It has had a tremendous impact on the businesses that we all want to support.

Secondly, there is a democratic deficit. When the ULEZ is extended so far out to those on the outer limits of London and those who live beyond the London boundary, they are clearly penalised in a very significant way. More particularly, the penalty falls on two groups. I take this from its own impact assessment, as I and others set out in the House on Friday. It falls on the low-income group and on public sector workers—surely the worst groups to be trying to penalise with an extra tax. Anybody who knows anything about the public sector knows it is really hard to get NHS workers, care workers and police officers in central London. I could go on.

Elliot Colburn: The Minister is absolutely right about public sector workers. I mentioned that the Royal Marsden Hospital is having to refund ULEZ charges to cancer patients. One other point we must surely consider is that something like half of all Metropolitan police officers live outside the geographical area of Greater London. No wonder people do not feel that they can come and work in the city if they have to pay £12.50 a day. Does the Minister agree that ULEZ will surely have an adverse effect on crime in London if the majority of our officers have to travel in and pay £12.50 a day to police our streets?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend has brilliant eyesight, because he can see the highlighted passage I was about to read out, showing that 50% of police officers in the Metropolitan police area live outside the London boundary and commute in. The percentage for all emergency workers is probably not far off that. There is no doubt that there will be a recruitment issue in all those sectors. I have spent three and a half weeks of my life in St Thomas' Hospital, requiring intensive care—and on not one but two occasions, because I am so accident prone. Someone may require overnight nursing care, for

example, and a nurse coming into London from outside will be penalised on the day she comes in, and when she leaves her night shift she will be penalised again. She will be landed with a double whammy of a ULEZ charge—and then we are surprised that London hospitals are struggling to retain staff.

Is there evidence that ULEZ is making a dramatic difference to air quality? The evidence that has been set out in a variety of ways suggests that improvement is minimal in some respects, especially in the outer reaches. Is there an impact on the economy? Definitely: there is a negative impact. Is there an impact on public services, public sector workers and the low-income people who, according to the impact assessment, will be more affected by ULEZ expansion? There is not a shadow of a doubt that that is the case. I do not want to get too political on the last day before the Easter recess, but my hon. Friend asked what would happen in the future, and the idea that the present Mayor will not expand the impact of the ULEZ is for the birds. It is a bit like asking, “Are there moustaches in Mexico?” or “Do bears go to the toilet in the woods?” We both know that what the Mayor is proposing to do is to extend the present proposal in a variety of ways.

The key point that was made on Friday by my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), my right hon. Friends the Members for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) and for Ashford (Damian Green), my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon)—from a sedentary position—and various colleagues from Watford was that great thought should be given to the benefits of this public policy as against the massive burdens that are being imposed. We must clearly consider why we are doing this on an ongoing basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington remains a massive champion of this issue, and I should be delighted to see the changes that he seeks. Of course, the Rail Minister will continue to work with him, and good work is being done. We want to continue to support him and his constituents. I commend him for bringing the debate to the House before Easter, and I commend his efforts on behalf of his constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): On behalf of Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, I echo the words of the Minister and Elliot Colburn in wishing a very happy Easter to everyone who works here to ensure that our democracy progresses. I hope that they will get together with their families and friends, and to those who sadly cannot do that because they are providing services to the rest of us, I say a great thank you on behalf of the nation.

Question put and agreed to.

5.38 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 26 March 2024

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

RNLI Bicentenary

9.30 am

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the bicentenary of the RNLI.

It is my honour and privilege to open and close today's debate on the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and to recognise its history, praise its work, celebrate and thank its volunteers. I want to put on the record the fact that this House understands, appreciates and values that magnificent, long-standing organisation.

Throughout 2024, across the country, communities will come together to mark the extraordinary 200 years of the RNLI. On 4 March, 1,800 crew of the RNLI assembled in Westminster Abbey for a service of thanksgiving. In May the month becomes mayday month, and 18 and 19 May will see a series of community activities, including a lifeboat festival in Poole and 25 July is World Drowning Prevention Day. On 1 August "one moment, one crew" encourages RNLI volunteers to celebrate in their communities. On 10 October, on the anniversary of the first ever street collection held in Manchester, the birth of the most successful fundraising campaign ever seen will be celebrated. There is also the 200 Voices podcast on the RNLI website, where we can listen to 200 people explain how the RNLI has impacted their lives. I strongly recommend it.

From its humble beginnings to the modern-day integrated network of volunteers, fundraisers and supporters criss-crossing the country, the RNLI is not just an emergency service, but a Great British brand that exhibits the very best of our spirit. It was on the Isle of Man in 1824 that Sir William Hillary proposed the concept of an organisation to save lives at sea. With an average 1,800 shipwrecks a year, Sir William proposed the Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck. Despite numerous rejections, including being pushed back by the Navy and Ministers of the day, he appealed to the philanthropic organisations of the time, which, with alacrity, took up the cause, and on 4 March 1824 they held a meeting in the City of London Tavern, officially forming and ratifying the institution—possibly the best idea ever to come out of a pub.

With royal patronage granted and the name changed in 1854 to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Sir William's vision was undoubtedly recognised, although whether he would have imagined that the RNLI would have 238 stations, operate 440 lifeboats, provide lifeguards for 200 beaches and be responsible for rescuing some 146,000 people over its history, it is impossible to know. However, that ambition and determination created an organisation from which we all benefit and whose charter still stands the test of time, declaring that the RNLI "will assist in saving life from Shipwreck"

and be

"supported by Annual Subscriptions and Donations, and other Contributions to its Funds".

Today the RNLI holds legendary status. Those of us who have grown up in coastal communities or who are fortunate to represent one have long been moved by the tales of epic heroism in which volunteers—members of the community—have put their lives on the line for others. That includes the sinking of the *Mexico* in the Ribble estuary in 1886; the White Star Line's *SS Suevic*, shipwrecked off the Lizard in Cornwall in 1907, where the RNLI managed to rescue all 456 passengers, including 70 babies, over 16 hours in an oar-powered boat; the RNLI's support in the Dunkirk evacuation, where over 100,000 soldiers were said to have been saved by RNLI boats; to Henry Freeman and his innovative cork lifejacket; the iconic Henry Blogg; the heroism of Grace Darling in the 1838 crisis in Forfarshire; and Margaret Armstrong, who helped every single launch of the Cresswell lifeboat, saving lives for over 50 years until her death in 1928. The RNLI has without prejudice always come to the aid of those in danger on the sea, such as the enemy during the first and second world wars, merchant sailors in peril, holidaymakers who are caught out, or refugees crossing the channel.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On the diversity of the problems that the RNLI faces, including holidaymakers, Portrush in my constituency has an RNLI boat, and the crew and volunteers do excellent work, sometimes in treacherous waters off the north coast of Northern Ireland and the east coast of Scotland. Will he join me, as I know he will, in commending them and in ensuring that the wider public support is as great as it can be for all our RNLI crews and volunteers to maximise the return and to save even more lives in future?

Anthony Mangnall: I thank the hon. Member for making that point. Especially in high-tourism areas and where there has been a dramatic experience post pandemic, the RNLI has seen more shouts—more call-outs to rescue holidaymakers—so it is essential that right across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland we support our RNLI crews, volunteers and fundraising efforts, and strengthen their hand in what they do.

The remit of the RNLI is simple: to help anyone in danger on the sea. The tales of events and individuals throughout the RNLI's history not only inspire the next generation of volunteers, but help to explain why so many families across the country have served the RNLI throughout its existence. In doing so, those volunteers have provided a magnificent, quiet heroism and public service to their communities, country and fellow human beings.

The volunteer power of the RNLI is all the more remarkable when we consider that for almost the first 90 years, the lifeboats of the RNLI were powered by nothing other than the strength of man, and launched by hand and horsepower. The steady evolution of the RNLI has resulted in a modern and up-to-date fleet that has replaced oar power with engine power. The ability to upgrade the fleet and provide new equipment, however, has been brought about only by the generosity of the British public and by businesses.

The RNLI has always been independent of Government and will always remain so. As a result, it relies on the support of donors to meet the costs of lifesaving activities.

[Anthony Mangnall]

As we politicians look on in envy, the RNLI has perfected the art of fundraising and has set exacting standards to develop long-standing relationships with supporters and to ensure financial stability. The figures speak for themselves: the RNLI raised £177.4 million in 2022 and £181.7 million in 2021. Along with the public fundraising, generous bequests have included, bizarrely, a set of gold teeth and two vintage Ferraris.

Regardless of what is donated, it all helps to ensure that the RNLI is able to respond to shouts anywhere along our coastline and to help those in danger with the most up-to-date equipment and facilities. We should consider the fact that in 2023, up to July, the RNLI had launched its lifeboats 9,192 times, the equivalent of 16 times a day; saved 269 lives; and assisted 10,734 people at sea—a remarkable number and giving remarkable significance to its work.

It is extraordinary to see businesses playing a role in the fundraising efforts. The Baltic Exchange, for example, has for more than 150 years supported the lifeboat based in Salcombe in South Devon, hence the subtle name of The Baltic Exchange III. Such fundraising efforts have allowed the RNLI to focus on what it does best and, perhaps most importantly, have ensured that the RNLI is immune from political interference and can be truly independent.

Just as the equipment and machinery have modernised so, too, have the provision and scale of what the RNLI offers. Starting originally with lifeboats and lifeboat stations, the RNLI now runs a safety-at-sea initiative with its Float to Live campaign, as well as providing lifeguards on 240 UK beaches. In 2023, those lifeguards carried out almost 3 million preventive actions, as well as attending some 14,000 incidents, helping 19,979 people and saving 86 lives. Its international arm is focused on making drowning prevention a priority worldwide and reducing the staggering 235,000 deaths a year caused by drowning.

The RNLI has been a key supporter of the National Independent Lifeboat Association, which I founded two years ago to represent the 54 independent lifeboat stations of the United Kingdom. Its steady progress to help both at home and abroad is in part why the RNLI is such a well-loved institution and why it carries the support and confidence of the British public and, I hope I can safely say, of this House.

The purpose of this debate is to recognise the RNLI as a national organisation and to celebrate its work across the country, but it would be remiss of me not to mention the RNLI stations in South Devon. Torbay RNLI lifeboat station, based in Brixham, was established in 1866 and has been busily protecting our channel waters ever since. I was pleased to attend a service of thanksgiving organised by the Fishermen's Mission earlier this year, to reflect on its work protecting those at sea, and salute its volunteers, who have attended thousands of shouts since 1866, rescued thousands of people and saved countless lives.

The Salcombe RNLI lifeboat was established in 1869 and is tragically remembered for one of the worst lifeboat disasters in the RNLI's history. In 1916, the returning lifeboat capsized on the Salcombe bar and 13 of the 15-man crew drowned, devastating the town

and the close-knit community. Memorial headstones either side of the mouth of the estuary recall and mark that tragedy.

The Dart RNLI, established in 1878 but closed shortly after, was reopened in 2007. The reopening was fortuitous, as last year alone it had 46 shouts and aided 51 people in difficulty. It is currently fundraising for a new boathouse, which I expect to be greeted with the same level of generosity as that often received by the RNLI.

Those three lifeboat stations are a necessity to coastal living. Their crews and support staff number well over 100 volunteers, and they have battled against some of the most ferocious storms to save those at sea, as well as dealt with thousands of visitors who flock to our beaches each and every year. The people of south Devon owe them an enormous amount, and we do not for a single second forget their courage and bravery in volunteering for the RNLI.

I would like to thank the crew of RNLI lifeboat stations across the country. They are all part of a rich heritage in which they put others before themselves. They put themselves in harm's way to rescue those in need, and too often friends, families and fellow volunteers pay the price. The 800 names on the RNLI memorial in Poole serve as a reminder of the dangers they face, but also the hope that must be felt by any individual in danger when they see the colours of the RNLI racing towards them. Sir William Hillary said:

"With courage, nothing is impossible."

I would like to finish by paying tribute to the outgoing chief executive, Mark Dowie, who finishes his five-year term in June. Mark has been an extraordinary leader of the RNLI over the past five years. He has had to deal with covid, channel crossings, rising inflation, increase in demand, and even unfair and inaccurate political comments. He has risen above all those, and leaves the RNLI in an even stronger place, with his name alongside those pioneering, innovative founders and fundraisers who have made the RNLI what it is today.

Today we mark and celebrate in Parliament the 200 years of the RNLI. I pray for calm seas and fair winds, and that it will continue to perform its masterful brave work for the next two centuries.

9.43 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this important debate.

This year marks the bicentenary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, an extraordinary organisation that could not operate without the outstanding bravery and courage of those involved. RNLI lifeboat crews launched more than 9,000 times in 2022, aiding 16,476 people and saving 389 lives. RNLI crews, the vast majority of whom are volunteers, put their lives at risk to save others. They do so at all hours of the day and night, often setting out on very rough seas. Many families have been involved with the RNLI for decades, with expertise handed down through the generations. As has been said, being involved in a lifeboat station is a way of life.

I am honoured to represent a constituency with two RNLI lifeboat stations: one at Hoylake and one at West Kirby. Crews are prepared to go out in all weathers to rescue people, whether they are in yachts, dinghies,

canoes or large commercial vessels or have been caught by the tide when walking out to the Hilbre islands. There is a long tradition of courage in west Wirral, of which local people are rightly proud. The first lifeboat station in Hoylake was founded in 1803, before the RNLI was established in 1824. Those early lifeboats were dragged into the sea by horses, their effectiveness reliant on the strength of the crews at the oars.

Tragedy struck in 1810, when eight men of a crew of 10 were drowned as they tried to assist the ship *Traveller*. The disaster struck the entire local community. A report cited in Nicholas Leach's excellent book "*Hoylake and West Kirby Lifeboats: An Illustrated History*" describes the aftermath:

"The bodies were found the same day, and carried to their respective homes, where a scene of misery was witnessed which defies all power of expression. The deceased were all near neighbours, and lived in a small village called the Hoose, near Hoylake...these brave fellows were the flower of the Hoylake fishermen, and had always displayed the greatest promptitude and alacrity in assisting vessels in distress; nor could England boast a set of braver men...They have left large families totally unprovided for".

To mark the bicentenary of the disaster, a memorial to those lost was unveiled outside the RNLI lifeboat house in Hoylake in December 2010, and due respect was afforded by today's lifeboat crews, members of the local community and descendants of those who lost their lives in 1810.

Thankfully, things have come a long way since those perilous days. In 2014, a new 13-metre Shannon lifeboat was stationed at Hoylake, where it remains today. It is a state-of-the-art vessel, with every conceivable safety feature. The smaller West Kirby inshore lifeboats were introduced in the 1960s. The roll call of brave men and women who serve at Hoylake and West Kirby is a source of great pride to the local community. Without them, there would be no rescue service for people who get into difficulty at sea and on the estuary. Fundraising is crucial to the RNLI, and it is unsurprising that local people are so keen to support it. It is vital that that support continues, because less than 1% of RNLI income comes from Government.

The stories of rescues are heroic indeed. I have had the great privilege of hearing at first hand from John Curry, chair of the Hoylake and West Kirby RNLI management group, about some of these rescues. One powerful image stays firmly in my mind: a hand reaching out from the waves. It is an image of a drowning man, woman or child, in the very last moments while rescue is still possible. The intense bravery and dedication of the RNLI volunteers, who will put themselves at risk to reach out and grasp such a hand before it sinks beneath the waves, deserve all our thanks and tributes.

9.47 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this debate, and I thank my colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it.

It is very apt to be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the RNLI, given the role that it plays for communities in south Devon. The Torbay RNLI has been operating since 1866, serving commercial merchantman traffic and keeping holidaymakers and those visiting the south

coast safe. The organisation has been at the heart of the community since then; it is based on volunteering and on funding and support from the community.

It is easy to see why the RNLI is such a loved institution when we hear the stories of its members' heroism. In Torbay we have Keith Bower, who I think is one of only three living holders of the RNLI gold medal for conspicuous gallantry. Other Members have already referred to those crew members who sadly lost their lives, but there have been many occasions on which volunteers will have absolutely pushed to the limits what they could do to save someone in distress. It is right that we pay tribute and remember them. It was great to see Keith at the heart of the recent service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey, in recognition of the role that so many play, in extreme conditions, to try to save the lives of people they will probably never have met. They go out of their way to bring them home safe, for them and their families.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes and I have an interesting debate about the Torbay RNLI, because the station on land is in Brixham, which is part of his constituency, but the boat is moored in the waters of Brixham harbour, which—due to the anomalies in how Torbay runs its harbour authority—is part of mine. But the RNLI is loved across the bay. At the event on 4 March, the fleet was out and being saluted by so many people on land, as well as those on the waters who rely on and are reassured by its constant presence.

It is worth noting that the RNLI Torbay lifeboat fundraising team are the ones helping to sustain the crew at the front. We have a song written by Roger Smith to commemorate and celebrate the 200th anniversary; there is also a whole network that exists throughout the year and raises vital funds to support the team we see out on the water.

It is also worth noting how the RNLI supports the wider work of the community. We think immediately of emergency call-outs when someone is in distress and a lifeboat is called out to identify them and bring them back to safety, but a range of other things can happen. There is always a moment for reflection when I am about to do the Boxing day walk into the sea at Paignton sands and I see the lifeboat pull up beforehand; the RNLI effectively provides a safety boat. It is a slightly thought-provoking moment: I sit there thinking, "Is this the best decision I've ever made?" as I am about to walk into freezing cold water, with the lifeboat pulling up to keep us safe. It shows what the RNLI does for the wider community: it is not just about emergencies, but about providing the safety and support that such events need. That allows thousands of pounds to be raised for other charities and for fundraising in the community, as well as being an opportunity to get rather cold on Boxing day, if that helps to shake off anything from the day before.

In its 200-year history, the RNLI has been supported by other institutions that contribute towards its efforts and share its goals. It is well worth mentioning the National Coastwatch Institution Torbay and its station up at Daddyhole plain, which works closely with RNLI Torbay. They are both committed to exactly the same purpose of keeping those who use the waters around our bay safe.

The RNLI is an institution that has been well loved and well supported for 200 years. It shows the best of our communities and ensures that they are safe even in

[Kevin Foster]

the most perilous of conditions. It has had a successful 200 years in which it has gone from strength to strength. I see no reason why it will not go on to further success over the next 200 years, with many thousands more lives saved.

9.51 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on his excellent and stirring speech about the service of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution across this country. I pay tribute to the RNLI: it is a wonderful service, and today's speeches have been inspiring.

I am here to say thank you on behalf of an inland community and to raise a related point about water safety. The RNLI has given 200 years of service to this country, and it is a privilege to speak in this debate. I will pick up on some hugely important points that the hon. Member made about the RNLI's expansion into taking over beach safety and about its international and education work.

The RNLI already covers estuaries of major rivers. I represent a town further upstream, beyond the tidal reach of the Thames: the tidal section goes as far as Teddington, and Reading is some way from there. However, every year we have tragedies when people fall in the river and, in some cases, need to be rescued. The police are the rescuing authority, but I have been approached by a number of residents, particularly boat owners, small business owners and others based by the river, who potentially have access to rescue craft. They want to learn more about the experience of the RNLI and about how inland waterways could be made safer by assisting the police in rescue, with trained personnel who are used to driving boats in river situations.

In fact, one of my residents was awarded a medal by Thames Valley police for doing exactly that last year: at very short notice, he jumped into his boat and rescued somebody who had fallen into the river. The gentleman concerned was quite severely injured; he had struggled and was no longer able to swim. He was floating downstream in the centre of the river, some way from the bank, and if it had not been for that resident the incident could have been much worse.

I address my points to the Minister. Is it possible to look into the RNLI's experience with inland waterways and see what we can learn as a country? We must not only thank the RNLI for its outstanding work in saving lives at sea, which has been spoken about beautifully today—we all share a great sense of gratitude to this wonderful institution—but see what can be learned from the collective endeavour about which the hon. Member for Totnes spoke so effectively and clearly in his inspiring speech. I pose that question to the Minister to see what might be done to further assist to local police forces: they are the rescuing authority in inland waterways, but they are often under enormous pressure, and police boats may take some time to get to an emergency.

9.54 am

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing it.

The RNLI has been an important institution in the United Kingdom since it was formed 200 years ago. The Suffolk association of lifeboats was formed in the same year, but it wisely handed over its assets and people to the RNLI in 1853. In 1824, boats were set up in Felixstowe, Bawdsey and Lowestoft, which is outside my constituency; a few years later, they were also set up in Thorpeness and Sizewell.

There is no doubt that the institution has been vital in saving lives, but it has also seen people losing their lives in saving others. The devastation that that can have in a community lives on for generations to come and is rightly recognised around the country. I pay huge tribute to all those who have served in the lifetime of stations around the country.

My constituency currently has two stations, in Southwold and Aldeburgh, and is served by the people of Harwich, just across the river in Essex. There is also a National Independent Lifeboat Association member in Felixstowe, which was set up more recently: just over 25 years ago. I know the dedication of the people, who are principally volunteers; they are on call and ready to move. The lifeguards who operate on some of our beaches have been integral in making sure that people are safe in the water. I also commend the RNLI guilds. Every branch and station has one: Aldeburgh's was set up in 1962 and has been vital to the station's ongoing operation.

I praised the operatives at Southwold station in 2013, because on 26 May 2013 a small group of the crew who were out on exercise gathered to deploy the single largest ever piece of peacetime recovery: 85 people, in just one event, where a swimming race had gone horribly wrong. Ben Lock and Lucy Clews were the lifeguards there who saw the issue straight away. The crew was mobilised by lifeguard supervisor Dan Tyler, and helmsmen Simon Callaghan, Paul Barker and Rob Kelvey came into action, later supported by Liam Fayle-Parr. It was absolutely astonishing. To date, I do not believe that there has been any other similar peacetime operation, although there may potentially be situations currently off the Sussex and Kent coast. It is right that we recognise the contribution of all these people in *Hansard* once more. Lives could have been lost.

I commend Simon Hazelgrove and the team today, who continue to operate the lifeboat station. I look forward to inviting them and the people from Aldeburgh to an event here in Parliament—hopefully in May, and if not, in June. At the Aldeburgh lifeboat station, it is slightly more complicated to launch a boat, because the town has a shingle beach, so the whole operation is even bigger. At the moment, they have a Mersey class boat. There is a significant operation, using a tractor and wooden poles to help the boat on and off; in many ways, it is a much bigger operation.

It is tremendous that a town the size of Aldeburgh can muster that sort of activity at pretty short notice. I am conscious that there has been some turbulence recently, but I want to celebrate the good things, including a service that was led by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich earlier this month to commemorate the 200-year anniversary.

Aldeburgh currently has an all-weather boat, the Freddie Cooper, which started operating in 1993, and an inshore boat, the Susan Scott, which has been operating since 2017. I want to turn to that for a sad moment, because a tale needs to be told of the recent leadership,

which has been quite shabby. I am worried about aspects of the culture, and I am sad for the people of Aldeburgh, who themselves are sad about what has happened. We all know that change can be difficult, but one of the things the RNLI needs to understand as it looks ahead to the next 200 years is that it relies on the good will of the local communities, never mind the huge amount of work that goes into supporting it nationally. It needs to reflect on how it should do things differently when dealing with local communities, and I am not the only Member of Parliament affected in that respect.

One of the comments that really brought this issue to mind was made by somebody involved, who talked about an appalling betrayal of a community that has been nothing but supportive, as well as disgraceful management of the situation by RNLI headquarters, which raises concerns about the culture of the charity. By and large, the RNLI has been absolutely amazing, but it does need to learn from this sad situation.

Change was happening and a review was being undertaken. That meant that Aldeburgh would no longer have an all-weather lifeboat; instead, it would have a rigid inflatable craft, or RIB, as they are called. That was of concern to the local community, because it had been used to having an all-weather lifeboat. Unlike in Southwold, its boats had not been deployed as part of the Dunkirk operation, but they had been deployed during peacetime and wartime, and the crews recognised the local seas.

In terms of money, legacies had been left in the RNLI's accounts to support it. It was indicated that these were restricted funds specifically to replace the all-weather lifeboat. The funds were in the RNLI's accounts, and then all of a sudden the decision was made—with some internal consultation—that that would not happen. There was upset and uproar and, as a local Member of Parliament, I was asked to raise the issue with the RNLI. To my surprise, it refused to meet. I was somewhat shocked by that. As an elected representative, I am conscious that this issue has nothing to do with Government or with politics. Of course, the RNLI benefits from things such as tax relief in its fundraising, but that was not my reason for wanting to raise this issue. I wanted to do it because I am a member of the community, and the community felt shut out.

Anthony Mangnall: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dr Coffey: I will not give way yet, no. Eventually, following correspondence back and forth, it was only because I knew one of the trustees that I was able to get a phone call with the then chief executive. They insisted that the call could take place only if it was private and the details were not shared. I was prepared to take the call under those conditions, because it turned out that the chief executive had already been to the station. I turned up the day after the chief executive's visit. Not all the volunteers had been informed that the chief executive was visiting. It turns out that that was part of a tour, which was proudly advertised, with photographs and similar in other stations on the tour, including the one at Southwold, but there was radio silence when it came to Aldeburgh.

I kept my part of the bargain; I did record the phone call, because I do not have the best memory, but I too had assumed that the conversation would be private.

I was therefore sad to learn just last week that the chief executive in fact recorded the call and played it to another Member of Parliament. I am not going to say who they are—I do not need to embarrass them or the chief executive—but I am telling the story because I am concerned about the culture. Indeed, the chair of the trustees offered to meet me at some point, but then seemed to withdraw the meeting—certainly, we have not been able to find a time to do it.

None of this has been received well in the local community. Not all the volunteers were informed. I attended a subsequent meeting with Aldeburgh Town Council, and a member of the local leadership later complained to the council that I had been there, although I am not sure why—perhaps because I was concerned about the culture there. However, I have chosen not to reveal to the community some of the things that were said at that meeting, because that would embarrass the RNLI, and I do not seek to do that. It would also really upset the volunteers who go out, or are on stand-by to go out, on that boat every day. However, at the same time, people are wondering where the money has gone, and we can see in the RNLI's accounts that the cost of wages, salaries and similar was £83.3 million in 2020 but is now £102.3 million.

As I say, this is a sad moment for me, and I have gone to the Charity Commission and similar. I really wish the RNLI success in the next 200 years, but it will need the strong support of its communities, and sadly some of those volunteer crew have now stepped away. I wish them and all the stations around the country well, but let us make sure that the RNLI is strengthened, and way to do that going forward is transparency, rather than secrecy.

10.5 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I commend the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on setting the scene so well and focusing on the bicentenary of the RNLI—[*Interruption.*]

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. Can I ask Members not to have private conversations while others are speaking?

Jim Shannon: I will focus on the title and subject matter of the debate because that is important—it is why we are all here. Like others, I always want to speak on the tremendous work carried out by the RNLI, and this is an opportunity to highlight that wonderful work right across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I always say that, because it is important for me to remember the Union and where we all are, and I have used that terminology on every occasion since I came here in 2010.

As we are all aware, the RNLI has reached the inspirational milestone of 200 years of service to the community. Hailing from a constituency with a huge peninsula, with Strangford lough on one side and the Irish sea on the other, I am reminded of a poem I learned when I was very young—"Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink"—because we are surrounded by seawater on both sides. That perhaps illustrates the importance of this emergency service and what it does not only in Strangford but for all of us who live on the Ards peninsula.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I was amazed to learn this month that volunteer lifeboat crews and lifeguards have saved an incredible 146,277 lives during the RNLI's two centuries of lifesaving. If we needed any illustration of the RNLI's importance, that is it: all those people—146,277 is a significant number.

The lifeboats at the charity's 10 lifeboat stations in Northern Ireland have launched 9,472 times, with their volunteers saving 1,535 lives and coming to the aid of thousands more. There is so much that they have done and so much more that they can do. Since the introduction of lifeguards to Northern Ireland in 2011, the RNLI's seasonal teams based along the Causeway coast—represented by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell)—and in County Down have responded to 2,894 incidents and come to the aid of 3,461 people, 47 of whom were lives saved. That is what this about: the lives saved and the commitments given.

The RNLI website states:

“Two centuries have seen vast developments in the lifeboats and kit used by the charity's lifesavers—from the early oar-powered vessels to today's technology-packed boats, which are now built in-house by the charity; and from the rudimentary cork lifejackets of the 1850s to the full protective kit each crew member is now issued with. The RNLI's lifesaving reach and remit has also developed over the course of 200 years...It designs and builds its own lifeboats and runs domestic and international water safety programmes”—

I think the hon. Member for Totnes referred to that in his introduction.

Today, of the 238 lifeboat stations across Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 10 operate out of Northern Ireland, including one in Portaferry, in my constituency of Strangford. I have visited that station on a number of occasions and I have a very good relationship with volunteers there. One of its stalwarts is Philip Johnston, who is one of the main leaders and organisers of the RNLI in Portaferry—he has just retired, and we thank him for all his service over those years. There are two other stations, on the boundary of Bangor and Donaghadee, in the constituency of North Down, which is, again, an illustration of the RNLI's importance in the area that we represent.

Although much has changed in 200 years, two things have remained the same: the charity's dependence on volunteers, who give their time and commitment to save others, and the voluntary contributions from the public, which have funded the service for the past two centuries. That is another illustration of what the RNLI means.

I was delighted that the local mayor of Ards and North Down in part of my constituency—the very capable Jennifer Gilmour, who just happens to be one of my party colleagues—has selected the RNLI as one of her charities and has carried out various fundraising activities. For many of her constituents and mine, the RNLI is a vital service. Indeed, there are questions as to whether it should be brought into the realms of the emergency services so that it can afford pay and have grants towards equipment. It is sad that the RNLI really is the last emergency service, yet the Government pay less than 1% of its funding. I believe that the service deserves more than that.

That is not a criticism—that is not what I do in debates—but maybe the Minister can give us some idea as to what the Government are able to do for the RNLI financially. I understand the desire to keep the functioning of the RNLI free from Government interference and the red tape that comes with that. However, I do not believe that a round of applause from people in this House is enough, as it seemed to be for the NHS—something we all did every week with real sincerity.

I close by giving my sincerest thanks and appreciation to all the past and present volunteers who have given up their time and who have sacrificed their lives. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) referred to a lifeboat that went to sea and came back with eight of the 10 crew lost. The hon. Member for Totnes mentioned a boat of 15 crew, 13 of whom died and only two of whom came back. That gives an idea of the sacrifice. These volunteers give up time with their loved ones at family events, and give up paid working hours, to use their skills and expertise to save lives and help people to be as safe as possible on an untameable sea. I thank them for all they have done. Their communities could not operate without their valued service.

We celebrate the RNLI as a body and the volunteers as its hands and feet. The RNLI has done much for us, and it will do more. Let us support it and do the best we can for it in this place.

10.11 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this important debate. First, I will pay my own tribute to the incredible work that the RNLI does. Since its establishment in 1824 its volunteers have consistently demonstrated immense courage, rescuing untold numbers of lives. We honour them today and over the course of the next year for the bicentenary celebrations, and we remember the 144,000 people who have been saved by their work.

The RNLI obviously holds particular importance in my constituency of North Norfolk, given the abundance of coastal communities. I represent 52 miles of glorious coastline. Whether it is the influx of tourists over the summer or the regular beach enthusiasts and dog walkers all year round, I know that my coast in North Norfolk is consistently bustling with activity. As such, the RNLI plays an incredibly important role in ensuring the safety and welfare of everybody who comes to use the North Norfolk coast.

We cannot talk about the RNLI without mentioning the significance of Henry Blogg, the most decorated lifeboatman in RNLI history. He served on Cromer's lifeboats and, alongside his crew, saved 873 lives and made 387 rescues over a length of service of 53 years. His ancestors are still living in and well connected to the Cromer community. Henry's story shines a light on the importance the RNLI holds in our local communities.

I would like the Minister to pay particular attention to what I shall say next, as it has been in the local newspapers a great deal, particularly yesterday. I am sad to say that I wish the story had not broken in the way it did, because it has caused a great deal of concern in the local area. One of the vessels that Blogg served on was the Bailey. The Bailey sits in Cromer, in the RNLI Henry Blogg Museum. There are reports that the building has some water ingress. The Bailey is a priceless artefact

in the history of the RNLI and priceless to the people of Cromer. I put it on the record that the Bailey belongs to Cromer; it belongs to the people of Cromer and it must stay in Cromer. I know that behind the scenes the RNLI and the local district council are working together to try and put the building right and get the remedial works salvaged, so that the Bailey can remain in place. I will do everything I can behind the scenes to help that to happen, and I want to reassure the people of Cromer, and more widely around North Norfolk, that we are absolutely driven to achieve that. If I need the Minister's help and support on that, I know he is a good man and that he will give it.

We have already mentioned the RNLI chief executive, Mark Dowie; when I have raised this matter with him, he has picked up the telephone within minutes. He knows how important the Bailey is as one of the most famous vessels in RNLI history, and what it means to the people of Cromer. To reiterate, we will do everything we can to make sure that that priceless artefact is looked after properly in the place where its home should be.

I cannot mention every single lifeboat up and down my coast because that would take far too long, but we are incredibly well served; Wells, Sheringham, Cromer, Mundesley and Happisburgh all have a provision. I know that list seems like a picture postcard of "Book your trip to north Norfolk this summer".

In the last year, Wells has had a new £2.5 million, 42-foot Duke of Edinburgh delivered, and I was privileged enough to see it brought out of its also brand-new multimillion-pound boathouse just last year. It is phenomenal, and it is now operational. Sheringham needs absolutely no introduction. Already this year we have had the now world-famous Sheringham Shantymen sing to us at a wonderful gala dinner, raising money for the RNLI station there; they do incredible amounts around my community. Furthermore, there is of course Cromer, which I will not mention again. All of those places are synonymous with lifeboat history.

To finish, we have talked a lot about the RNLI crews and the amazing work they do, but I just want to mention the people who are often the unsung heroes—rather gloriously not referred to as the admin staff behind the scenes. They are not necessarily the backbone going out on the vessels, but they are the people who make the whole organisation tick. If we did not have those people rattling buckets on the high streets and running the RNLI shops, the entire organisation would not function. I therefore pay tribute to all of the volunteers; not just those on the vessels, but those behind the scenes as well. They are absolutely just as important as the heroic men and women who risk their lives to save other people's lives. I would not get away without saying that, because my stepmother works in one of those businesses.

10.17 am

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Bore da, Mrs Harris. It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this important debate on the bicentenary of the RNLI.

My island constituency of Ynys Môn has seen lives lost at sea for centuries, and many of our lifeboat stations began life as private community initiatives in

response to such events. Improvements in technology have now superseded those smaller lifeboat operations in communities like Penmon, Cemlyn, Rhoscolyn, Cemaes, Bull bay and Rhosneigr.

During the 19th and 20th centuries there were 13 RNLI lifeboats on Anglesey. There are now four lifeboat stations—two with all-weather lifeboats at Moelfre and Holyhead, and two with inshore boats at Trearddur and Beaumaris. Between them, those four stations have given over 500 years of service and their brave volunteers have been awarded more than 100 RNLI medals for gallantry. Those volunteers include the late Moelfre coxswain, Richard Evans BEM. Dick served for 50 years and was involved in the saving of over 250 lives. He is only one of five men to be awarded the RNLI gold medal twice—the highest accolade awarded by the institution and the equivalent of the Victoria Cross for bravery at sea.

Most recently in 2022 the crew of the Trearddur bay lifeboat received medals for the rescue of a female surfer during gale-force 9 winds on 20 May 2021. Helmsman Lee Duncan received a silver medal, with Dafydd Griffiths, Leigh McCann and Michael Doran being awarded bronze medals for a rescue in a 50 mph storm, described as

"one of the finest acts of selflessness and courage of recent times".

Earlier this year in the Holyhead RNLI station, full-time coxswain Tony Price announced his retirement from the role, although he will continue as a volunteer. In his time Tony has dealt with significant incidents, including saving the Christopher Pearce lifeboat when the Holyhead marina was destroyed in Storm Emma. Tony comes from a family with a long history of volunteering for the RNLI.

Just last week, the strong ties between the lifeboats and our community were clearly demonstrated when the demolition of the old Anglesey Aluminium chimney raised more than £10,000 for the Holyhead RNLI. The 120 metre high chimney, which dominated the landscape for 50 years, has been cleared to make way for Stena's Prosperity Parc, a key part of the new Anglesey freeport. In just seven days, more than 900 tickets were purchased in the prize draw to press the demolition button. All the proceeds have gone to the Holyhead RNLI in memory of local lifeboatman Iwan Williams, who sadly passed away last year. Geraint Williams, who was originally from Aberffraw, won the winning ticket.

Last year, Anglesey singing sensation Ren Gill visited Beaumaris lifeboat station after raising more than £15,000 for the local RNLI in recognition of its work searching for his best friend Joe, to whom he dedicated his album "Freckled Angels". This year, to celebrate the bicentenary, Holyhead Lifeboat is proud to be handing the 200-year commemorative baton on to Cemaes bay harbourmaster Dafydd Williams aboard the 1907 rowing and sailing lifeboat the Charles Henry Ashley. Dafydd will then hand the baton over to the Moelfre crew. Then, on 20 April, the Beaumaris RNLI will host a celebration black tie event at Canolfan Beaumaris, with music from Seindorf Beaumaris Band and Suspects and food provided by Gate House Catering.

I will close by saying that the RNLI is part of our island's DNA. From Graham Drinkwater, who laid the foundations for Trearddur bay lifeboat station, to its chairman, Jack Abbott, who was awarded a Royal Humane

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

Society testimonial for using his skills to rescue and resuscitate a drowning man in 2001, just weeks after undergoing open heart surgery, there are too many heroic events to relate and too many past and present RNLI volunteers on Anglesey to name here. To people like Osian Roberts and Arwel Owen, who man the lifeboats, to Phil Hen, with his brilliant photos, and Shirley Rogerson, who tirelessly fundraises, diolch yn fawr to you all and those like you across the United Kingdom for the over 146,000 lives you have saved over the past 200 years.

10.22 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing the debate. It is always good to have some of these debates before recess. I wish all hon. Members, Clerks and everyone else a very good Easter when it comes.

When we mention the emergency services, most people would picture a vehicle used to protect people and save lives—an ambulance, a police car or a fire engine, say. That is what people see on a daily basis in urban communities such as mine. They might not immediately think of that fourth essential vehicle, the lifeboat.

The Glasgow South West constituency is on the south bank of the Clyde. Travelling downstream from there, we have the lifeboat stations of Helensburgh, in the Firth of Clyde, and then others at Largs and Troon on the Clyde coast. People from Glasgow South West have been going “doon the watter” for most of the time that the RNLI has existed, and many will have benefited greatly from its rescue service in that time. For those staying in the city and not making that exotic journey to the Costa Clyde, there has often been the temptation to spend time near the River Clyde itself—an activity that can be quite hazardous. For that reason, the Glasgow Humane Society has long had a base upstream at Glasgow Green from which it performs lifesaving services in the Clyde and other local waterways.

For 40 years, and until only recently, the Glasgow Humane Society was operated by Ben Parsonage, and then by his son, Dr George Parsonage MBE, who pulled thousands from the Clyde, saving many lives. But the society has a much longer history than that: it is the oldest practical lifesaving organisation in the world, having been founded in 1790. Countless Glaswegians have since owed their lives to the officers, volunteers and directors. Admittedly, the society’s remit is local to the Glasgow area, but looking further afield, RNLI lifeboats in Scotland have launched 45,853 times, saving 11,878 lives. That means that over a quarter of all rescues in Scotland have resulted in a life saved.

Looking even further afield across these islands, a term most appropriate in this context, Members will know that the RNLI is reckoned to have saved a total of 146,277 lives. As a proportion of the population, the number of lives saved in Scotland is particularly high. This might not be a great surprise to those who have crossed the Minch or the Pentland Firth during a howling gale, or crossed to any other of Scotland’s 790 islands in weather that we would call, “A good day for a washin’,” or “A good drying day.”

It is easy, as I have done, to make light of the dangers of such journeys, but there is a much more serious edge to it. In defining bravery, a common example is ordinary people running away from burning buildings while firefighters run into them. It is the same with lifeboat crews, who choose to launch and enter the tempest while others would be rushing for safe havens. What makes this behaviour even more remarkable is that those carrying out such feats of bravery are volunteers—all 32,000 of them. They do not expect a high-salary professional career; they do this out of principle and compassion.

That compassion is obvious, but let us look more closely at the principle of who the RNLI seeks to rescue. It is often said, half-jokingly, that in the United States of America, a hospital or ambulance will first check someone’s bank balance before checking their pulse. Fortunately, that is not the current policy in our national health service. In a similar vein, Mark Dowie, the chief executive of RNLI, has said:

“Right from the get-go in 1824, we said that the lifeboat service would rescue whoever needed our help wherever they are.”

“Whoever” and “wherever” therefore includes rescuing migrants in the English channel. Because of that humane work, disappointingly, Nigel Farage and others have described the RNLI as a “taxi service” for illegal migration. Let me make it clear that my colleagues and I utterly disassociate ourselves from such views.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is, I think, principally referring to the RNLI lifeboats at Dungeness and Littlestone, both in my constituency. There is a strong community support for the excellent work they have done, from rescuing British servicemen at Dunkirk in 1940 to the work they do today in the channel, keeping people safe whoever they are.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to mention Dunkirk, as other hon. Members have. We should agree with Mark Dowie when he says:

“The day that the RNLI turns round to the coastguard and says: ‘I’m awfully sorry, can you tell me where these people are from?’ before they respond, that’s the end as far as I’m concerned.”

We should all associate ourselves with the chief executive’s words. It is therefore very heartening that following these smears and attempts to undermine it, the RNLI found itself on course for the highest annual fundraising total in its near 200-year history.

Much has changed here over the centuries. Both the smaller Glasgow Humane Society and the larger RNLI have added the roles of being advisory and educational bodies. Progressing from its original purpose in 1824 of aiding ships in distress around the coasts of Britain and Ireland, the RNLI now identifies swimmers, paddleboarders, fishing crews, and small boats in the channel as making up the bulk of callouts today. As the RNLI puts it:

“We were all about lifeboats and we’re now about life saving.”

We in Scotland have a strong working relationship with the RNLI, which provides joint safety training alongside the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Police Scotland. We have a drowning prevention strategy, which aims to reduce accidental drowning fatalities by 50% by 2026. Co-operation between the bodies, including the RNLI, is vital to achieving this. Unsurprisingly, the steering group of Water Safety Scotland consists of the

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Police Scotland and the RNLI. We in Scotland take this opportunity to thank the RNLI for the vital public service it carries out, and we wish it well for the future and the next 200 years.

10.29 am

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Harris, and a happy Easter to everybody. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this debate, and thank all Members who have spoken about the brilliant work the RNLI and its volunteers do around our coasts. I make a special reference to the stepmother of the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) for her volunteering.

I associate myself strongly with the comments from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about the importance of rescuing everybody at sea, in particular people on small boats in the English channel. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) reminded us of just how dangerous it was 200 years ago and less, and how many gave their lives to rescue others. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) talked about the importance of water safety on inland waterways. Those are important additions to the debate.

The RNLI mission statement says it all. The RNLI is committed to and focused on the purpose for which it was created 200 years ago: to save lives at sea. Founded in 1824 as the Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck, it was 30 years later, in 1854, that it was officially named the Royal National Lifeboat Institution—the RNLI, as we all know it today.

We all think of it as the fourth emergency service, after the police, fire and ambulance services, so it is remarkable that 97% of its frontline staff are volunteers and that it is funded by charitable donations. As a charity independent of Government, its volunteer lifesavers give their time for free, but they need training, well-maintained equipment, lifeboats and shore facilities, and part of the donations received fund those things. Almost 6,000 volunteer lifeboat crew members are stationed around the UK and Ireland, and they are ready, when the call is received, to spring into action to save the lives of those in danger at sea.

Since its launch, the RNLI has saved the lives of 4,356 people across the north-west and 146,000 people across the UK and Ireland. It works tirelessly in my constituency: in 2022 alone it saved five lives, responded to nearly 200 incidents and aided 1,000 people across the boroughs of Sefton and Wirral. I am proud to say that Crosby beach, which is in my constituency, is the only British beach that is patrolled by the RNLI all year round.

Virginia Crosbie: Great name!

Bill Esterson: It is great.

In Southport cemetery, just outside my constituency, there is a monument to the 27 lives lost in the Mexico disaster, which happened almost 140 years ago. The rescue remains the worst loss of crew in a single incident in the history of the RNLI, and was viewed as a national disaster across Victorian Britain. The Mexico,

a huge wooden ship, left Liverpool on 5 December 1866, bound for Ecuador. She was caught in a violent gale, and amid heavy seas she ran aground on the perilous sandbanks of the Ribble estuary. The rescue effort saw the biggest loss of crew in a single incident in the history of the RNLI, leaving 16 widows and 50 children without their fathers in Southport and St Anne's. It was a stark reminder then of the real risks such brave people undertook, and it is a reminder today of the dangers every time they are called into action.

The RNLI's work is not just about reacting when things go wrong; it plays a huge part in keeping our communities safe and reducing the need for search and rescue. That is done in a variety of ways, including street stalls and classroom visits to educate and advise on the dangers of water. In 2021, the RNLI's water safety teams reached more than 27 million people with essential messaging, which undoubtedly saves more lives and keeps families together. Those services are vital. There are 238 lifeboat stations up and down the land and an active fleet of 431 lifeboats, ranging from large, all-weather lifeboats to smaller inshore vessels. We cannot overstate the impact and importance of the RNLI's work.

The RNLI will go to the aid of anyone in trouble at sea, as the lifesaving charity has for 200 years. It does so without judgment or preference. In south-east England, it is currently engaged in a significant level of work in the channel, as a result of the large number of people crossing one of the world's busiest shipping lanes in small, overcrowded, unsafe boats. All too often, those crossings end with disastrous, fatal consequences. The RNLI launched to rescue 290 times in the English channel in 2022. That was 3% of all RNLI lifeboat launches that year.

The stories of desperate people crossing the English channel to reach the UK often dominate news and social media. Of course, we cannot know the experiences, backgrounds and personal stories of every person trying to arrive in this way, but it is clear that many of them intend to, and do, claim asylum here. Labour will crack down on criminal smuggler gangs by introducing stronger powers for the UK's National Crime Agency to restrict the movement of those suspected of involvement in people smuggling. We will set up a new cross-border police unit with officers based in the UK and across Europe to tackle gangs, because if we want to reduce the number of people in need of rescue in the channel, it must make sense to cut the supply of boats by the criminal gangs. Our plans will reduce the numbers of people making the desperately dangerous crossing of the channel in small boats.

RNLI crews are asked by His Majesty's coastguard to assist anyone who is in trouble on or in the water in the UK. They will go to the aid of anyone in danger when asked to do so, as they have been doing for 200 years, without asking who they are or where they come from. They respond in extremely demanding search-and-rescue environments with continued dedication and commitment. In any rescue, their priority is to ensure that casualties are treated with skill, care, dignity and respect and are brought to safety as quickly as possible. RNLI crews then pass over responsibility for those rescued to the most appropriate agency. That might be the ambulance service, the police or Border Force.

[*Bill Esterson*]

It was fantastic to see lifeboats on the River Mersey near my own constituency to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the RNLI. We should be incredibly proud of the crews, who continue to respond selflessly to their callers day or night simply to help others. I pay tribute to them all here today, and also to everyone who plays a part in fundraising—rattling buckets or making donations—for this vital, life-saving charity.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this very moving and important debate. He spoke very eloquently of the work that the RNLI has done over the centuries. I know he has been a long-term champion of the RNLI and has dedicated a lot of his time in Parliament to supporting and helping it. I enjoyed many elements of his speech, including the gold teeth and the vintage Ferraris that have been donated, but most importantly the tales of tragedy and heroism that he mentioned, particularly the tale of the Salcombe lifeboats in which 13 out of 15 died. That is absolutely devastating.

I am very pleased to see so many contributions from across the entire United Kingdom. I notice that we have contributions from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and from the south coast to the north coast of England. We even had a contribution from inland, which just shows how important the RNLI is to everyone across the UK—I say that as somebody who also represents a landlocked constituency.

I am delighted to be able to offer the Government's congratulations to the RNLI on the momentous occasion of its 200th anniversary. I am sure that Members from across the House will want to join me in thanking the RNLI, its volunteers, fundraisers and supporters for their amazing contribution to the saving of lives over the past two centuries. Through the courageous and dedicated actions of RNLI volunteers, more than 144,000 lives have been saved over the past 200 years. That works out as 700 lives per year—almost exactly two lives for every single day of the past 200 years. That really is quite a phenomenal achievement.

Damian Collins: Does the Minister agree that we should also be thankful for the on-land volunteers who support the RNLI, including Judith Richardson in my constituency, who has given more than 50 years' service? She was one of the last of the "lady launchers" who, until 1977, used to help to drag the boat physically out to the sea.

Anthony Browne: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work that the RNLI does not just coastally, but inland, as he says. I know that the remit of the RNLI has expanded over time.

The RNLI has launched more than 380,000 times in the past two centuries, showing amazing dedication and commitment. Last year alone, RNLI lifeboats launched more than 9,000 times in one year, aiding more than 10,500 people and saving 269 lives. In addition, RNLI lifeguards carried out almost 3 million preventive actions and attended more than 14,000 incidents, aiding

20,000 people and saving another 86 lives. It is testament to the commitment and skills of the RNLI and our lifeboat volunteers that the UK has one of the finest lifeboat services in the world, which continues to uphold the finest traditions and values of the RNLI as proudly today as it did 200 years ago.

I will briefly remind the House of the history of the RNLI and its contributions to our society, which my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes touched on. The founder of the RNLI, Sir William Hillary, was so appalled by the loss of life at sea that he set about creating an institution dedicated to the preservation of human life from shipwreck. He initially went to the Government to appeal for support, but the Government of the day, in their wisdom—or lack of it—said no. He was forced to go to other supporters and philanthropists and managed rapidly to get support, which helped to launch the institution we see today. It is notable that all the fundraising over the past 200 years, which reached a record last year, is really a consequence of that initial Government decision to say no. The RNLI might have ended up a very different organisation if the initial Government decision had been different.

It was the drive and dedication of Sir William that led to the institution that we know today. He laid out 12 resolutions that formed the foundation of the RNLI and that still stand firm today, remaining part of the RNLI charter 200 years on. The RNLI has grown extraordinarily over the past 200 years. It now has an income of more than £200 million, more than 2,000 staff and more than 30,000 volunteers. I pay tribute to the visionary founders of the RNLI for their leadership and support over the years. The continuing dedication of the RNLI to saving lives at sea and its volunteer ethos remains a cherished cornerstone of British society.

I put on record our tribute to the brave volunteers of the RNLI who risk their own lives to save others at sea and around our coastline. It is in large part due to their personal commitment and skill that the UK has one of the best records for water safety in the world. I also pay tribute to the families of our search and rescue volunteers. They are often forgotten, but without their never-ending support, our volunteer services would not be able to continue their vital life-saving operations.

I pay particular tribute, as other hon. Members present have, to the brave RNLI volunteers who have lost their lives while trying to save others over the past 200 years: more than 600 volunteers have lost their lives, and 2,500 medals have been awarded for bravery. I know many Members will be aware of the tragic loss of lifeboat volunteers from their constituencies over the past two centuries—we have heard various examples of that this morning. The loss of every RNLI volunteer is keenly felt across a local community, impacting friends and family. Local memorials remain a reminder of the sacrifices of the RNLI crews who have been lost. As part of this bicentenary anniversary, local services and events are planned to commemorate RNLI volunteers throughout its illustrious history.

I will turn to some of the comments that have been made in what has been a very moving debate this morning. We have heard many extraordinary stories of tragedy and heroism, among various other issues that have been raised. I was touched by the story of the Traveller, raised by the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), where eight out of 10 people died.

The hon. Lady spoke movingly of the impact on the local community of Hoylake. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) paid tribute to the wider work that the RNLI does, particularly with safety and support in the community. He mentioned that when he goes on his Boxing day walks, it is good to see the boats out there.

The landlocked hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) asked whether the RNLI could help out with inland rescue. While search and rescue is the responsibility of the police, he makes a valid point, and I completely understand the importance of trying to learn lessons from the RNLI to help to improve search and rescue inland. He made a point about local people in boats and boatyards, and whether they can be called on to help, and I will absolutely take that away to see if anything can be done to improve that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) paid tribute to the work of the RNLI in Northern Ireland, where it has 10 lifeboat stations. He raised a question about Government support, which makes up only 1% of its total funding, and questioned that. The RNLI is obviously independent of Government—very proudly so; if Government funding increased, there might be a risk that it would end up being more Government-controlled.

His Majesty's Coastguard, some representatives of which are here now, works closely with the RNLI; calls come through to the coastguard and it works out whether it needs a helicopter, which is run by the coastguard, or whether the case should be handed over to the RNLI. I understand that that relationship works very well. The RNLI is very proudly independent of Government: it does not take instructions from Government and it decides its own operations, and I would not want to compromise that.

I pay tribute to the stepmother of my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and her work for the RNLI. My hon. Friend also mentioned the extraordinary case of Henry Blogg, who was involved in saving 873 lives over 53 years—a quite extraordinary achievement. I was sad to learn what is happening to his ship, the Bailey. That is fundamentally an issue for the local authorities in my hon. Friend's area, but if he wants my support in any way I will be happy to do what I can to help save the Bailey.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) talked about the fundraising achievements of the RNLI in her constituency and in particular the Anglesey aluminium chimney demolition, which raised over £10,000 in one go. It must have been fun pressing that button and seeing it go down!

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), paid tribute to the RNLI, but also raised the issue of migrants in the channel. I put on the record that my position and that of the Government is exactly the same: the RNLI cannot ask people whether they have a visa before deciding to rescue them, and it is absolutely right that it rescues everyone who needs rescuing. That is very much the Government's position.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), whose contribution added a slightly different tone to the conversation, has been in dispute with the

RNLI over the allocation of resources and a bequest. I am told by the RNLI that the chief executive and the regional lifeboat manager have responded to my right hon. Friend's questions directly on a number of occasions, and that the Charity Commission has responded to her complaints about the use of bequests but has advised that it is satisfied with how the RNLI has handled the legacy funding.

My right hon. Friend did recognise that the RNLI is, as I said earlier, independent from Government. This is not a dispute that the Government can get involved in. The RNLI is independent: it decides the distribution of its assets. I am advised that the RNLI generally does a really good job at working out the best allocations of assets to make sure that it is most effective at lifesaving, and it would be inappropriate for me as a Minister or for the Government to intervene to influence the independent decisions of the charity.

Dr Coffey: I have not asked the Government to intervene. I appreciate the extraordinary work that the RNLI does, as I highlighted in my contribution. There was a particular recent incident that I thought needed to be raised. Frankly, before anybody seeks to insult me about representing my constituents, they should remind themselves they are insulting those constituents. I am not asking in any way for the Government to intervene—I never have. It is right that the RNLI continues to be a thriving institution after 200 years; I wish it at least 200 years more.

Anthony Browne: My right hon. Friend has made her point well; we agree about the issue of independence.

In conclusion, as we have heard, the RNLI's achievements over the past 200 years have been absolutely exceptional. Since its foundation in 1824, not a single year has passed without outstanding rescues and courageous and selfless acts. Advancements in life-saving assets and innovation to support its lifesavers through busy summers, wild winters, wars and pandemics have been at the core of everything that the RNLI has achieved. I invite Members to join me in thanking the RNLI for its support and dedication over the past 200 years. I wish it well as it seeks to inspire and engage a new generation of supporters, volunteers and fundraisers, and as it works towards securing life-saving services for the next 200 years.

10.49 am

Anthony Mangnall: If for no other reason, we can all rest easy: by frequently referencing the great work done by the stepmother of my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), we have made his Sunday family gatherings that much easier.

In this tremendous debate, we have celebrated the magnificence of the RNLI's 200 years and the extraordinary work it has done across the country. If you had been speaking in this debate, Mrs Harris, I know that you would have mentioned the fantastic work done by Mumbles lifeboat station in Swansea. I am pleased to put that on the record.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for North Norfolk and for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), the hon. Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson),

[Anthony Mangnall]

and my hon. Friend the Minister for their extraordinarily kind words about an organisation that deserves far greater recognition and all the support we can give it for the next 200 years.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I add my congratulations to the stepmother of the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker).

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the bicentenary of the RNLI.

10.51 am

Sitting suspended.

People Granted Asylum: Government Support

11 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for people recently granted asylum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance, Mrs Harris. I refer everyone to the entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests that I receive support in my office from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project.

When an individual receives a grant of refugee status, it is a moment of unspeakable relief, even of celebration, as they finally have assurance of protection and knowledge that the next part of their life will be in the UK—after great tribulation and tragedy, they have safety and security. Refugees go through monumental struggles to reach that point, but it is only one part of their journey to rebuilding their life here in the United Kingdom.

It is very clear, particularly from what we have seen over the past year, that improvements have to be made to enable refugees to build fulfilling lives here and to use and develop the skills that they bring. To be genuinely welcoming to genuine refugees makes sense economically and for the health of our communities. It fulfils our international obligations as well as being a clear moral obligation.

To welcome refugees is not to give them preferential treatment over others, but to ensure that they do not have to overcome unnecessary barriers as they seek to get on with their lives—indeed, to start a new life—and contribute to our society.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate on a very important subject. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place; I know he will do his utmost, as he always does, to respond. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who arrive here not illegally in boats, but having gone through a very selective process and been granted asylum, should be given aid and support to begin their new life? The first step must be to help them integrate into British communities and our way of life.

Tim Farron: Yes. I will refer to that later, but we know that the large majority of those who present themselves and seek asylum in this country, however they arrive, whether through regular or irregular means, turn out to be genuine refugees. We seem to be failing them and ourselves as a society if we do not commit to helping them to integrate, even before they receive official status.

Over the past year, we have seen an increase in the number of decisions on asylum applications because of the Prime Minister's focus on trying to clear the backlog of legacy cases. I welcome that, because people should not be waiting for years for a decision on their asylum case. Accurate and timely decision making should be a hallmark of an effective asylum system. Indeed, it would be the best deterrent against those who are not genuine refugees seeking asylum here. Yet, of course, the backlog is still huge. In excess of 100,000 people are waiting in limbo, which is unfair on them and hugely expensive for the taxpayer.

We should be clear that the increase in newly recognised refugees this year is not because of an increase in people arriving by small boats or any other means, but because the Government are playing catch-up, having inexcusably allowed that backlog of human misery to build up in the first place. With more people being granted refugee status, there has been significantly more pressure on the part of the system dealing with those who move on from asylum support to refugee status, in what is often referred to as the “move-on period”.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. Since April 2023, there has been a 575% increase in the number of people who have presented to Manchester City Council as homeless due to eviction from Serco accommodation. Those people come not just from Greater Manchester, but from as far away as Belfast. Does he agree that we need more funding and support from the Home Office for all local authorities that are supporting people who have recently been granted asylum?

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Local authorities end up picking up the tab. I will refer to this later, but, as the Home Office seeks to reduce its expenditure, it ends up passing the buck to another part of the public sector. The same taxpayers are paying the bill, yet we have misery for the people at the wrong end of that.

The period from the point at which someone is given their status—a happy moment—to the point when they lose asylum support, which is referred to as the “move-on period” by those of who us are interested in this area and those who work in the sector, has exposed policy failings that have existed for years. The problem that those working in communities with refugees see is practice not mirroring policy, as well as policy simply not working.

Currently there is a 28-day move-on period from when a person receives their grant of refugee status until their asylum support ceases. Although their asylum support is a miserly £7 a day, which is meant to cover food, clothing, communications and travel, £7 a day is still better than the absolutely nothing at all that they face at the end of the move-on period. The move-on period is supposed to enable transition either into work or, if needed for a while, on to mainstream benefits. However, it takes 35 days to receive the first universal credit payment, so it is obvious that a gap in support is created.

Across the UK, local authorities and charities do what they can to support refugees who have fallen through that predictable gap, where they have zero income and no accommodation, but it is hardly a surprise that many end up sleeping on the streets, homeless and destitute. That was exacerbated over the second half of last year when the Home Office started to calculate the 28 days from the date of the asylum decision letter rather than the date of issuance of the biometric residence permit, which is usually received at a later date and, critically, is needed to apply for universal credit. That reduced the already inadequate 28-day move-on period to fewer than 20 days in practice.

It is quite astounding that the Home Office took that decision at the time it did. Given the Government's attempts to clear the backlog, we faced a situation where many more refugees than normal were in the

move-on period window, so, predictably, that decision created far more hardship for far more people. It appears there was minimal consultation with local authorities and charities, which were inevitably going to have to pick up the pieces.

The reality on the ground has been and continues to be terrible. We have heard some terrifying statistics from Manchester. Data from the Centre for Homelessness Impact indicates that street homelessness among those leaving asylum housing increased by 223% from June to September last year when the backlog clearance programme began. During that period in Leicester, British Red Cross staff and volunteers were giving out between three and five sleeping bags every day to people who were about to become homeless.

Statutory homelessness statistics published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities show an increase of 203.8% in the number of households owed a relief duty after being required to leave asylum accommodation between July and September last year, when compared with the same quarter the year before. Again, that corresponds with the backlog clearance programme.

Data from the British Red Cross refugee support services across the UK show that between the beginning of August last year and 15 March this year—a couple of weeks ago—there was a 202% increase in the number of clients with refugee status experiencing destitution, when compared with the same period a year earlier. At the end of 2023, Home Office operational guidance changed back and the calculation of the move-on period reverted to beginning with the receipt of the biometric residence permit. That was a welcome U-turn, but despite that change, destitution and homelessness among refugees continues to be a huge issue in 2024.

The British Red Cross reports that so far this year there has been a 205% increase in the number of new clients with refugee status in need of its support due to destitution. In that period, it has provided 75 sleeping bags to people who have been granted refugee status following the most traumatic of experiences, which most of us can barely even imagine. A survey organised by a cross-party group in London found that 311 refugees were forced to sleep rough after eviction from Home Office accommodation in January this year alone. That marks an increase of 234% compared with September the previous year. In total, 1,087 refugees approached London homelessness services for help in January following Home Office evictions—a rise of 78% in the four months since September.

This is utterly disgraceful. It is heartbreaking and it is genuinely shameful—shameful in the sense that it makes me ashamed. We are the United Kingdom. We are a country that, by the grace of God, is wealthy, stable, free and peaceful. Like similar countries, we are in a position to help provide sanctuary for those who have fled the horrors of war and persecution.

We take fewer asylum seekers per head in the UK than two thirds of other European countries, but those asylum seekers who make it to Britain, present themselves and claim asylum then hear witless rhetoric demonising them. They are stuck in hostels of one kind or another and face extreme right-wing protestors leafleting and chanting outside their residence. They wait months and months for a decision and then most of them turn out to be genuine refugees, despite the garbage written and

[Tim Farron]

spoken by people who should know better. Finally, they are able to move on from the trauma of their past to begin a new life, put down roots and contribute to our economy and our society, only instead, we choose, through malice or incompetence, to visit upon them more hardship. What a wicked thing it is to do to grant refugee status to a traumatised person one day and then dump them on the street with a sleeping bag the next. I am ashamed of that, and I really hope that the Minister is ashamed of that.

This is an appalling breakdown in policy. It cannot be right that street homelessness is a necessary part of the transition for newly recognised refugees. Yes, there will be more people in the move-on period at this time because of the ambition to clear the legacy backlog, but that does not make it right. Outrageously, it suggests that an acceptance of street homelessness is built into this policy.

Local authorities need 56 days to work with households at risk of homelessness—that is not merely my opinion, but the official and considered view of Parliament and Government, recognised through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—so why do refugees get only 28 days? Why is there a discrepancy in how we treat different kinds of people facing homelessness in the UK? I am aware that there will be a desire to reduce asylum support costs, but costs need to be considered from a cross-departmental perspective.

Making people destitute does not save the taxpayer a penny; it quite clearly costs them a lot more—as well as, of course, being utterly and totally shameful. Local authorities and emergency services will end up picking up the tab and it obviously causes distress and hardship for those refugees affected. These are not conditions conducive to looking for work, to education and training, or to people rebuilding their lives in the UK and becoming part of and contributing towards our society.

Will the Minister commit to reviewing whether the refugee move-on period should be extended to 56 days to ensure compatibility with the Homelessness Reduction Act, to allow people time to apply and receive their first universal credit payment, and to give local authorities a reasonable shot at trying to accommodate those in priority need? It is particularly important for refugees who have fewer connections and therefore less ability to lean on any family and friends. Will he also confirm that the 28 days will continue to be calculated from the issuing of the biometric residence permit, rather than from the date of the asylum decision letter?

Given the challenges experienced this year with refugee homelessness, will there be a review of the local impact of the asylum backlog clearance, including on DLUHC's priorities around homelessness? When will the lessons learned from the Home Office liaison officers pilot in three council areas be rolled out more widely? Will there be a review of the support that Migrant Help is required to offer refugees during the move-on period? Will there be consideration of face-to-face support for refugees as they navigate that period?

Many refugees will not qualify for local authority housing and they face a range of barriers in accessing private rented accommodation, including the difficulty of providing a guarantor with the lack of established social networks, and the cost of rental deposits and

advanced rent payments even if an individual can afford the monthly rent. What are the Government doing to improve access to the private rented sector for refugees? How is best practice being shared?

A refugee's ability to thrive in the UK alongside existing communities is deeply connected to their experience and treatment while they are in the asylum process. The most obvious example is finding work. If an asylum seeker is able to work, they will be in a much stronger position to find work as a refugee. They will have maintained skills, built local connections and gained confidence from being able to work. Living in a period of limbo for months or years in substandard accommodation, separated from local communities, makes it much harder for them to rebuild their lives and integrate once they get refugee status.

We are an outlier among comparable countries in not permitting asylum seekers to work. There is no evidence that it creates a pull factor in those countries and, significantly, it does not make sense to keep people idle against their will and then suddenly expect them to have everything they need to thrive once they get legal status.

I refer the Minister to the report recently published by the Commission on the Integration of Refugees, which draws on wide-ranging evidence from civil society, local government and refugees themselves to form recommendations supported by commissioners from across the political spectrum. The recommendations include extending the move-on period to 56 days and giving asylum seekers the right to work after six months. I ask the Minister to consider those practical solutions for the refugee move-on period, which reflect the wider need for a cross-departmental national strategy for refugee integration incorporating input from local authorities, the voluntary sector and those with lived experience.

Shall we just imagine what it must be like to have to come to the UK as a refugee? Maybe you fled Eritrea rather than be conscripted to butcher your own people, or you fled Iran because you were persecuted for being a Christian, or you fled Syria because of the barbarous Putin-puppet Assad. Your journey might have been through the lawlessness of Libya and over terrifying bodies of water. You might have been living through appalling hardship in terror, barely existing, losing loved ones on the journey to seek sanctuary.

Ninety-nine per cent of people like you will be heading somewhere else—Lebanon, Turkey, Germany—but you are heading for Britain because of family, because you speak English, because of the legacy of empire, or because you have heard that it is a decent, civilised and safe place. You make it there and you sit and rot for months because of the backlog. You get the growing sense that you are not welcome and that you are disbelieved, because you can read the headlines and the online abuse. But then you get your status. Britain accepts you. It believes your story—your true story. You are now ready to dedicate to your new home in Britain, having finally made it here, the skills and tenacity you demonstrated as you fled your horror. But then you are sat huddled in a shop doorway, freezing, wet, hungry and scared, with nothing—no home, no money. And you came here because Britain is better than that.

Minister, I challenge you to make the changes that I have set out today, and make Britain better than that.

11.17 am

The Minister for Countering Illegal Migration (Michael Tomlinson): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and to respond to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron); I congratulate him on securing this debate. I also welcome the interventions by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and the ever-present hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He always makes meaningful contributions to these debates, as did the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton.

I will start by challenging the tone of the remarks from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale. He started well, by rightly acknowledging that this is a welcoming country, and I agree: it is welcoming and generous. He will know that one of the challenges of my job relates to illegal migration. One reason why I am passionate about this role is that to ensure that we remain generous as a country and to ensure that all our constituents recognise the need for us to continue to be welcoming, we must crack down on illegal migration. However, that is not the subject of today's debate.

Let me make it clear that when someone is granted refugee status or humanitarian protection, they are not simply left to fend for themselves. In the hon. Gentleman's words, that would not be in keeping with the values of our country—the values that we share—and it would be at odds with our long tradition of welcoming and helping people who have fled tyranny, oppression or persecution.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the asylum backlog, and I join him in welcoming the Prime Minister's commitment to clearing the legacy asylum backlog. That has been delivered, with 74,000 initial decisions made. I know that the hon. Gentleman welcomes that and recognises it as important, as do I. At the time, however, the Prime Minister made sure that the backlog cannot be cleared at the expense of our security and necessary detailed background checks, as I know the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge. We have taken steps to speed up asylum processing while maintaining the important integrity of our security at the border.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the move-on period, and it is important to understand the context when we look at that. He is right that following the service of an asylum decision, an individual continues to be an asylum seeker for the purpose of asylum support until the end of the prescribed period. That period is 28 calendar days from when an individual is notified of a decision to accept their asylum claim and grant them leave.

Let me tackle directly the hon. Gentleman's challenge about extending the prescribed period to 56 days. There are no current plans to do that, but I hope to reassure him in my next few sentences about what is happening, some of which he has already touched on. Although 28 days is the legislative period, in practice, support extends beyond that time. Measures are in place to ensure that an individual granted asylum can remain on asylum support and in accommodation, so individuals already have longer than 28 days.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments about the point at which the 28 days begin. He is right that the process was temporarily amended in August to use the date of service, in line with secondary legislation.

As he knows, a decision was made to pause that in September, and consideration of that practice is ongoing. I take his points on board and I will consider them alongside that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned homelessness and move-on support. Of course, the Home Office is aware of the potential challenges that newly recognised refugees can face. He was right to highlight homelessness, as was the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. There is support available. For example, move-on support is granted through Migrant Help and its partner organisations. That includes providing advice on accessing the labour market—I will come back to the point from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale about accessing the labour market more widely—and applying for universal credit, as well as signposting to local authorities for assistance with housing.

On housing, it is recognised that the number of individuals moving on from asylum support is placing pressure on local authorities, as was implicit in the hon. Gentleman's speech. He noted that the clearance of the backlog may have something to do with that, but it is right that the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are working closely together on that and regularly engaging with local authorities to ensure that they are supported. Following the notification of an asylum decision being made, we expect accommodation providers to notify local authorities within two working days, and we are working with providers to ensure that that practice is applied consistently across all areas.

Afzal Khan: The Minister touched on the difficulties with moving on. The difficulty seems to be that there is no proper co-ordination when people are actually granted asylum, and then they move. I gave the figure of the more than 500% increase in Manchester. Considering the difficulties that we already have with housing shortages, perhaps better co-ordination and asking those who have been granted asylum where they would like to move to would help local authorities.

Michael Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive point. He is right that co-ordination in this area is important, as it is in any area of Government business. That is why my point about the Home Office working closely with DLUHC is so important. Also, I just made a point about notifying local authorities within two working days, and that is part of the better working relationship that is needed. That is happening on the ground, but I take on board his point that that there need to be good working relationships between Departments.

I will briefly mention biometric residence permits, because they are important in obtaining onward support and allowing newly recognised refugees to integrate and establish themselves. It is right that there have been concerns about this, but a dedicated support function is in place, which will help to address any issues with the BRP process at speed and ensure that there are improvements right across the system. That perhaps also addresses the hon. Gentleman's point.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale closed with the important subject of the right to work. I disagree with him on the pull factors. Unrestricted access to employment could act as an incentive for more migrants to choose to come here illegally. Only last week, there was an exchange in the Chamber on this

[Michael Tomlinson]

subject when we debated the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. The provision about asylum seekers' right to work was also debated during the Committee stage of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, when an amendment was tabled to that effect. We do not want to encourage the pull factor of employment.

Tim Farron: I appreciate the Minister's response, and I am not surprised by it. He will know that many of his Conservative colleagues agree with me. To put it bluntly, there is a very good right-wing and left-wing argument for this to happen. First of all, there is absolutely no evidence from any comparable country that employment creates a pull factor. As well as the moral argument that allowing people to work in order to integrate is good for them when they remain as refugees, as most of them will, it also saves the taxpayer a fortune to allow people to earn a living—and my goodness, we have a massive workforce crisis in our neck of the woods, with massively too small a workforce to be able to sustain our economy—because they then have the opportunity to contribute to the cost of the system and to pay for their own. Surely the fiscal Conservative within the Minister should want to say yes to that.

Michael Tomlinson: These debates have happened, including recently, during the passage of the 2022 Act, where a specific amendment was tabled to that effect. The hon. Member is right that we disagree on this issue. There is no permission to work unless—this is the caveat—someone's asylum claim has been outstanding for 12 months or more through no fault of their own. He knows that about the system, but on his point, we do encourage asylum seekers awaiting the outcome of their claim to undertake volunteering activities, for example, so long as it does not amount to unpaid work or a job substitution.

I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale for securing this debate; he is right that this is an important issue. We have debated many of these subjects either directly, in relation to the 2022 Act, or tangentially, in relation to the more recent Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. None the less, they are important, and this short debate has given us the opportunity to exchange ideas and differing views. Perhaps ultimately, we can all agree that the aim should be for people who have been granted sanctuary in the United Kingdom to be led on a path to a happy and rewarding life here, because that is not only in their interests, but in all of our interests as well.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Cavity Wall Insulation

[MRS PAULINE LATHAM *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of cavity wall insulation under Government grants.

I start by thanking you, Mrs Latham, for chairing this important debate. What a pleasure it is to see you.

The problem I am going to outline starts with Government grants for cavity wall insulation schemes, but I wish it ended there. Sadly, it doesn't. I am grateful to the Minister for her time last week: I had the opportunity to brief her on the scale and nature of the problem, which I can only describe as a scandal upon a scandal. I also want to thank *The Yorkshire Post*, God's own newspaper; its editor, James Mitchinson; and the deputy business editor, Greg Wright. They recognised the agony of ordinary people in what is a complicated legal mess and have worked hard to unravel it and tell those stories, and I am truly grateful to them for their diligence and painstaking work in shining a spotlight on this situation.

I am working with 20 constituents in my Halifax constituency who have all been affected. However, figures quoted by the BBC indicate that up to 1,400 people may have been impacted. More and more MPs are taking to the Chamber and writing to Government Ministers with their concerns and their local cases. Most of the cases I am working on follow a similar pattern. People had a knock on the door in around 2015 or 2016 and were asked whether they would like cavity wall insulation. They were assured that it would not cost them a penny because it was a Government-funded scheme. They were told it would be better for the environment, help them to reduce their energy bills and save them money. Most of the people who had the knock on the door were eligible for the scheme on the basis that they were in receipt of some form of welfare support, so the prospect of saving money on energy bills was an attractive one.

Yet months and years later, mould and damp started to affect properties where it had never been an issue before. In some cases, I have seen families become really quite unwell living in these conditions, and they could not understand what had changed so drastically in their homes. Years later, people had a second knock on the door from representatives of law firms, who often told them that they should not have had cavity wall insulation in the first place; that it has done damage to their homes that would cost thousands to fix; and, if they wanted the situation resolved, they should allow the law firm to take the insulators, many of which have since disappeared, to court on a no win, no fee basis. These cases were taken on by SSB Law, which corresponded with my constituents for some time until, just before Christmas of last year, these families and individuals received enforcement notices telling them they owed thousands of pounds in legal fees and that, if they did not pay them, bailiffs would be coming to their homes. One bill was for £18,000, one was for £32,000, and there were a range of amounts in between and beyond.

Bearing in mind that people were usually eligible for the Government-funded schemes on the basis that they were in receipt of some form of welfare support, these bills have devastated people who simply have no means of paying them. It is hard to overstate the impact that

this has had on people's lives. One of my constituents, Mr Zafar, is featured in the extensive coverage by *The Yorkshire Post*. His home was visited by a representative from a law firm in 2019. His wife was told that cavity wall insulation which had been installed a few years earlier was unlawful and potentially harmful to their children's health. This representative persuaded Mr Zafar that they should take on the case on a no win, no fee basis. The case was subsequently transferred to SSB Law solicitors, who handled the case for nearly two years. Then, on 30 January 2023, Mr Zafar received a first enforcement letter demanding £2,973. He contacted SSB Law Solicitors and was assured via email that the payment had been made to the High Court bailiff. Despite this assurance, on 28 November 2023, he received another enforcement letter, this time for nearly £19,000. Distressed by this demand, he made inquiries and learned that SSB Law solicitors had gone into administration. He contacted Leeds High Court, requesting the suspension of the enforcement order. However, just a few days before Christmas last year, an enforcement agent visited his home while he was at work, leaving his wife terrified.

Mr Zafar said:

"I can't work properly and me and my wife can't sleep. The amount in the enforcement notice is always on my mind. Wherever I go, I have on my mind the fact that I must pay £19,000...My kids asked me, 'Dad, have you done anything wrong? Why are you paying this amount? Are we going to end up homeless?'...I just want to release my family from this stressful and horrible situation."

Another Halifax constituent, Mrs Battye, was told that cavity wall insulation would make her home more energy efficient, more environmentally friendly and would improve heating costs—as we all know, if it is done properly, that is all correct. However, in the following months, she started to notice damp and mould appearing in her front and back bedrooms—that was not a problem she had ever had before. Then in 2020, someone knocked on Mrs Battye's door and asked whether there was any damp in the property. This man told her that the cavity wall insulation should never have been installed in the first place, and this had now caused extensive issues at her property. He stressed that it would be difficult and expensive for her to rectify, which she could not afford.

She said:

"He advised me to submit a claim for damage done to the property through a no-win, no-fee claim. I was assured I would not have to pay anything and this was the best way of rectifying the problem."

Over the next four years, Mrs Battye received correspondence from SSB Law in relation to her case, but like the others, just before Christmas last year, she received a letter from High Court enforcement, informing her that she was liable to pay £32,000 to the defendant's solicitor.

Mrs Battye lives alone and works for the NHS on what she describes as a modest salary. She said:

"I have no means to pay this money and I am worried about bailiffs coming to my house and getting a CCJ or a charging order on my property."

Another constituent, who does not want to be named, said she had cavity wall insulation fitted—work in which she had confidence, on the basis that it was funded under a Government scheme. In the months that followed, she and her young son contracted pneumonia, living in a house with mould and damp—again, that was not a problem they had ever had before.

She said:

"I kept changing my wallpaper and house decorations to try to cover the mould...Because SSB Law was a big company, I believed they were definitely going to help us."

On 5 December 2023, my constituent came home to find an enforcement letter at the back of the door. It said that she must pay more than £17,000, otherwise bailiffs would be dispatched to her home.

She said:

"It was just so shocking. My entire credit history had been damaged. My credit card has been suspended. For 10 days, I couldn't sleep. I'd borrowed some money, I thought about selling my jewellery...It's really hard for me. Every day, I'm thinking, 'How am I going to be able to pay this money back?' It's affected my mortgage and affected my credit history. It's affected my daily life."

This lady was so terrified that she managed to borrow money to pay the debt she had no idea she was liable for, just to alleviate her fear of bailiffs coming to her home. However, she now worries every day how she will pay back that loan.

Mr Goodey, a constituent with a similar story, said:

"The amount of stress this has put myself and my family through is grossly unfair. I've since learnt that the construction and age of my property means it is unsuitable for expanding foam cavity filling and should never have been used in the first place. I'm a widowed 65-year-old who is due to retire this year with an 18-year-old son who will inherit the house eventually. I do not want him to inherit this problem."

The Minister will see what a profound, life-changing impact this scandal has had, and is continuing to have, on people. The Solicitors Regulation Authority is investigating SSB Law, which is welcome. In a letter to me, from 23 February, it confirmed:

"We are currently investigating to see if the SSB Group acted in accordance with our Standards and Regulations. This will include whether the firm properly assessed the merits of claims, whether your constituents were properly advised at the outset on potential liabilities arising from initiating litigation, even if this was on the basis of a 'No Win, No Fee' agreement."

It said:

"We will also be looking at the handling of the files and the arrangements for after the event insurance, the failure of which appears to be the main reason why your constituents are facing the prospect of demands for costs."

Crucially—and I really welcome this—the letter from the chief exec of the SRA states:

"After the event insurance has been around for several years and is frequently used in 'No Win, No fee' agreements. We are not aware of similar circumstances to those your constituents now face, being experienced on this scale before. As such, we will also be speaking to a number of organisations to explore whether the numbers of cases where the failure of after the event insurance is increasing, or whether there are any wider gaps in protection to consumers that need to be addressed, given the importance of such products to individuals pursuing civil redress."

I really welcome this investigation, which I hope will be comprehensive in assessing what has gone so horribly wrong for so many people, but the SRA advises that it is expected to report in the autumn. While we have had some success in managing to get some of the enforcement notices paused, they hang over constituents like the sword of Damocles. I therefore ask the Minister to help move this to a permanent resolution.

As I acknowledged at the beginning of my contribution, this all starts with cavity wall insulation, but I am acutely aware that the scandal has grown tentacles into

[Holly Lynch]

a number of Government Departments and policy areas. My first ask of the Minister is that she makes representations to her colleagues to see what else can be done to hold the insurers and law firms involved to account. I am afraid to say that the responses so far from Ministers at the Ministry of Justice have been less than useless. The SRA investigation is significant, and I am hopeful that it will expose what has failed so badly. I would urge the SRA to consider making recommendations to Government and the other relevant agencies, with a view to fixing whatever its findings deem so broken that it has had an impact on 1,400 people. I would ask the Minister to liaise with the SRA to provide any support that she can, so that if there is any way to accelerate the investigation that is made a reality. Given that the SRA might not be the right body to investigate why after-the-event insurers have failed in this scenario, I hope the Minister will also consider ways in which any further regulators or agencies could be instructed to investigate and made to understand the scale, seriousness and urgency of this situation.

Returning to the Minister's brief, I have been reassured to some extent that oversight and regulation of cavity wall insulation—which is such a good thing when done well—has improved since the energy company obligation 1 and energy company obligation 2 schemes, having discussed this in some detail with experts. However, there are still many people out there who do not know where to turn with cavity wall insulation problems dating back to that period. That problem has been exploited by some of those agencies, leading to the problems we now have.

CIGA—the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency—issues guarantees for cavity wall insulation and has issued almost 6.2 million since 1995. It operates a scheme that puts right failures in materials or workmanship for a period of 25 years from the date of installation, and many of my affected constituents could have explored this as a first step in seeking advice and redress. CIGA, in its correspondence with me, stresses that often homeowners were actively told not to lodge a claim with the guarantee provider, who could take action to correct the problem under guarantee, but who instead made, in these cases, false promises of a pay-out in court.

One of the questions I asked on behalf of people with cavity wall insulation who received a knock on the door from someone representing a law firm, was where did that person get their intelligence so they knew where to knock? CIGA suggests that the claims solicitor model relied on farming a large number of potential claims using data accessed either through freedom of information requests from Ofgem, or under the guise of the Data Protection Act, in an attempt to access their own guarantee records. Having gained information on properties where insulation had been installed, unqualified assessors were sent out to encourage the homeowner to pursue a claim. In most cases, they inflated any potential damage or indeed alleged damage that simply did not exist, with the subsequent report signed off by unscrupulous chartered surveyors registered with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. The Minister can see just how much all of this stinks.

I ask the Minister to undertake a review into the whole sorry mess. It is a scandal upon a scandal, which has affected these vulnerable people, up to 1,400 of them,

who in some cases have chronic problems with damp and mould in their homes as a consequence of a Government-funded scheme. They were then preyed on by unscrupulous assessors and lawyers, falling through the cracks of regulation and mismanagement, and we find that the people who could least afford or least deserve it were picking up the bill, driving them into debt and despair. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for leading the debate. Things are different in Northern Ireland, and it is not the Minister's responsibility to reply for Northern Ireland, but I wanted to come along to support the hon. Lady in her request for justice. Ultimately, that is what she is looking for: justice for her constituent. Hon. Members who speak after me will be seeking justice, too. The scheme was for England, Scotland and Wales—the Northern Ireland scheme is different—but I support the hon. Lady.

In my research for this speech, I read the background information, and today I have listened to the hon. Lady's comments about the despair that some people feel. She referred to one lady who was unable to sleep for 10 nights, such was her trauma and concern. That level of concern was financial, ultimately, and she was presented with a huge bill. We have heard about figures of £17,000, £25,000 or £35,000, which indicate just how worrying the issue can be. People do not understand why they are in that position, because that was not what they signed up for.

The hon. Member for Halifax was right to set the scene. She described the financial ruin that her constituents have faced, with unexpected legal bills running to tens of thousands of pounds. Without doubt, more needs to be done to support those families and protect people from such schemes in future. It is not only about helping people with the problems that they have today, but about ensuring that such things do not happen again. [Interruption.] I think there must be something wrong with the plumbing, Mrs Latham: there is definitely a background noise. Whatever it might be, I am sure that it will not silence me or anyone else.

It is important that all constituents have good access to thermal insulation to prevent heat loss in their home. I will give some examples about our heat loss and cavity wall insulation schemes in Northern Ireland. We were able to sort the problems out, by the way, and we did not have individual companies soliciting round the doors for no-win, no-fee representation. There is no doubt that the insulation process is expensive, and many will struggle to pay for it. The Government need to be commended for what they do: it is incredible that we have schemes to enable people to upgrade their homes and ensure that they have the levels of insulation and heating that we all need.

Schemes are offered across the United Kingdom to ensure that those on a low income can avail themselves of cavity wall insulation. The schemes are different across the United Kingdom, as I have intimated. Beginning in 2013, the Government's energy company obligation has required large energy suppliers to pay for energy-saving measures in British households that meet certain conditions, covering wall and loft insulation. We have different

schemes back home: a cavity wall insulation scheme and a roof insulation scheme. The new schemes are offered through the Housing Executive and sometimes through local councils. The ECO scheme covers England, Scotland and Wales, and it is no surprise that we have differing circumstances in Northern Ireland; we often do. We have a scheme that seems to be working well, and whenever there are indiscretions or things do not fall into place, we have been quite able—so far, anyway—to come up with solutions.

Northern Ireland has a sustainable energy programme, which was set up by the utility regulator. Some 80% of the funding has been targeted at vulnerable customers and at those who are older or on a low income. It is important that we enable those people to bring their houses up to a standard such that they can avail themselves of the same energy savings and efficiencies, as well as helpful cavity wall and roof insulation. It is great that those most in need of assistance are getting it.

In my office, I deal every week with people applying for the cavity wall insulation scheme that we have in Northern Ireland, the sustainable energy programme. We have been successful in enabling people to get on it; we just wish there were a wee bit more financial aid available. Now that the Northern Ireland Assembly is back, that responsibility will fall on the shoulders of the Assembly and of the Department that looks after these matters. In my constituency of Strangford and in my main town of Newtownards, many of the homes are of a certain age and standard, so they need the cavity wall insulation schemes. The Housing Executive is the major provider of homes, although the Housing Association provides homes now, some of which are old as well.

With some cavity wall insulation schemes, we have seen examples of insulation not even being put into the walls, although people said it was. We have also seen cavity wall insulation having a detrimental effect, as the hon. Member for Halifax noted. I am not quite sure of the reasons for that, but ultimately we have been able to sort those things out because the companies involved have an obligation to deliver what is right and what is proper.

The priority is to ensure that the Government properly back those schemes to ensure that they are being done legitimately, and that constituencies like Halifax are not being lumped with thousands of pounds of fees to pay back. There certainly must be justice for those who were victims of the scheme. I am pleased that many of them have already contacted the legal ombudsman and the financial services ombudsman to question the level of service that was provided. When it gets to the stage of contacting an ombudsman, we hope for recourse, justice, restitution and ultimately compensation for the people who have been part of that process.

I thank the hon. Member for Halifax again for leading the debate. She should know that she has my full support in this matter; she has the support of all of us in this room, and that is why we are here today. I hope that the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), will be in a position to offer some support and answer some of the questions that the hon. Lady posed. There is no doubt in my mind that the Government must now step in to right the wrongs and ensure that people are protected financially. I believe that that is their obligation. That is why we are here: I am here to support the hon.

Lady and support her constituent. Other Members who will speak in this Chamber want the same justice.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I am sorry for the buzzing noise that we can hear in the background. The Doorkeepers have contacted the engineers, and they are going to address the issue. Meanwhile, it is quite difficult to hear—I cannot hear from the Chair what is being said—so can people speak up so everybody can hear?

2.53 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on securing this very important debate. I am pleased that it has cross-party support, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, and that there are shared concerns about this shocking situation.

This is a real opportunity to seek clarity and pursue justice for all our constituents who have been affected by this shocking affair. The human toll of the SSB Law crisis is significant and has undoubtedly caused considerable shock, anger and distress to those affected. I have met multiple constituents over the past few weeks to discuss the impact of the collapse of SSB Law. I have heard at first hand how the devastating situation has had a severe impact on them, their loved ones and their lives. I have seen the damage to their homes, which is shocking, considering that the Government spent millions of pounds on the scheme. It is leaving families in a terrible situation.

The situation goes on. People are receiving letters threatening court action. Several of my constituents are in real fear of losing their home. It is shameful and outrageous that people have been misled. We need to demand justice for those who have been targeted. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax mentioned the data on who was affected by the scheme; it must have been shared. That must be investigated.

I am one of 20 MPs who have signed early-day motion 423, which calls on the Government

“to ensure that all demands for payment and court orders resulting from the collapse of SSB Law are dropped immediately”.

We need to take pressure off these families.

It is significant that the situation has arisen from the poor implementation of a Government-backed decarbonisation scheme. The Government must therefore be held accountable for the crisis that ensued. The failure on the Government's part to ensure the proper implementation of the insulation scheme means that we must now firmly commit to upholding the rights and protecting the wellbeing of citizens. People are living in unsafe homes, with damp and mould threatening their physical and mental health.

If we are not forceful and succinct in our approach to solving the crisis, we could see serious or potentially life-threatening health issues developing. One mother told me the story of her little boy who suffers severely with asthma; she is really concerned about him. It is vital that we work across the parties to ascertain the true scale of the crisis and find a solution for affected constituents as the scope of the problem comes to light. I am sure it will continue to grow.

We must urgently work with those affected to put right the failings of SSB Law and address this extraordinary scandal. I implore Government Ministers to meet victims

[Kate Hollern]

of the crisis and hear their stories, as I have done, so that they can fully comprehend the urgency of the situation. It is incumbent on the Government to address the unacceptable and desperate situation in which so many people find themselves through no fault of their own. I will continue to do whatever I can in this House to pursue justice. I am pleased to learn that the Minister has the same ambitions as my colleagues and me, because the situation cannot continue. Measures need to be put in place to ensure that it never happens again.

2.58 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a privilege to see you in the Chair, Mrs Latham. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing the debate and for telling us about the experiences of her constituents as well as the problems that they have had after having cavity wall insulation fitted to their homes. Some of the problems might have arisen from very poor ventilation as a consequence, and it is troubling to hear about that.

On the doorstep, I have come across constituents who have suffered from mould and damp. I have also talked to an employee of East Devon District Council who is responsible for the maintenance of social homes and who has said to me that some of the issues with damp and mould are linked to cavity wall insulation. Done properly, cavity wall insulation is a positive thing. It keeps people warm and saves money for the Government, taxpayers and individuals. It is one of those rare policy areas that is not just a win-win, but a win-win-win.

On the subject of heating, the End Fuel Poverty Coalition estimated that 4,950 people in this country died in the winter between 2022 and 2023 because they were living in cold conditions. Clearly, worries all of us. I know that the Government were also concerned, because they introduced the energy price guarantee. On the face of it, the energy price guarantee was a very popular policy because it reduced people's energy bills by a very significant amount, although many of my constituents will not have felt it because their energy bills were still staggeringly high in that winter of 2022-23. The energy price guarantee was a subsidy from the Government—from the taxpayer—of £37 billion. The really sad thing is that had the Government continued to invest in home insulation measures at the rate they had been in 2012, a large proportion of the funding spent on heating people's homes and subsidising their heating would not have been necessary.

The third win is, of course, in the reduction of emissions. Given the concerns that the Government might not reach their net zero target by 2050 and that the world might not meet the target of reducing temperature rises by 1.5°, we absolutely have to be concerned about reducing emissions, too. Heating homes, saving money and reducing emissions are all things that can be achieved with cavity wall insulation done properly.

I want to look back at the last decade or so and at how much cavity wall insulation has helped some of our constituents. One million cavity wall insulations were carried out in Great Britain through the energy company obligation scheme between 2013 and 2023, 27% of all measures carried out under the scheme. The annual number of cavity wall insulations provided through

ECO has fallen over time, from a peak of over 316,000 when the Liberal Democrats were in government in 2014 to a low of little more than 11,000 last year. The number of ECO measures installed overall peaked at three quarters of a million in 2014, but fell to just 159,700 in 2022—a fall of almost 80% and a figure 59% lower than in 2021.

There is no evidence that the UK is near the saturation point for cavity wall insulation. The Government have estimated that 71% of homes with cavity walls had insulation installed at the end of 2022. Some 3.8 million homes with uninsulated cavity walls were thought to be “easy to treat”, and the remaining 1.3 million were “hard to treat”. There is still much low-hanging fruit to progress with now that we know how cavity wall insulation can be done, and done well. If we think about not just Great Britain as a whole, but England, England has a lower percentage of cavity wall insulation: just 69% of homes have it, compared with 76% in Wales and 80% in Scotland. As for my region, the west country, the south-west got just 6% of all ECO spending, compared with 18% for the north-west. Clearly, the west country is dipping out again.

Again, the Liberal Democrats in government made sure that home insulation was a real priority, given the savings on heating, money and emissions. In 2012, we made sure that 2.3 million homes benefited in a single year. If the Conservatives had carried on insulating at that level, the average household would have saved hundreds of pounds per year on their energy bills and the taxpayer would have saved money, too, during the crisis that followed the invasion of Ukraine. It is reckoned that the failure to continue insulating at that level cost taxpayers around £9 billion under the energy price guarantee, because of the lack of insulated homes.

To finish on a cheerier note, some really good work is happening, including in my local area. In my constituency, the Blackdown Hills parish network has invested in an infra-red camera—a thermal imaging camera—that it offers to residents to use so that they can identify where their homes are leaking heat. The camera has also been lent to Sidmouth Town Council and the chair of the council, Chris Lockyear, is offering to help residents to save not just heat but money.

3.5 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is of course a pleasure, Mrs Latham, to serve with you in the Chair. I join colleagues in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing this very important debate.

My hon. Friend quite rightly pointed out the importance of this debate, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) and other hon. Members. Indeed, it is very important to many of our constituents, who are suffering the results of some of the scandalous actions that we have heard about. Many of them are having sleepless nights and are threatened with financial ruin, which I will say more about a little later.

As other hon. Members have said, with the promise of reducing energy bills and with the Government's stamp of approval, cavity wall insulation schemes were an attractive proposition that were readily signed up to by many people, including many of my constituents in Bradford East. However, the reality was a far cry from the promise of warmer homes and lower bills.

Cavity wall insulation has now left many of them facing financial ruin, because, after it was installed, they began to notice, as many other hon. Members have said already, damp and black mould was growing on walls, ceilings, window ledges and floors in their homes, and their electrical systems were compromised. Their homes became harder to heat and in some cases skin conditions increased. Also, many experienced mental stress, because they constantly had to deal with the problem. It is important to mention the real-life consequences for our constituents.

The cavity wall insulation that was supposed to keep their homes warm instead acted as a bridge to draw in the moisture from the external walls and transfer it inside their homes. Although cavity wall insulation was an excellent way to improve energy efficiency in many homes, which it is if it is correctly installed, in those cases it was discovered tragically that those homes were never suitable for cavity wall insulation or that the work that had been carried out was defective.

Like other hon. Members, I have tens of cases now of people being forced to pay hundreds of thousands of pounds. That is the total accumulated amount, including legal fees, which I will come on to. What is alarming is that in every one of these cases the companies that initially installed the cavity wall insulation disappeared, and my constituents had nobody to go back to to ask for help. They were literally left on their own.

That is where the next serious issue arose, because legal firms were going around, door to door, and promising no win, no fee. Sometimes, that was the only option for people who had very limited means and who had already gone through so much stress. One such law company was SSB Law, which has already been mentioned today; actually, it has now been highlighted by a documentary. I and other colleagues have raised the issue in Parliament. SSB Law took on £200 million in debts in trying to deal with these cases. Actually, the company probably knew that many of these cases never had any chance of success, but they were taken on and there were many victims in Bradford, as we have heard.

My constituents were pursuing financial reparations for damage caused by defective insulation. There was no fault on their part for the situation they found themselves in, but they are now facing demands for payments that stretch into tens of thousands of pounds and are simply unaffordable. Despite the situation, with many of my constituents in Bradford growing more and more desperate, it is clear that no one in the current system has any inclination to deliver them justice. It is therefore equally clear that the Government need to step in and intervene.

There is cross-party support for this issue, and it is not an issue that has never been raised before. According to my research, the reviews go back as far back as 2015, when it was acknowledged by at least one report, if not more, that there was an issue with some of the work on cavity wall insulation and the level at which it was being carried out. Certainly, the matter has been raised a number of times in parliamentary questions and debates, including in 2016 and 2017.

Our constituents are now begging us. I cannot emphasise enough the strength of feeling in some of the conversations that I and my colleagues have had. If it were not for the one-line Whip and the last minute nature of the debate, which only my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) could have pulled off as quickly and

miraculously as she did, many more colleagues would have been here. We are here to plead that this issue is causing anxiety, stress and depression. I have had people who have not slept for days, worrying. If someone is a pensioner and the only thing they have is their house, and they are already living through one of the biggest cost of living crises and making ends meet, and they suddenly get a demand for £28,000 through the door, that is going to cause untold misery—of course it is.

As was said earlier, the SRA knew about this. A complaint went in about SSB Law way before many of these cases had advanced to the stage where people are now being asked to repay. The insurance company responsible is now not agreeing to pay any of the indemnity insurance that is the legal protection—I will not go into further detail as I suspect the matter will be subject to much legal debate when the time comes.

I respectfully ask the Minister to step in, in the spirit of the cross-party agreement on this issue. I wrote to the Justice Minister about the issue in that spirit more than a month ago, and I have yet to receive a response. All I request is a meeting for MPs to sit down and discuss this issue, because we have a duty to protect those constituents who have been wronged.

I have just three asks of the Minister. First, the Government must ensure that the legal proceedings, costs and demands for payment that our constituents are mired in, along with the charging orders, interest charges and threats of home repossession are dropped immediately. I think the Government can step in to address these issues and to take some action, although I appreciate the legal technicalities. Secondly, the Government must conduct a full review of all Government-funded insulation schemes to identify the total number of homes affected by defective cavity wall insulation, as well as a full investigation into the collapse of SSB Law and the role of regulators in guarding against risks. Thirdly, the Government must convene a meeting between Ministers, energy providers, insulation companies, legal firms and anyone else involved in this scandal to agree steps toward a compensation fund such as the one developed for the Fishwick insulation scandal. That involved insulation of a different type, but there was compensation there. It set a precedent where defective cavity wall insulation was removed from the homes, the structural damage was addressed, and good quality suitable insulation was retrofitted with a 25-year warranty. That is what happened in that case.

I thank again my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax. Thousands of our constituents up and down the country will be very grateful to her for securing this important debate. I cannot emphasise enough how important this area is to our constituents. If we can save further misery, we have an absolute duty to do so. I look forward to working with Ministers to address and end this scandal for our constituents.

3.16 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) not only on securing this important debate but on making the detailed case that needs to be made about his scandal. The contributions of hon. Members from across the Chamber have added to her exemplary presentation, and have underlined the urgent

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

need to do something about the issue. My hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) all made first-class contributions to the debate.

Cavity wall insulation has played, and will continue to play, a tremendous role in keeping people's homes warm, reducing bills, fighting fuel poverty and uprating homes so that they are fit for a low-carbon future. Indeed, the vast majority of cavity wall insulations work perfectly well and do a good job for the homes where they are fitted. Of course, cavity wall insulations need to be done with the right materials, by the right people, in the right places and according to the right standards. I regret to say that there are circumstances—rather more in the early days than now—where those criteria were not adhered to, and problems arose with properties in which cavity wall insulation had been placed.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. Could you face this way?

Dr Whitehead: I am sorry, Mrs Latham. One would think that, in a reasonable world, there should be speedy recognition that the problem has arisen and an equally speedy arrangement whereby the person in whose home the problem has arisen can get restitution for what has happened, in terms of both compensation and putting right what has gone wrong with the cavity wall insulation.

The Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency came into being in 1995. As hon. Members have mentioned, it provides guarantees for cavity wall insulation. There have been 6 million since it was set up, over a 25-year period. The agency has a good record of ensuring that redress is carried out speedily and properly, where problems have arisen.

Unfortunately, not everybody knows about the agency or has had their wall insulations guaranteed through CIGA. Indeed, they might have had cavity wall insulation installed before guarantees came into place. The picture today is quite good regarding guarantees, but that does not remotely address the problem before us this afternoon. As my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax said, this is essentially a scandal on a scandal. It is the problem of cavity wall insulation going wrong in a certain area. When it does go wrong, several cases often appear in certain areas because the installer—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. Could the Opposition spokesperson address the Chair?

Dr Whitehead: Yes, I am sorry; I keep doing that. The appearance of a number of problems in a particular area might relate to a particular company carrying out faulty insulations or using the wrong material, whereas in other areas no such events will occur.

Scandal one is that a relatively high number of deficient cavity wall insulation arrangements came to light in a particular part of the country. Scandal two is that a parasitic law firm decided to make a good living by zealously pursuing people it thought might conceivably have a claim for failed cavity wall insulation, and tried to push those people down a path to restitution in a

wholly cynical and unacceptable manner. I am pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax that the Solicitors Regulation Authority is investigating that company, SSB Law, but that does not address the fact that other firms also pursued that practice. Ironically, SSB Law took over a number of claims from a company that had pursued this model and gone bust in the process. One might say, therefore, that it is a scandal, upon a scandal, upon a scandal.

The way this worked is set out in a letter from CIGA to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax, which describes how the model operated.

“Claims lead generator often unqualified promises large payouts if homeowner signs up to pursue a claim for failed cavity wall insulation.

Details passed to a RICS surveyor who does not visit the property but prepares a claim schedule based on detail provided by the lead generator.

Claim is handed to a claims solicitor”.

SSB Law, as mentioned, was a claims solicitor that took on a number of these cases, including those of another company operating this model, Pure Legal, having apparently been offered the opportunity to do so by the Solicitors Regulation Authority itself.

The claims solicitor then sends a letter to the installer and

“informs them to put their insurer on notice and that the claim will be in the order of 60k for damages caused by poorly installed insulation—schedule of costs does not reflect the property and damage is often not evident.

Homeowners are actively discouraged from notifying the guarantee provider”

—in this instance, CIGA—

“and instead promised a large pay out.

Just before the claim goes to court, the Claims solicitor drops the compensation amount to just over 10k (They do this to encourage the installer or insurer to pay out and also so that they can still claim costs through the fast track legal route). Costs are typically around 70k at this point”.

That is the model, and it is a scandalous model. No one should be allowed to operate that kind of arrangement in this country, in this age. Solicitors' companies are supposed to be protecting the interests of their clients and not just trying to make a living parasiting on the distress of homeowners dealing with cavity wall insulation problems. The Solicitors Regulation Authority has a substantial job to do in not just investigating this particular company, but hopefully broadening this out to investigate how solicitors are able to get away with this kind of arrangement, in this kind of way. As we have heard this afternoon, when that arrangement does not work out very well, they go bust and leave all those householders facing those huge bills.

Are the Government able to pursue any form of intervention to assist householders protecting themselves from the claims coming back against them? In a number of instances, those claims are from the installers that have basically been attacked by these particular law firms. The installers have defended themselves, but then the law firms went bust. They have put in a lot of money, and naturally they want some of it back. It is an almighty mess as to who is really responsible for all this, although we know that overwhelmingly the responsibility lies with the dodgy law firms that have pursued this kind of practice and given false guarantees and false

promises to householders. Perhaps the Ministry of Justice could look at what sort of practices make this sort of arrangement possible.

We all want to see confidence in cavity wall insulation for future programmes, although we differ among ourselves on the extent of those programmes. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton suggested that it was the Liberal Democrats, in alliance with the Government, that really pursued cavity wall insulation. That was true, but it was based on the programmes of the previous Labour Government, under the cert and assess programmes that carried on until about 2012 and 2013. That produced an enormous number of generally very good cavity wall insulation programmes, but it has crashed since that date. Certainly, the Opposition hope to revive those publicly funded and sorted-out retrofit measures under a future Labour Government.

I think there is agreement on all sides that we want the general public to see that cavity wall insulation is a good thing for their homes and for them, and indeed will be a good service for the nation in making our homes warmer and more liveable. It is important that everybody has confidence that that system is going to work as well as it should and, if it does not work as well as it should, that there is proper redress. I ask the Minister to pursue seriously whatever can be done to seek additional redress for the householders who find themselves in this difficult situation. I also ask the Minister—perhaps working in conjunction with the existing guarantee agencies—to ensure that, for the future, the public have the best level of protection they can get when cavity wall insulation goes wrong: a guarantee that, under most circumstances, people undertaking cavity wall insulation can rest easy that their cavity wall insulation should work rightly for them, but that they need not worry if it does not because help will be at hand to put it right.

3.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): It is the greatest of pleasures to be here under your Chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for raising this incredibly important debate, and all hon. Members who have partaken in it and shared some heart-moving stories. It is dreadful for consumers to be in the situation described in those stories and I have every sympathy for the people affected. All Members who have spoken have made their points incredibly well. We need to remember the impact this situation has on people's lives, which has been portrayed very clearly.

As the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) have stated, insulating homes properly is one of the most impactful and cost-effective things we can do, which is why we have a number of schemes ongoing to install cavity wall insulation.

As the hon. Member for Halifax has said, the Solicitors Regulation Authority is already working with the Financial Conduct Authority and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors to look into the conduct of the firm in question, but these bodies are independent of Government and it would be inappropriate for my Department or the Ministry of Justice to intervene.

The Ministry of Justice, as the Department responsible for legal services regulation, will continue to closely engage with the SRA and Legal Services Board to understand the action being taken and the timeframes for investigation. However, I am concerned to hear from the hon. Member for Halifax and the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) about how companies such as SSB Law may have targeted people. We will ask the SRA, as part of their ongoing investigation, to consider how SSB Law were able to do that. I also acknowledge the points raised by the hon. Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Southampton, Test on this subject.

I do not want to see this issue passed around like a football, because this is an urgent matter for the households impacted. I therefore guarantee that I will be writing to the Ministry of Justice, asking them to encourage the SRA to accelerate the investigation for affected homeowners, as they deserve to have this matter addressed swiftly.

Imran Hussain: While the Minister is writing to the Ministry of Justice, can she please kindly request that her colleagues there respond to the letters from MPs and organise an urgent meeting?

Amanda Solloway: I thank the hon. Member for the intervention. Of course, I will pass on those remarks.

I encourage Members to write to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero about specific cases. If there is a guarantee in place, my officials will engage with the guarantee agency to see if there is anything that we can do about that particular situation.

The range of Government-backed schemes to install cavity wall insulation are ongoing and lessons have been learned from the complaints that we are discussing today. These complaints, thankfully, are not representative of the experiences of thousands who have used our existing schemes. As I said earlier, in certain circumstances in suitable properties, cavity wall insulation is one of the most cost-effective measures for energy saving. For a relatively small outlay in costs, we know that cavity wall insulation, which costs between £1,000 and £3,000, can save homeowners up to £300 a year.

The hon. Member for Halifax is aware that the Government have made improvements to installation standards as a result of earlier findings. I will summarise the changes we have made, because any response to the problem must include preventing it from happening again. That is why the energy efficiency measures installed under all current Government schemes must be in line with industry best standards established by the British Standards Institution. All installers must be certified to the publicly available specification 2030 standards for any energy efficiency measure that they carry out, including cavity wall insulation, and must demonstrate a high level of competence. The latest revision to the standards was published at the end of September 2023, so I can assure hon. Members that this is a live issue for us and that we continue to refine and improve.

The Department published guidance in October 2019 for consumers who suspect they may have had faulty cavity wall insulation installed in their homes. We urge consumers to follow the guidance to help them avoid becoming victims of fraudulent cavity wall insulation claims.

[Amanda Solloway]

Outside of Government-funded schemes, I urge all consumers to check the certifications claimed by their installer and what protections or warranties installers can offer before going ahead with work. TrustMark is the Government-endorsed quality mark for retrofit, so its “find an installer” web search will be a good place to start for any consumer, whether the work is Government-funded or not.

As the Minister for Affordability and Skills, I am glad we are discussing this matter today because I think there is a double injustice. People who did the right thing by wanting to install insulation to lower their energy use have suffered from insulation that has failed. That emphasises why we are now required to use the PAS certificate and TrustMark-registered businesses in Government schemes.

A legal firm that was recovering the costs has now collapsed, leaving affected households wondering how this will finally be resolved. That is why I am grateful to the hon. Member for Halifax for bringing the cases in her constituency to my attention, as have other hon. Members. I encourage Members who were unable to attend today to write to the Department about specific cases. My officials will follow up with the relevant guarantee agency to ensure that all due process has been followed.

3.37 pm

Holly Lynch: I thank you once again, Mrs Latham, for chairing this important debate so ably. I thank those hon. Members who have contributed. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), in his diligent and dedicated fashion, is a voice and advocate for his constituents. He is always incredibly supportive of me and so many across this House, and we all appreciate his contributions. I thank him for what he said.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), who spoke so eloquently on behalf of her constituents, including the young boy struggling with asthma and his parents, who are battling that and the debts to resolve the problems in their home, as well as taking on the giants they are up against that have boxed them in to an incredibly desperate financial position.

Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) set out the strong case for cavity wall insulation. When it is done well, it can have a positive impact on homes’ energy efficiency and can reduce energy costs. He described it as a win-win-win. We can see from hon. Members who have outlined the impact of the scenario we have been discussing on our constituents that it has ended up being a lose-lose-lose. I said it was a scandal upon a scandal; the shadow Minister said it was a scandal upon

a scandal upon a scandal, and he is absolutely right. This has to be done well. We need to find a solution that gets us through this mess and gives people confidence in cavity wall insulation again.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who characteristically explained the emotional impact on his constituents and mine, and gave a detailed assessment of how cavity wall installation not only has failed, but has shockingly led to an increase in skin conditions, including in some of the cases he has been involved in. I thank him for his contribution.

I am grateful to the Minister, who I think has understood, from the cases that have been shared, the seriousness and the urgency for the constituents we are representing today. She has encouraged Members to write to her Department. I am sure we will take her up on that offer; however, I ask her again to make representations in the strongest possible terms to her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice. As I said, I have not really been left with any confidence that it understood the seriousness of the issue. Its response to me on 22 February just gave definitions of some of the bodies involved and ended by saying:

“At this stage, given that legal services regulators are independent of government and the SRA has ongoing investigations into this issue, it would not be appropriate for MoJ to seek to intervene further.”

That really underlines the point. I absolutely am sensitive to the separation of Government and the legal system, but where there has been such a catastrophic failure, as the shadow Minister so articulately outlined—he described these law firms as operating in a parasitic way—I look to the Ministry of Justice to explore all the ways in which it could appropriately intervene.

Some legal bills that constituents are facing have been paused. I do not know how for long, and am I not absolutely clear why, but expecting people to live with this until the autumn—even if, in the best-case scenario, there is then a solution that resolves it—is asking them to live in pretty desperate, distressing conditions, which I know will drive them further into despair, debt and poverty.

I thank the Minister for her time and finish with a final plea: please can she convey in the strongest possible terms to her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and other Departments why we really need Government help on this?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the provision of cavity wall insulation under Government grants.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

Cross-Solent Ferries

4 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I will call Bob Seely to move the motion and then 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.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for cross-Solent ferry transport.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham.

I will come straight to the point: the relationship between the ferry firms and the people of the Isle of Wight is breaking down. The ferries are a genuine lifeline; we have no choice but to use them. There is no public service obligation. We need to get a better deal. I have produced a study of the ferries, which I think is the first major work on the ferries that has come out of the Island for 40 years. In it, I highlight how we can get a better deal for the ferries, some of the options for the firms and how we can get there.

Time is tight, so I will make as much progress as I can. The Island depends on three private ferry operators: Wightlink, Red Funnel and Hovertravel. Hovertravel is not really part of the picture, but Wightlink and Red Funnel are. Wightlink was privatised in 1984, and Red Funnel has always been in private hands. The firms' services initially improved throughout the '80s and '90s, but they are now worsening, in part because of the private equity-style ownership model. I will return to that, because it is a constant theme.

In 2009, under new Labour, the ferries were given a clean bill of health, and we were told there was open competition between them. That was not true. For passenger services, there are two local monopolies in the west: between Yarmouth and Lymington and between Cowes and Southampton. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Minister here, as ever. The idea that people will travel 25 miles from Yarmouth to Ryde to cross four miles of water into Portsmouth in order to travel 35 or 40 miles around to Lymington again is nonsense. In Ryde, there is competition of sorts between Hovertravel and Wightlink, although not to the same destination—one goes to Southsea, and one goes to Portsmouth harbour. On the car ferries, there is an effective monopoly in the West Wight, again on the Yarmouth to Lymington route, and a duopoly for the rest of the Island, with Red Funnel pitched slightly below Wightlink's extortionate prices—but it is not true that there is a free market among Isle of Wight ferries.

Barriers to entry are very high. I am trying to support two potential competitors into the market—a passenger ferry and a potential car ferry—but that is difficult, because the ferry firms also own the ports.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing the debate forward. There is a similar issue back home, except for one difference. We have a ferry that connects Portaferry, in my constituency of Strangford, with the constituency of South Down—with the boundary changes, that will all be mine next time around, if everything goes according to plan. We never

privatised the ferries back home; we retained them under the Department for Infrastructure, because we thought that that was the best idea. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that perhaps Government retention would be a better way forward?

Bob Seely: It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Gentleman. That is absolutely one of the ideas that I will discuss later; I thank him.

What are the problems? First, as I have said, the ferry firms have no legal obligation to meet timetables or standards of service above the minimum levels of safety required in law. The Island's connectivity is entirely at the discretion of the firms, which are answerable to—and overwhelmingly driven by—the needs of their shareholders. They have no public service obligation and no regulator, and they set their own service standards. The Minister should know that I am having a Bill on a ferries regulator for the United Kingdom written. The ferry firms change their speeds and timetables whenever they want, and they judge their own punctuality rates depending on the service that they want to run, not on the service that we agree they should run.

Secondly, the firm's corporate structures and incredibly inflated valuations are becoming a critical issue for the Island. I also believe they are bad for the United Kingdom. What do I mean by that? The Solent market has an established model of private-equity style ownership that has several generations of acquisition and sales, and in all that time, debt has gone up. The Island is a captured market: we have no choice but to use the firms. They have reliable high incomes, there are high barriers to market entry and they are highly profitable. That makes them ideal for private equity investment.

Typically, owners purchase the ferry firms with borrowed money. The firms are subsequently restructured to pay interest on that debt. They effectively avoid tax perfectly legally because they pay back their shareholders through loans. We, the users, pay for the owners' purchase of the firms, and then pay through the nose to pay back interest on those purchases. Returns to shareholders are via loans on the debt. Such private-equity style structures may be common elsewhere, and are sadly used by the water utilities, which are not a great example of them, but those firms have a utilities regulator, whereas the ferry firms that use such structures do not have any regulator to control them or to put limits on debt or limits or demands on service.

The firms have been increasingly overvalued by bankers with a vested interest in ramping up their value. The higher the value of the initial purchase, the greater the debt loaded on to the firm and the greater the need to repay that interest, so the more the Islanders—to put it bluntly—get stuffed by the ferry firms, and the more we have to pay through the nose to pay back the interest on buying the firms in the first place. Manchester United had a similar form of ownership, as do the water utilities, as I said, but the water utilities have a regulator that makes demands on the firms.

For example, for the year ending 2023, Wightlink had tangible assets of £85 million and an operating profit of £15 million. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has distinguished expertise in matters of transport and will know the operating margins for the rail firms. If we look at the operating margins for the ferries in the last 30 years, we see that in 1990 the margin was 28%; in

[Bob Seely]

1995 it was 19%; in 2000 it was 32%; in 2004 it was 29%; in 2010 it was 20%; and in 2019 it was 25%. Red Funnel's operating margins over the years went from 15% in 1990, to 21% in 1995 and 24% in 2019. These companies have vast profit margins. Compare that with the operating profit for rail firms, which is perhaps 2%—is it 5% maximum? There is a real ethical problem with the amount of profit that these people are making and the amount of tax they pay on that, which is very low.

Effectively, since the early 2000s—I do not know why we have allowed them to get away with it—the Isle of Wight ferries have been treated as collateral for loans for private equity and for pension funds. Not only that, but there is a web of offshore companies that own both the firms. Wightlink's parent company, Arca Topco, had borrowings—I find this amount unbelievable—of £261,593,000. A small ferry firm has borrowings or loans outstanding of more than a quarter of a billion. That is a phenomenal amount. Some of that is in terms of investment, but most is debt that has been loaded on to those firms over the years by pension funds and private equity in order to buy the firms.

Arca Topco paid interest totalling £16,825,000. Various bodies that have owned the company or been paid back those loans include Basalt Infrastructure, Fiera Infrastructure and, amazingly, the People's Bank of China. The People's Bank of China, an arm of the Chinese Communist party, has owned the company that owned the company that owned Isle of Wight ferry.

I will say one more thing about Wightlink. Wightlink argues that it makes no profit because it uses loans to invest in the company. Although that is not wholly untrue, because it does use some of the loans to buy new things and make investments, it is nothing like enough, on both counts. It is also largely dishonest because those loans are used not to invest in the company but to pay back the massive amounts of debt that are loaded on to the firms, which is why Islanders are being screwed—to put it in the vernacular; I apologise for my bad language—every time they use the firms. That is the problem here.

I personally feel that I have been lied to by both firms about the debt and the ownership structure for too long. Frankly, my tolerance of them is reaching a low point. The firms have become overvalued cash cows. Red Funnel was worth £200 million in 2007; 10 years later, the most recent time it was sold, it was worth £370 million. It is phenomenally overvalued and I suspect it was always going to have trouble paying back the loans based on that overvaluation.

Since covid-19, the passenger market has dropped 30%. So what are the firms doing? They are cutting back their services. I will come back to that in a moment. Effectively, they are overvalued cash cows, and because these cash cows are not delivering, we—the passengers—are being squeezed more. To deliver the returns they need on their inflated valuations, they have cut back services. For any given Monday in February, if we compare 2004 with now, we see that Wightlink reduced the 36 daily sailings from Fishbourne to 18, the 24 daily sailings from Yarmouth to 16, and the 32 daily sailings from Ryde to 18. Wightlink is cutting back significantly on services in order to increase profits. Since 1998, Red Funnel has reduced 33 daily sailings from West Cowes to 22. Although

Red Funnel says it has increased daily car ferry sailings from 13 to 14, the number of unrestricted sailings has stayed the same.

Services are also slower. Red Jet used to take 22 minutes; it now takes 28 minutes. That means—the Minister should know this—that it is now a slipped service. Instead of departing every half an hour during peak periods, there is a delay of 10 minutes each time, and that is messing up people's connectivity with the mainland when they want to get trains or buses to different places. Before 2009, Wightlink FastCat reported a maximum speed of 34 knots; today, it is 26 knots. Late-night services are also being cut. Red Funnel has just cut the late-night service between Cowes and Southampton. To its credit, Wightlink has put one back on, but it was painful to get it to do so.

Next is yield-management pricing, which the Minister will know about, being very expert on these things. We go online, we look for flights to Cairo, Ibiza or Paris, and we get different pricing because that is the way that yield-management pricing schemes work. If we do it in advance, it becomes cheaper, and so on. For air travel that works, but with monopolies it does not. Although the firms say, "We still have starting prices for a family of four with a car for £29," because of their surge pricing, the amount of tickets in that bracket are tiny, if not non-existent.

There are somewhere between 13 and 15 price brackets. The fact that someone can go online to book a ferry on a bank holiday or in the summer at a week's notice and pay £250 for a return ticket means that there are huge numbers of tickets available at the most expensive, rip-off prices, and virtually none at the cheaper rates. My concern is that this form of surge pricing is hiding significant inflation in the cost of travelling, and it is having a significant effect on our economy.

I will wrap up in the next five to six minutes, so I will really rattle through. Why change now? First, because the firms have old car ferries because they have spent too long paying back shareholders and not enough time investing. If they want green money from the Government, that should come at a price. Secondly, because I and the Scottish councils lobbied for the Islands Forum initiative, and the Government are now looking into connectivity between the mainland and the UK islands.

Thirdly, because during the covid pandemic the ferry companies took money from the Government, because they recognised that the firms ran a lifeline service. Fourthly, because Red Funnel is probably up for sale again, and I am worried that eventually one of these firms will be so overloaded with debt that it falls over.

Fifthly, because there may be an attempt by a local entrepreneur, Nick Wakefield, to introduce a public-service ferry service, which I believe the Government should support because it would help to break the duopoly of Red Funnel and Wightlink and break the monopoly of this corrupted private equity-style investment system.

There are many questions that I want the Department to answer, and I will follow up with letters if I do not get all the answers today. Does the Department for Transport have an opinion on supporting new ferry firms? Does it really believe, given the state of the private equity-style investment, that this is a healthy market and a healthy structure, or one with duopolies and monopolies? There is a rail Bill coming up, which I am sure the Minister knows about. Can we add the Isle of Wight ferries to it as well?

On the sale of Red Funnel, what powers do the Government have to block a sale? What powers do we have to prevent it from selling its third passenger ferry? Red Funnel is running a “comprehensive” service with just two passenger ferries and is even slowing them down to save money. If one or both of those ferries falls over, there will be no service. How do the Government feel about that?

Next, what is my answer? There should be easy multi-link tickets for poorer Islanders; a greater discount for journeys that start on the Island; electronic through-ticketing, which, ridiculously, is something we still do not have; and the ability to book places for passengers, including the elderly or those going for medical treatment. There should also be independent assessment of punctuality and reliability; permanent improvements in late and early passenger services, so that the ferry companies understand that they have a public service obligation; regular services, and not the unacceptable slip service that Red Funnel is running to save money; and a duty to ensure best connectivity with national rail services—I am bored of having to lecture the firms to ensure such connectivity.

There should be stronger sanctions for failures to deliver an agreed standard of service. A couple of weeks ago, the ferry firm did not run the last service, so someone living on the Isle of Wight coming back with his family would have been stuck in a hotel, which would have cost him three hundred quid. Does the Minister think that he should pay, or does he think he should be able to claim the money back from Wightlink or Red Funnel the next time it happens? It is completely unacceptable.

There should also be an accurate understanding of investment levels in recent years; a better deal for young people; better wheelchair and disabled access; more transparency about corporate structures; and some thought given to whether the Isle of Wight should take a seat on the board of the major ferry firms. I am happy to discuss nationalisation, although I cannot see it being on the cards—it has not been under any Government, including Labour Governments, in the past—but what happens when these firms have debts that become unmanageable?

What are the options for getting there? I am having an independent regulator Bill written. Would the Government consider supporting it and installing a regulator, not only for the Solent ferries but for all the national ferry firms? I have had to do a national Bill—I say that for Islanders watching this debate—because if I bring in a Solent Bill alone, I as an MP cannot present it. The parliamentary etiquette is that I can present only a national Bill; therefore, I am presenting a UK ferries regulator Bill, rather than a Bill just for the Solent. That is the first point.

Secondly, would the Government demand the rights to sign off on the firms’ timetables, as they do for rail services? Is there more money for central Government funding for healthcare-related visits to the Island? Might we persuade the companies to enter into voluntary regulation, so that there is a formal process and they have to listen to us more seriously, perhaps with beefed-up powers—maybe legal powers—for our transport infrastructure board to demand better things? I will be writing to the Competition and Markets Authority to see what scope there is, and whether I can request an inquiry into the ferries and, if so, how that could be initiated. Will the Department of Transport support my request?

We cannot go on as we are. Despite some incremental gains over the last two years, we are now reaching a crunch point, where these firms are so overvalued and their shareholders’ demands for returns are so loud, that we simply do not get listened to. It is harming our future, whether it is our tourist bookings, which are down, or the fact that young Islanders cannot go to Southampton in the evening because there is no way back—yes, they can get the car ferry from Portsmouth, but it goes from a different place from where they left.

I thank the Minister for bearing with me. I know that this is not his responsibility per se—the relevant Minister is in the House of Lords, so I am sorry to be unloading on him today—but to sum up, the ferry companies are failing the Island. The private equity model is now breaking down. The disparity between the power of the shareholders and the needs of the Island is becoming too great. The situation is becoming acute. Shareholders are relentlessly prioritised over the needs of the Island. Sailings are fewer, slower and more expensive than they were 20 years ago.

The firms have no obligation to run a service. One of the things that really grips me is that when I say to them, “Shouldn’t you be raising your game?”, their attitude is: “If you complain too loudly, we won’t invest.” It is literally a form of blackmail on a genuine lifeline service—if we dare to criticise them, they might rethink their investment plans. If we criticise them and they say, “Oh, we don’t know if we’re going to invest,” that is reason enough for the Government to give them an enormous kick up the backside. The Government should say, “If that’s the way you play it, we’ll force regulation on you to make sure that you are considerate and thoughtful, and that if you say you’re running a service, then you damn well run a service and don’t just change your timetable when you fancy slowing down your boats to save some money, to pay your shareholders over the needs of the Isle of Wight.”

As you can see, Mrs Latham, this is an issue grips me, because it is harming the people of the Island, and we need change. I am really hoping that the Minister will now work with me, because there is a window of opportunity for change when it comes to green funding for the ferries, to Island connectivity, because of the Islands Forum, and, potentially, to ferries clause in the rail Bill, whether that is voluntary change from the ferries firms or change that we encourage or force on them. It is now time to look again at this issue, because we cannot have another 20 years of this.

4.21 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Let me begin by saying that it is my pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I am delighted to be standing in for the maritime Minister today; he cannot attend because he sits in the other House, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) has pointed out. I would also like to congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I know that this is an incredibly important topic to both him and the community he represents. The ferry service is essential for the Island, the Islanders and its visitors. He has been championing this important link for many years, campaigning for a more resilient and reliable service for his constituents.

[Huw Merriman]

I know that my hon. Friend's recent plan for the future of cross-Solent ferries, which I have in my hand, is the culmination of all his hard work. It offers a route map towards better services, better prices and ticketing, and greater transparency over the ownership structures of ferry operators. I can assure him that the Department for Transport will take time to digest the report thoroughly, and we will respond to all the questions he has asked me this afternoon. For now, I will simply say that we welcome this work, and we look forward to seeing the final report once both his constituents and the Isle of Wight Council have had the opportunity to comment, which he is of course giving them in the consultation. The consultation is important because, as we have always made clear, the solutions to these issues are better resolved at a local level, where all stakeholders—Islanders, the operators and the council—can get around the table and, if possible, agree the best way forward.

The Government have a history of backing reliable and accessible ferry services for the Isle of Wight. During the pandemic, cross-Solent ferry services were safeguarded, and significant funds were made available to the Isle of Wight Council to ensure that they were preserved—an excellent example of the council and operators coming together to tackle the challenges faced at that time. However, as my hon. Friend is aware, although that intervention highlighted the Government's high regard for lifeline ferry links, it was made under those exceptional circumstances, and as the country moves from recovery to renewal, we must acknowledge that the current operators of cross-Solent services do so in a fully commercial market. The bar for central Government intervention in such a commercial market is rightly extremely high, although I am aware that my hon. Friend is asking us to meet that height. The economic growth that we are striving for relies on a healthy private sector that brings jobs, investment and opportunities to communities up and down the country. We must acknowledge that these ferry operators are part of that ecosystem.

The Government pride themselves on recognising the benefits of private investment, and we have worked hard to make sure that UK plc is an attractive place to do business. That means that when local issues arise around local services, locally led solutions are the best way to resolve them. That is, again, why I commend my hon. Friend for the report he has produced.

The Isle of Wight transport infrastructure board could well be the perfect vehicle for these discussions, and I hope my hon. Friend reaches out to the board as part of his consultation. We should not forget that the investigation into the Isle of Wight ferry market by the then Office of Fair Trading back in 2009 was instigated by the then local MP, working with his constituents, which is yet another example of the community coming together to drive action.

Of course, as my hon. Friend set out today, the services are not perfect, and we can all acknowledge that there is work to be done. That was highlighted by the disruption to Red Funnel services last week, when many passengers endured frustrating delays. I think we can all agree that the situation was not acceptable and, while we thank Red Funnel for the mitigations put in place, they do not take away from the impact of those cancellations on the Islanders. The Government welcome the independent review that Red Funnel is conducting and I know that, once it is complete, the maritime Minister will be meeting with the company to discuss the recommendations.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. He has expertly pressed home his concerns and those of his constituents, and he has taken time to put them together in a report, and to put that report out to consultation. I thank him for his engagement on these important issues. I underline that he has the Government's full support in striving for the quality of service that his community deserves.

Question put and agreed to.

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Disability Benefits

4.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Personal Independence Payment and other disability benefits.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham.

I am grateful to the House authorities for allowing me to secure this important debate on an issue of huge concern to many across our country, including in my constituency. Often, constituents have come to my advice surgeries with tears streaming from their eyes, in absolute despair at the predicament they face, especially when they are struggling to make ends meet in the midst of a cost of living crisis.

This evening, I stand before the House to draw attention to the state of disability benefits in our nation. Those in our society with disabilities and other health conditions that often prevent them from working are valuable members of our society. They cannot be summarised by statistics, nor by how much they cost the public purse. Behind every such figure is a disabled person.

Successive Conservative Governments have again and again undermined social security in our country, whether through cutting support, a punitive culture towards disabled applicants, or—perhaps most disappointingly—divisive rhetoric about the most vulnerable in our society from none other than senior Government Ministers. My belief is that how we treat the most vulnerable is a benchmark of how healthy our society is.

I am proud to say that under a Labour Government, every stage of the social security system will be supportive and accessible. Labour understands the importance of every person with disabilities being treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve. Unfortunately, that is not a view shared by everyone in our society. Under the Conservatives, many disabled people feel that the Department for Work and Pensions is failing them, with an assessment process that does not understand their needs.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on a very important subject. Elinor, one of my constituents, got in touch with me recently. She had a young child and was pregnant; she was reassessed, her money was dropped—she found out just before she had her second child—and then the money was reinstated on appeal. Does my hon. Friend agree that the assessment process is mad at the moment? It is crazy. It is not sensible. We need to change it, and fast.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for making the case for Elinor in her constituency. Indeed, my hon. Friend is a strong champion of her constituents, and no doubt she and other hon. Members in this place will have helped constituents to regain thousands of pounds in support that they are due. I agree that the assessment process is something that needs to be looked at, and I hope the Minister will give us some good news at the end of this debate.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. We have unfortunately had some tragic

cases in recent years, including people who have gone through the transition from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. One person in particular sticks in my mind: Philippa Day, who took her own life because of the appalling transition process and all the mistakes that were made. We need to ensure that we have policies and systems in place, for health assessments and elsewhere, that protect vulnerable people and do not make things worse. I am sure he agrees.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend speaks with a great deal of experience, having served previously as a shadow Secretary of State. The word to use is indeed tragedy. There have been countless tragedies. That is why the likes of me have been calling on the Government to deal with issues with compassion and empathy. These are real people that we are talking about and often, unfortunately, they have lost their lives or been put in a state of such despair that they do not know how to get out of their predicament.

My Slough constituent, Monika, told me about her struggles being assessed for PIP. Monika was informed that she was required to have a health assessment to extend her PIP. After appealing against 27 pages of discrepancies and outright untruths in the report from her previous assessment, she was predictably very worried about how she would get through the process again. Her assessment ended up being delayed for a month and taking place when she was suffering particularly ill health. Monika was again left in the lurch by the DWP and faces another appeal, which she is dreading.

Unfortunately stories like Monika's are, as my hon. Friends have already eloquently explained, not news to any of us. We all have constituents who are failed by the system and by the DWP. Labour has a plan to replace the Government's current flawed system of work capability assessments with a system that can support people to live with security.

Many benefit claimants are aspirational, but fearful that if they go back into work and find themselves unable to cope, they will be left high and dry—assessed as being able to work, but finding themselves unable to work full-time. Labour's plan was born out of a desire to deliver for disabled people, helping those who can work back into work.

Too many disabled people say the current system does not work for them. Labour has pledged to introduce the “into work guarantee”, which I hope the shadow Minister will explain at length. That will allow claimants to agree with their benefits adviser that, if they try paid work and it does not work out, within a period of a year, they can go back to the exact benefits that they were on without fresh health assessments. With 288,000 PIP claims outstanding in October 2023, does the Minister agree that Labour's plan will help to reduce the number of disabled people who want to work, but do not want to risk having their benefits reassessed?

This January, the latest statistics from the House of Commons Library found that the most common main disabling conditions among claimants of PIP were psychiatric disorders. Nationwide, 37.7% of PIP claims were due to those. With mental health waiting lists ballooning under the Conservatives, it is unfortunately not a surprising statistic. When the Government leave suffering people for far too long—people often see their condition worsen before being able to access treatment—it is no wonder that the number is so unacceptably high.

[Mr Dhesi]

I believe that begs a question: will the Minister admit that her party's policies on mental health over the past 14 years have significantly contributed to the PIP backlog?

The latest numbers from Macmillan Cancer Support show that claimants are still waiting 15 weeks on average for their PIP claim to be processed. Unacceptably, that is higher than it was at the same time last year. Four in five people living with cancer are facing an increased financial impact from their diagnosis, even before the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. It is unacceptable that the Government have failed to fix those issues, which affect our constituents at some of the most difficult periods in their lives. The Government announced extra funding for processing disability claims in the Budget, but can the Minister clarify how exactly that will be used to reduce delays?

Among PIP claimants in my Slough constituency, 16.3% of claims are due to musculoskeletal disorders. MS Society research found that the current disability assessment system is not fit for purpose for those living with multiple sclerosis, a condition that significantly varies in its impact from day to day. A staggering three in five people with MS have reported being unable to explain adequately the effects of their condition on the standard application form. That figure highlights a systemic failure to capture the true extent of disabilities that are not constant, but fluctuate, and underscores the Government's failure to create a nuanced system that understands the lived realities of those with MS and other conditions.

Furthermore, based on its findings, the MS Society urges the Government to consider the elimination of the 20-metre rule used in mobility assessments, and to seek a more flexible approach that accurately reflects the variable nature of MS. Current criteria fail to accommodate the day-to-day changes in symptoms that people with MS experience. On one day, walking 20 metres is achievable; on others, it is downright impossible. That clearly leads to assessments that do not reflect disabled people's actual needs.

Incorporating those changes into our approach to disability benefits would not only make the system fairer, but ensure that individuals with MS and similar fluctuating conditions receive the support that they truly need. I am proud that Labour is committed to delivering a system that works for disabled people, ensuring that every person with a disability receives the respect, support and dignity that they deserve.

In conclusion, I thank the constituents who have asked me to share their stories. I am also grateful to various voluntary organisations that make such an enormous impact to help those in dire need. As we conclude this debate on personal independence payments and other disability benefits, let us remember the essence of what we are discussing: the lives and wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

The accounts we have heard serve as a stark reminder of the critical work that lies ahead. It is evident that our current system, in its rigidity and lack of understanding, falls short of providing the necessary support to those living with conditions such as MS. The call to reform, to dismantle barriers such as the 20-metre rule and to embrace a more nuanced approach to disability assessment is more than just policy revision; it is a moral imperative.

We stand at a crossroads where the choices we make can significantly enhance the lives of thousands. By advocating for a system that truly understands the variable and complex nature of disabilities, we advocate for a society that places dignity, empathy and support at its heart. This is not just about adjusting guidelines or streamlining processes; it is about ensuring that every individual feels seen, heard and valued. Our commitment to reforming PIP and other disability benefits is a testament to our dedication to justice and equity for all citizens, regardless of their physical or mental health challenges.

Let us leave this room with a renewed dedication to serving those within our constituencies and beyond, ready to enact the changes necessary for a fairer, more compassionate benefits system. Together we have the power to transform lives. Let that be our guiding principle in the days ahead.

4.44 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will try to be as brief as possible, so that others can contribute. Before I come to the general topic, I want to make one specific point to reinforce what my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said.

I am a champion for Action for ME, the myalgic encephalomyelitis campaign. The organisation has written to a number of us to emphasise its concerns about how narrow PIP assessments are. ME sufferers are losing the ability to access the relevant benefits themselves as a result. They are simply asking the Minister to commit to what the previous Minister committed to, which was to meet them so that they can work to co-produce a system that enables them to have full access. I dealt with my first ME case about 25 years ago, when ME was not recognised and there was a lot of stigma attached to it. These people have suffered on the quiet. It behoves the Government to sit down with that group and work through the process.

I want to take the debate up where my hon. Friend left off: on the impact of the system on individuals. Those who were at the Select Committee might recall the evidence that was provided with regard to Michael O'Sullivan. I dealt with his case 10 years ago; I met his family, the lovely Anne-Marie and Declan. He had suffered mental health difficulties and had attempted suicide already. He was then assessed; he was declared fit for work, and he could not cope with it. He committed suicide. That was 10 years ago.

Some Members will know John Pring from the Disability News Service, who performs an excellent role monitoring cases and providing information to many of us. He has particularly monitored recent cases that relate to people coming under pressure when seeking to apply for universal credit. He gave three examples from the past couple of years. I will give brief details; I will not use any names.

A disabled woman who was left traumatised by the daily demands of universal credit took her own life. Days earlier, she had been told that she would need to attend a face-to-face meeting with a work coach. She would shake and cry every time she had to log on to her universal credit journal, which she had to do every weekday to check whether she had received instructions and to avoid a sanction. She had already had a six-month sick note from her doctor explaining that she was not fit to work, but she was expected to go through the

whole process, and she could not cope with it. The DWP was told about her mental distress, her suicidal thoughts and her fear of the Department. She took her own life.

There was another suicide months later. Someone had a long history of depression and anxiety and had been engaging with mental health services. He had been detained under the Mental Health Act 1983; he was then discharged. A psychiatrist who saw him two days before he took his own life told the inquest that he believed that the anxiety had been exacerbated by the whole process of the universal credit application.

Another person died a month after taking an overdose that caused irreversible damage to her liver. The coroner did not believe that she intended to take her own life, but nevertheless the coroner wrote a prevention of future deaths report to the DWP highlighting how the DWP had failed in its duty to maintain protection.

I raise those cases because John Pring and others had to put in a freedom-of-information request to get a report that was produced by the Prime Minister's implementation unit on the harm caused by the process and the suicides that were taking place. It was four years before that report was produced. It had been covered up in the PMIU, and publication was prevented. Some of us have been calling for that report on the Floor of the House of Commons, but we have been denied access. We were calling for it because there were recommendations in it about the duty of care that the Department owed to people identified as vulnerable, and specific actions needed to be put in place. There is a further report that should be produced with full openness and transparency. I commend Disabled People Against Cuts, which has run a campaign year in, year out about the issue.

When it comes to disability benefits for PIP, the work capability assessment, the application process for universal credit and the pressures that people are put under, the system is putting lives at risk. What Anne-Marie called for, which I think is right, is a statutory duty of care to be placed upon the Department, with particular regard to vulnerable people. I also agree with Anne-Marie and others that there should be an independent public inquiry into the harm the Department has done over the last 14 years through the brutal way benefits have been administered, particularly for those who are vulnerable with mental health problems.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. I must impose a time limit of five minutes on each speech.

4.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhosi) for his persistent and thorough questioning of the DWP on matters pertaining to disability benefits. I support him in these debates in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber. This word is often used, but it is good to have a champion on this side of the House. His work has been excellent.

There will not be one engaged Member of the House who does not have an awful story of someone being turned down for help when they are so much in need of it. I have a constituent who is a plasterer. I will not mention his name; I will just tell the story. At 50 years of age, he had many years of work ahead of him.

He had never been out of work, because he had done a good job all his life. That was his plan, but he has had a number of strokes and has been in the intensive care unit. He has been told that he will never regain enough strength to work and that he will struggle with daily life. His wife is a care assistant in a special needs school, and she has been able to help him in many ways; he never dreamed that he would need that sort of help.

He has been turned down for the personal independence payment. For the life of me, I cannot understand how someone who needs help or daily care from his wife, mother-in-law and daughter has been given no points in that assessment. The system has clearly let him down. I can see the difference, because I know the guy. I have known him all his life. My staff will assist him in his appeal, of course, but I always thought that the idea of the benefits system was to help those in need; the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred to people who need help.

Looking at this issue really depresses me. The recent Supreme Court judgment has shown that assessments have not been carried out in the correct way, meaning that 250,000 cases are to be reopened to ascertain whether the correct assessment criteria were used. I am not boasting, but I fill in benefits forms regularly for people and I know the system very well. I have a staff member who does nothing but look after benefit queries, so we are on the frontline. She is incredibly overworked.

It is clear that the criteria have never followed the spirit of the law. The spirit is to ensure that those who need help with daily life can get it, but the reality is that incredibly ill people are being made to feel like liars, spongers or fakers. They are made to feel that they have no right to help and that the world is judging them. From grown men with cancer who require their wives to catheterise them multiple times during the day to those who are severely affected by lifelong learning difficulties and are forced to have their awards renewed and their routines disrupted with assessments, the system lets people down regularly. It needs to be changed. It needs to understand, with compassion, the issues that our constituents face. Yes, I understand that we need to ensure that those who claim are entitled to the system, but the way in which that is assessed needs to change now.

We say this to the Minister beseechingly and with honesty, on behalf of our constituents. We want to ascertain how quickly these changes can be made so that men like my constituent, who feel worthless and embarrassed to claim only to be told that they are not deserving of help, will actually be assessed on the needs that they have now. It is not about the needs that my constituent had five or 10 years ago, but about the needs of the man he is today—the man who needs care for life. He has worked for 34 years of his life in a physically demanding job. When he needs help, he should have a social welfare system that does the job. It should deliver for him when he has a dire need, with changes to his health and personal life.

This debate is so important and necessary. We need an assessment that takes people's health conditions into account and that understands with compassion why they need help. It should understand the evidential base from their doctor, medical expert, wife, carer, mother-in-law or daughter. That is all the evidential base we need. I cannot for the life of me understand why it is not taken on board.

4.55 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate. There are two points that emerge from the recent work of the Work and Pensions Committee. First, PIP assessments should routinely be recorded. We know that the assessments very often go wrong—we have heard lots of examples of that already—but we do not know why. They should routinely be recorded, with an opt-out available for claimants who do not want a recording to be taken. All the providers agree with that proposal, but for some reason the Government will not accept it. The Minister's predecessor gave a number of reasons, which were all valid but all surmountable. Because we do not record the assessments, we do not know what is going on, so the problems just carry on and will not be fixed.

Secondly, the cash provided by PIP is designed to cover the extra costs arising from people's disabilities. Of course, the amounts will vary from one person to another, but during the Select Committee's recent inquiry on benefit levels, the New Economics Foundation told us that on average PIP covers only just over a third of the additional income that a disabled person requires to afford a decent standard of living. I welcome the Government's commitment, in last month's disability action plan, to set up an extra costs taskforce that will assess those extra costs. Can the Minister tell us when that taskforce will start its work? One practical proposition is to increase the number of levels in PIP—there were more in DLA—so that a better proxy for people's extra costs could be provided.

4.56 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing it. All speakers have made some important points, although, as is often the case, many different strands get mixed up because there is a confusion between WCA, PIP and Access to Work support. That is not a criticism: it is a very complicated system. Before universal credit was rolled out, people—often some of the most vulnerable people in society—typically missed out on £2.7 billion-worth of benefits to which they were entitled, because the system was far too complex. Frankly, someone would have needed a nuclear physics degree to understand it. About 700,000 families were missing out on the support that we all agreed they should get.

I recognise that there are real challenges, which is why this debate is important. That is why the Minister is here and why she was at the Select Committee this morning—a busy day! I welcome the fact that in real terms we have increased by £11.3 billion the support to people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. We must not lose sight of the fact that both PIP and WCA, which are predominantly what we are talking about, were introduced by the former Labour Government.

I pay tribute to all the stakeholders and to all the independent reviews that have taken place. They have delivered hundreds and hundreds of improvements, which have made a difference, but there is still a considerable way to go. Under the old system, just 16% of claimants got the highest level of support; that figure was 32% a couple of years ago, and I imagine it has continued to increase. On mental health in particular, people are now

six times more likely to get the highest level of support under PIP than they were under DLA, which often under-recognised the issue. We can also all celebrate record disability employment.

When it comes to making improvements, I have a few asks of the Minister. I apologise, because I asked this at oral questions, but I do not think I was very clear, because I got a different answer. First, when somebody has been assessed for PIP, they get a level of financial support—we can debate whether that is enough—but we do nothing else. If we identify somebody who has a primary health condition, we never signpost them to formal or informal support in their local area. We all know of different groups in our constituencies that support people, but often those who would benefit most are unaware of them.

Secondly, has there been any progress on mandatory reconsiderations? We did a pilot where we proactively reached out to the claimants and asked them to tell us, in their own words, why they were challenging the decision. More often than not, it was because they were unable to get the supportive evidence from their GP or whomever, which we would then assist in securing. Has that progressed? Is it still double? Is it higher? That was certainly an area that we thought would make a significant difference.

Covid fast-tracked our use of telephone and video assessments. We were looking at piloting, testing and introducing them over a decade; instead, we had to introduce them over days. Stakeholders warmly welcomed them, because people did not necessarily have to travel long distances to, in some cases, inappropriate assessment centres. The other advantage is that because the person is no longer tied to a geographical location, they can in theory have their assessment with somebody who has specialist knowledge of their primary condition. Is that what is happening, and are stakeholders involved in training and updating the skillsets of the specialists who would recognise those?

I was delighted when finally we got the special rules for terminal illness over the line; that nearly broke me when I was a Minister. Is there an update on how that is working? By matching the definition in the NHS, we took the period from six months to one year, so we removed the double assessment that was happening. Is there any progress on convincing Scotland that, although it likes to be different—often for the sake of being different—in this area it should have mirrored our view, which was the one shaped by the stakeholders?

I pay tribute to the work the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has done regarding vulnerable claimants. Have we made any progress on asking the person at the beginning of their application to provide the name of a trusted colleague, so that if they drop out or stop responding for whatever reason, we have a trusted point of contact to whom we can say, "The claimant is no longer responding. Are you aware of an issue?" In most cases, it is because their circumstances have changed, but in the absolute worst cases, it would allow us then to chase up support for them rather than them being left behind.

5.2 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this crucial debate. To boil the debate down to its essence, the situation that disabled people in our

constituencies and across the country are facing can be summed up like this: too often, disabled people are scapegoated. Too often, they are treated like dirt. The social security system does not give disabled people the financial support that they not only deserve but so fundamentally need, and that needs to change. Benefits are simply too low.

As we have heard, last week the Work and Pensions Committee published its report considering benefit levels for working-age people and whether they are meeting the needs of claimants. We need to look very closely at three issues arising from that report. First, shortfalls in the support provided through health and disability benefits are found to have a negative physical and mental health impact on claimants, which could in turn affect their ability to work. Secondly, the Committee recommends that the DWP set out a new benchmark for benefits that actually considers living costs. Thirdly, it suggests using the methodology in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell Trust essentials guarantee. Those charities estimate that, even after benefits are increased in April, universal credit will fall short of the money needed to survive by £30 each week.

In relation to the situation facing disabled people in our country, in our society, we need to look very closely at the breaches of the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. During the hearing on 18 March, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities accused the UK Government of demonising disabled people and treating them as “undeserving citizens” by preparing to fund tax cuts through slashing disability benefits.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. I have a constituent who until 2016 was in receipt of disability living allowance. She was then told to apply for PIP and was rejected. She then went to tribunal and had the decision overturned, and her payment was increased on review. Now, however, in 2024, she has been told that she was never entitled to it and is being pursued by the Department for Work and Pensions for £49,000.

Richard Burgon: The hon. Member has eloquently set out an excellent example of how the system puts disabled people into an appalling situation, as we see in our constituency surgeries.

The United Nations special rapporteurs described the UK’s current policy and practice as

“a pervasive framework and rhetoric that devalues disabled people”, which tells disabled people that they are “undeserving citizens” and makes them “feel like criminals”, particularly those who are trying to access the social security system. The committee members also cited examples of how the Government had continued to breach their obligations under the UN convention on the rights of people with disabilities, and pointed to a benefits system that traumatised claimants, leading to some even taking their own lives, increasing rates of institutionalisation, and a disproportionate number of disabled people who are now too poor to heat their homes or buy food.

A survey by the disability charity Euan’s Guide found that 50% of respondents in this country—one of the richest on Earth—were concerned about their energy bills, while 51% were worried about grocery bills. The Government reported in the autumn statement that

there would be a consultation on a social tariff on energy, but that was quietly shelved. A social tariff would have helped financially vulnerable consumers and disabled people with higher energy usage. We need to go back to that.

We should all be shamed by the way that disabled people are treated in our country. A real change in direction is needed. We must move completely against the scapegoating and demonisation of disabled people that we see in much of the right-wing media. Disabled people deserve respect, support and a social security system that works for them. We need to move forward in a way that is inclusive, empathetic and supports everyone in our society. After all, we are all equal.

5.7 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Latham. I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for bringing forward this important debate.

The rationale for PIP and other disability benefits is to create parity between disabled people and their non-disabled counterparts, but we all know that that is not the case. Sense has called on the UK Government to increase PIP so that it truly reflects the extra costs that disabled people feel and face, and to increase universal credit and the employment and support allowance so that disabled people can reach a minimum living standard.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) referenced the social tariff on energy and I hope he will support my private Member’s Bill to that end, because I am not giving up on that either. The UK Government continue to short change the disabled community. I think he was reading my speech because I was going to use the same quotes from the UN rapporteur, but I will not for the sake of brevity. It is shaming for the UK that the rapporteur thinks that is how disabled people are treated by the Government.

In my casework and my engagement with disabled people and organisations, I hear all the time that disabled people feel disrespected, devalued and demonised by the Government and the UK media, which is utterly shameful. One in five people in the UK have a disability and we could all be disabled tomorrow—a point worth remembering. It is time that disabled people had the recognition and support they deserve. We do not even have a disabilities Minister, as has been raised many times; I mean no disrespect to the Minister, but we need a disabilities Minister to focus on this part of the portfolio.

With good reason, there is little trust between the disabled community and the DWP. According to Z2K, since the introduction of PIP in 2013, 76% of claimants have ended up with a better outcome following an appeal, either via lapse or in an independent tribunal. That compares with just 28% at mandatory reconsideration, where the DWP marks its own homework.

This lack of trust in the DWP is why there is so much worry about the health and disability White Paper proposals. The abolition of the work capability assessment is welcome, but it comes with grave risks; it means that there are much higher stakes for people. Half a million people who are not well enough to work but are not receiving PIP are at risk of losing out altogether. It is imperative that the White Paper proposals are halted

[*Marion Fellows*]

until PIP can be trusted to deliver reliably the correct decisions. Since 2018, more than 200,000 people have been awarded no PIP at the initial decision, only to be awarded some at the mandatory reconsideration or tribunal. In more than 70,000 of those cases, the individual subsequently received at least one higher or enhanced element. The system does not work.

This is indicative of a system that is not fit for purpose—it forces disabled people to endure gruelling assessments that have huge mental health impacts. It is about time the Government started treating those with disabilities better. I had a constituent who was diagnosed with terminal cancer and who put herself through gruelling trials. When she was reassessed for PIP, they more or less said to her, “Oh, you are still alive. You are supposed to have died.” The mental health impact on all disabled people undergoing this cannot be underestimated.

The hon. Member for—I am so sorry.

Justin Tomlinson: North Swindon.

Marion Fellows: The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) referred to the Scottish Government. This is why they started a system different from the one in Westminster—a system that is based on fairness, dignity and respect. They collect the information from doctors and others about the case of the individual who is claiming the adult disability payment. Is that not a better way of doing things? They have VoiceAbility, which helps people to fill in the forms correctly so that, more often than not, they get the right decision at the first point of contact. It really defies belief. I have said this and I keep repeating it: look at what is happening in Scotland. People who have worked for Social Security Scotland that came from the DWP say the difference in how they have to treat clients, how they have to treat people, and how the system works, is like night and day.

The Scottish Government have made a difference with interventions such as the adult disability payment, the child disability payment and the carer support payment. They ensure that both disabled people and carers get all the financial support they are entitled to, which allows them to live with dignity.

I hold quarterly poverty action network meetings. I held the last one on Friday, at which there was a representative from the Scottish social security system. They come every quarter and they are there to help local organisations who work in Motherwell and Wishaw to improve people's lives—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. You are only supposed to speak for five minutes.

Marion Fellows: Will the Minister please look at what is happening in Scotland and reform this outdated and unworkable system?

5.13 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this debate. When he was a

member of the shadow Transport team, he joined me in meeting disabled people to discuss accessibility, and he continues to champion their rights in his constituency and beyond. He spoke passionately about stories of his constituents in tears. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) spoke of the challenges that her constituent, Elinor, faced when finding that her benefit had been cut, before being reinstated; this causes multiple problems all the time. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke about the consequences of an inhumane transfer from DLA to PIP and how Philippa Day sadly took her own life because of it.

I am shadow Minister for disabled people, so it is no surprise for Members to hear me say that PIP and other disability benefits are a regular feature of the conversations that I have with disabled people, and disabled people's organisations and charities. I can assure the House that even a brief mention of the phrases “PIP assessment” and “work capability assessment” is enough to strike genuine fear into the hearts of many. Disabled people tell me they feel demonised and humiliated by having to explain their conditions over and over again. Quite simply, as many have said, they do not trust the DWP to make the right decisions.

It is not difficult to see how we got to this point. Welfare reforms brought in during the coalition years, coupled with austerity, seemed to have been based on the premise that disabled people are undeserving and out to defraud the system. These moves, coupled with the fact that disabled people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, have led to a regression in disabled people's rights over the last 14 years. That is not just my opinion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) so passionately put it, the UN agrees. I am ashamed to say that eight years ago, the UK became the first country ever to be found to have breached the UN convention on the rights of disabled people.

As has been referenced, Rosemary Kayess, the chair of the UN committee said:

“We find a pervasive framework and rhetoric that devalues disabled people and undermines their human dignity. Reforms within social welfare benefits are premised on a notion that disabled people are undeserving and skiving off and defrauding the system. This has resulted in hate speech and hostility towards disabled people.”

Put simply, the current system is flawed. It is little wonder then that we see so many desperate constituents in our advice surgeries who are afraid that the DWP will take away their income. Quite frankly, we should all be ashamed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked the Minister to meet the ME community to look at how we can reform the system. I really hope that she remembers to respond to that point. I know that issues with the benefits system cannot be fixed overnight, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) said—I have heard him say this many times—why do we not just make sure that assessments are recorded as standard? That is a simple thing that can be done straightaway.

A future Labour Government will provide a reliable safety net for people who lose their job or cannot work due to ill health or disability. Where appropriate, we will help people on their journey back into work by allowing

them to try paid work without the need for reassessments if it does not work out. We will also replace the current system of work capability assessments with a system that supports people to live with dignity and security. In doing so, Labour will work with employers, trade unions and other stakeholders to support the wellbeing of workers and their long-term physical and mental health. Most importantly, a future Labour Government are committed to working with disabled people to break down the barriers they face in everyday life. We know they are the experts by experience.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I thank all hon. Members for their invaluable and insightful contributions this afternoon, and in particular the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for bringing this timely debate to the Chamber.

Collaboration remains vital as we address the critical matters that we have discussed today, essential for supporting many in our communities. I appreciate that people are passionate, but the perception of a punitive, divisive culture, and the rhetoric used this afternoon, does not reflect an approach that I or my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) have ever taken or would ever take in our time and commitment doing this job. I want anybody watching this debate this afternoon to feel reassured that whether they come to us through a complaints procedure, or into an MPs' surgery, or work with one of the charities in this area, they will get the support they need. We at the DWP, as much as anyone else, strive to give the most vulnerable the right support. We have the right policies and the right system in place so that we can be fair to those in need and be fair to the taxpayer, but always listen to disabled people's voices. I have absolutely been striving to do that in the full-time role that I hold. I am not going to disagree that I have not looked at housing and youth alongside that, but many of the transitions and challenges apply to disabled people as well.

I am very happy to meet the gentleman from the ME community who the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) says needs to meet me. I am also keen to look at Monika's case, at the case raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), and at other cases that have been raised this afternoon. I say to hon. Members, "Please share these cases with me. It's no good you only having them in your constituency. It's really important that we look at them and learn from them at the DWP, so we can get beyond the perception and the feeling that people have."

I am determined to ensure that I work with disabled people and listen to them speaking about their everyday lives. I was recently in Hastings to discuss our new trauma-informed approach. I will be at the new health model office in Gosport on Thursday to make sure that compassion, empathy and understanding are at the heart of what we do.

Vicky Foxcroft: I am grateful that the Minister has offered us all the chance to share our cases with her, but I hope she realises how many there are. Some of us have raised one or two cases today, but I have literally hundreds and hundreds of examples of things going wrong.

Mims Davies: I am very happy to look at specific cases. Only recently, I met one of hon. Lady's colleagues, with members of the blind community and people with a visual impairment, to discuss how we can learn directly from their experiences. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon made exactly that point.

I have a speech to make, but first I want to respond to some points that Members have raised. On vulnerable people and vulnerable groups who need specific support, will they please look at this morning's Work and Pensions Committee sitting, at which the Lords Minister and I covered the topic of safeguarding? We have a vulnerable claimant champion; safeguarding concerns are rightly referred to social services.

I am happy to write to my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon on the point about end of life. The point that he made about appointees was covered this morning, in recognition of the work that we need to do to ensure that people have the suitable voice that they need and that there is progress in this area. As we speak, we are growing our visiting officers team to 700 to go out and support people in the way that my hon. Friend described, and we are making sure that we go to the people we need to hear from. On the mandatory reconsideration trial, it is too early for definitive results, but there was a very pertinent reminder for me to be dialled into it.

The Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), asked about audio recording. We have taken an opt-in approach, but I am happy to go away and look at the specific point that he raised.

Jim Shannon: The Minister talks about compassion. The medical evidence that has been presented is very clear in what it says. May I ask respectfully whether the staff looking at these matters are trained to understand the medical evidence?

Mims Davies: We have a new chief medical adviser and 4,000 clinicians in this area, with a statutory duty and an understanding that is very much among the learnings that we have gained. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman, but if there is more to say, I will write to him. Questions have been raised about how the evidence is looked at and how it works; I am asking those questions myself, individually, and am happy to continue to do so.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister for picking up my point about default recording and for her offer to look into it. When she does so, will she bear it in mind that all the companies that provide these assessments favour default recordings?

Mims Davies: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The companies want to get it right and they are keen to do what is right. I am very happy to look at that, feed back to him my thoughts and pick that issue up in the Department under my tenure.

Of course we aim to make the right decision as early as possible. We recognise that the numbers are high. By the very nature of things, anybody who comes to an MP's constituency surgery has invariably had a very poor experience; they would not come to us otherwise. That is why I want to take away the particular cases that have been raised today. However, those cases must be seen in the context of overall decisions—

Mr Dhesi: Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman shortly.

With PIP, there were three million decisions from October 2018 to September 2023; 8% were appealed, with 5% cleared at tribunal and 3% overturned. However, I appreciate that the hon. Member for Slough made the point, of which I am very mindful, that none of these statistics are just statistics; they are individual people with individual needs, and we should be very mindful of that.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for giving way. Given the time, I would like an answer to one of my various questions. The Government announced extra funding in the Budget for processing disability claims. Can she clarify exactly how that will be used to reduce the huge delays?

Mims Davies: Yes—I am keen to try to come on to that. There were many questions this afternoon and I am trying to get through as many of them as I can.

The chance to work guarantee was mentioned, which will effectively remove the work capability assessment for most claimants; they are already assessed without work-related requirements. That will remove the fear of reassessment and give the group the confidence to try work within the existing permitted work rules in employment support allowance and work allowance rules in universal credit. I am absolutely delighted about what we have done around disability employment. I am keen to do and say more around it, which should feed in again to the process of trying to allay some of the concerns that have been expressed this afternoon.

The proportion of those people in receipt of PIP with a mental health condition who are getting top rates is actually six times higher compared with DLA—PIP is at 41% and DLA is at 7%. I will just point out that customer satisfaction for PIP customers was 77%, with different scores according to different providers; again, I will go away and have a look at that. People being treated with dignity and satisfaction with how they are treated is extremely important to me. Indeed, this morning I raised the issue of disability services complaints. The number has decreased from 2,690 in 2021-22 to 2,330 in 2022-23. I am very mindful again that all of this is about individual experience.

Let me quickly try to canter through a couple of other questions before I close. The hon. Member for Slough talked about PIP clearance times. We have increased the number of case managers—health professional assessment providers—to deal with the increased demand and we have addressed the blend of phone, video and face-to-face meetings, to ensure that it is more centred on service users and is suitable. We have also empowered case managers, where they have robust evidence, to make decisions on award reviews, without referral to an assessment provider, so that decisions are quicker and we can avoid claims going out of payment. I am very much looking at that myself, and the end-to-end claim process for new claims has been reduced from 26 weeks in August 2021 to a current wait of 15 weeks. We are in a better position than we were before the pandemic. That is an achievement that I am proud of. Is there more to do? Absolutely, yes, but again I want those who are watching or listening to this debate to see that this is a big focus.

We are fully committed to delivering on the issues that matter to the British people. This is delivering for disabled people. It is an absolute mission for me in this role to make sure that the most vulnerable members of our society lead decent, fulfilling lives and I will use my time in this role to make sure that I can make the changes that everybody would wish to see.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): The question is, That this House has considered personal independence payment and other disability benefits.

Jim Shannon: On a point of order, Mrs Latham.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): There is not time—there is no time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered personal independence payment and other disability benefits.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 26 March 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Export Statistics Update

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): On 31 March 2021, the previous Government published their policy on support for the fossil fuel sector overseas^[1]. As part of this, the Government set out that they would withdraw all new financial and promotional support for the fossil fuel energy sector overseas, with very limited exemptions.

Since the introduction of this policy, the Government can confirm that no such overseas fossil fuel projects have received financial funding or support from UK Export Finance; nor have they received any Government investment. However, I regret to inform the House that we have recently discovered that a limited number of projects did receive other support that contravened this policy in the period between April 2021 and October 2023. Support typically focused on market entry and trade promotion advice.

During this period, 134 projects worth £747 million were recorded as having been supported by departmental officials in some capacity. These 134 projects are a small proportion (1.00%) of the 13,457 projects, and the £0.747 billion of export wins are similarly a small proportion (1.35%) of the total value of £55.342 billion of exports in these years.

None of these projects were subject to the approval of Government Ministers, and Ministers were not made aware of these projects until the discrepancies were discovered recently by officials. The projects were, however, included in the Government's "Export Wins" data between 2021 and 2023.

My Department has taken steps to rectify and remedy the issue. We have put in place additional measures, checks and reporting to ensure that all staff understand and adhere to the policy and can demonstrate clearly that no support is being given that contravenes the policy.

We have also written to colleagues who were inadvertently given incorrect information.

^[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-the-government-will-implement-its-policy-on-support-for-the-fossil-fuel-energy-sector-overseas>

[HCWS383]

DEFENCE

Wider Service Medal

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): It gives me great pleasure to announce to the House the introduction of the wider service medal, a new medal to recognise the service of personnel outside the traditional "risk and rigour" criteria of existing medals.

The wider service medal represents a significant change in medallic recognition for the UK armed forces, and on occasions other public servants, acknowledging the evolving context within which our personnel operate.

The medal ensures that the operational impact of many activities, previously considered out of scope for medallic recognition, is now able to be recognised.

The overarching eligibility criteria for the medal is defined as follows:

Operational activity where there is evidence of operational impact, non-physical risk, and rigour.

Personnel must have accrued 180 days aggregated service on eligible operations. Subsequent service of 180 days will result in the award of a bar to the medal, up to a maximum of three bars.

The medal will be retrospective to December 2018 for ongoing operations.

The medal is evidence of our gratitude and respect for the dedication of our armed forces, and other public servants, and recognises the diverse roles our personnel play in the defence of our nation. The initial tranche of medals will be awarded in the early summer.

[HCWS386]

EDUCATION

Schools Funding: SEND, Alternative Provision and Building Conditions

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Today, I am announcing a further £850 million investment in places for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities or who require alternative provision. I am also announcing £1.8 billion in capital funding for the 2024-25 financial year to improve the condition of buildings at schools and sixth-form colleges.

Funding for SEND and AP places

Spread over this financial year and next, our £850 million investment forms part of our record £2.6 billion funding in high needs capital between 2022 and 2025, and represents a significant, transformational investment in new high needs provision. This funding will support local authorities to deliver new places in mainstream and special schools, as well as other specialist settings, and will also be used to improve suitability and accessibility of existing buildings. Along with the funding already provided, it will mean this Government are delivering over 60,000 new places for children with SEND or who require AP since 2010.

The methodology for calculating each local authority's allocation has been updated to target the funding to the areas where it is needed most. This will help to ensure that families have access to the localised, specialised support that their children need. 30 successful applications to run special free schools have also been announced today.

Full details of this announcement, including allocations broken down by local authority and the methodology used to distribute funding, have been published on the Department for Education section on the gov.uk website here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-provision-capital-allocations>

Funding for school condition

Today's announcement on funding to improve school condition means we will have invested over £17 billion since 2015 to support local authorities, academy trusts and other bodies responsible for school buildings, to keep their estates safe and well-maintained.

The £1.8 billion includes £450 million made available through the condition improvement fund programme for financial year 2024-25. As part of this, we have today announced projects to improve conditions across 733 schools and sixth-form colleges. It also includes almost £1.2 billion in school condition allocations, including for local authorities, large multi-academy trusts and large voluntary-aided school bodies, to invest in improving the condition of their schools. The proportion of funding allocated through SCA continues to grow as more schools become part of large, strong academy trusts. Over £200 million in devolved formula capital will also be allocated directly for schools to spend on their capital priorities.

The amount of SCA allocated to each eligible responsible body, and the total for CIF, have been calculated informed by evidence from the condition data collection. Previous Administrations took no action to have a national assessment of the condition of the school estate. This Government introduced the condition data collection: the first ever comprehensive survey of the school estate and one of the largest data collection programmes of its kind in Europe.

Condition allocations for 2024-25 are in addition to our continued investment in the school rebuilding programme and our commitment to remove all RAAC from the school estate in England.

Details of today's CIF announcement are being sent to all CIF applicants and a list of successful projects will be published on gov.uk. Copies will be placed in the House Library. The full methodology, guidance and allocations amounts for SCA and DFC will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS384]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon).

The hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of Baroness Massey of Darwen.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) has been appointed as a substitute member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken).

The right hon. the Lord Touthig has been appointed as a substitute member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

[HCWS393]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS England: Financial Directions

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my noble Friend Lord Markham, has made the following written statement:

"I am revising the 2023-24 financial directions to NHS England made on 30 March 2023 and setting the 2024-25 financial directions to NHS England. The amendment to the total revenue resource use limit for 2023-24 has been agreed with NHS England as required under section 223D(4) of the National Health Service Act 2006.

The directions include a number of transfers of funding between the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England that are in addition to the headline spending review/autumn statement settlement for the NHS. This includes the outcome of the supplementary estimates process and the spring Budget 2024. Funding is being transferred for the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth (VPAG), the covid-19 vaccination programme, 2023-24 pay awards, as well as to fulfil manifesto commitments on primary care, car parking and nursing recruitment.

The directions will be laid in Parliament and published on gov.uk. The existing NHS mandate remains unchanged by these publications."

[HCWS388]

Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust: CQC Review

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): On 30 January 2024, I requested that the Care Quality Commission conduct a special review of mental health services in Nottinghamshire under section 48 of the Health and Social Care Act 2008. The review includes three strands of activity.

Part 1 is a rapid review of the evidence related to the care of Valdo Calocane. I have asked the CQC to report on part 1 by June, with the aim of providing much needed answers to the families of Barnaby Webber, Grace O'Malley-Kumar and Ian Coates whose lives were taken so brutally in the horrific events in June 2023.

Part 2 is an assessment of patient safety and the quality of care provided by Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to improve the standard of mental health care at the trust.

Part 3 is an assessment of progress made at Rampton Hospital since the most recent CQC inspection activity to offer an up-to-date assessment of the service provided at the hospital.

Today the CQC have reported on part 2 and 3 of this review.

I am grateful to the CQC for the rapid and extensive work that has been undertaken as part of this review. As set out in its report, the CQC has found highly concerning failings in the trust's ability to manage demand for services and access to care, staffing, and issues of leadership at the trust. This is not acceptable and must be improved. The trust has already begun work to address areas of risk such as patients who are waiting to access care. The trust board have accepted the recommendations made by the CQC and will address each recommendation through an improvement plan.

Since I asked for the review, the trust has been evaluated by NHS England and given a rating within their national oversight framework of 4, which means it now subject to regulatory action and the highest degree of national oversight. This includes being entered into the national recovery support programme. An improvement director has been appointed to manage the trust's progress through the recovery programme, and delivery of its improvement plan, which is being supported by system partners and NHS England.

I expect to see significant action and improvements. I have asked NHS England to work with my officials to provide assurance that their programme will provide targeted support for the issues identified, and to be updated on improvements at the trust.

I also asked that the CQC, as part of its review, assess the services at Rampton Hospital to inform my decision about the reauthorisation of Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust as a provider of high-security psychiatric services. The CQC has found that, while some progress has been made at Rampton since its last inspection, there are still significant improvements to be made. Following this assessment and the recommendations from NHS England's assessment across all three high-security hospitals, I have decided to reauthorise Rampton for a period of 12 months only, with conditions attached to address the concerns raised by the CQC and to continue to sustain the improvements it found at the hospital. I will review the progress made against these conditions before the end of the 12-month period and make a further decision about whether to renew the authorisation and what further steps are necessary, if any.

The Government remain committed to expanding and improving mental health services. This is reflected in the investment that has gone into services, with NHS spending on mental health increasing by £4.7 billion in cash terms between 2018-19 and 2023-24.

I will update the House again when the CQC provides its report on part 1 of the review in June.

[HCWS391]

Healthy Start Uptake Data

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): I would like to make the following statement on Healthy Start.

Background

Healthy Start is a passported scheme with eligibility being derived from certain qualifying benefits, such as universal credit and child benefit. The uptake percentage for the Healthy Start scheme is calculated by comparing the number of eligible people to the number of beneficiaries (individuals who were eligible and accessing the scheme).

I regret to inform the House that an issue has been identified with the statistics provided that means that the uptake figures used in PQ198857, PQ199201, PQ199480, PQ201335 and PQ9386, and referenced by Viscount Younger in a debate in December 2023, were incorrect.

It is important to state that this issue affected eligibility uptake statistics only; it did not impact any Healthy Start individual applicants, existing beneficiaries, or live claim processes.

Issue

Healthy Start uptake percentage statistics are calculated using information provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The DWP generates potential

eligibility statistics through matching DWP benefit data with HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) child benefit data. When a new HMRC child benefit data feed was introduced in June 2023, the DWP omitted to add it to the matching process. This means that the figures provided between July 2023 and February 2024 were inaccurate.

Impact

Due to the missing data feed, the Healthy Start statistical data provided has led to an underestimated number of eligible beneficiaries from July 2023 to February 2024; this in turn has led to an overstated estimated uptake percentage for the same period.

It should be noted that while these statistics are a key element for reporting uptake of the Healthy Start scheme, there has been no impact on new claims where volumes have remained stable. The scheme continues to be promoted by NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA), which administers the scheme on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), through a variety of publications, social media, exhibits and other routes.

Corrective Action

The DWP has now added the new data feed to the matching process and has provided the updated statistical data for March 2024. Additional checks have been added to ensure the issue does not occur in the future.

The incorrect statistical data has been removed from the NHS Healthy Start website; the revised March figures will be published shortly by the NHSBSA.

Unfortunately, we are unable to publish corrected historical figures as the two systems involved in the matching process do not have the historical data that could be matched.

This issue did not impact any Healthy Start individual applicants, existing beneficiaries, or live claim processes but did affect eligibility uptake statistics. The DWP will continue to work closer with HMRC and DHSC to ensure the quality of this data going forward.

[HCWS389]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Covenant Annual Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): I am delighted to lay before Parliament the second annual report for the police covenant. The report will also be available on www.gov.uk.

The police covenant aims to provide recognition by Government, policing and society as a whole of the sacrifices involved in working in policing, with the intention of ensuring that members of the police workforce suffer no detriment as a result of their role.

Since the first police covenant report was laid before Parliament in May 2023, significant progress has been made on all priorities. Several additional priorities have also been delivered successfully.

A major issue identified early on in the development of the police covenant was a need to better link across to the NHS and to develop a greater understanding of the impacts of policing among certain parts of the medical profession. To address this, we have appointed a permanent chief medical officer who will work to bridge the work of the NHS with the needs of the policing

community through the new clinical governance group workstream. We have also seen training developed for general practitioners on the specific needs of the police workforce, which has now been shared with the Royal College of General Practitioners.

We have also taken steps to address issues around officer and staff roadside safety with new sentencing guidelines for situations where a car is used as a weapon.

This year, the Home Office sought to expand the police covenant further by incorporating new priorities and initiatives to combat the ever-changing challenges faced by police. In doing so, we have been able to identify and incorporate four new priorities into the police covenant:

- tackling fatigue within the workforce;

- providing, for the first time, proactive suicide prevention resources for forces and individuals;

- the creation of a new authorised professional practice specifically centred around wellbeing; and

- re-purposing the Operation Hampshire priority to focus on efficient data gathering for assaults on police.

The remaining workstreams continue to be priorities for the covenant. This year, there has been a particular effort made to understand and find the most effective support for police families and police leavers, leading to the creation and further development of resources to help these groups.

Our police officers and staff put themselves in challenging and dangerous situations daily for the benefit and protection of the communities they serve. It is vital that our police workforce feels supported, not just by the statements that go out from Government and Parliament, but also in the actions we take to look after them. That is why I particularly welcome the improvements in how the covenant is being publicised by the Home Office, forces and the national police wellbeing service.

It has been this Government's privilege to support the improvements being made to police wellbeing. In taking forward the work of the covenant over the past year, I am grateful for the support, professionalism and collaboration of our valued policing partners including the College of Policing, National Police Chiefs' Council, the staff associations and unions, the chief medical officer, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, the Welsh Government and non-Home Office forces for their vital contributions.

This Government will continue to push to progress and deliver the police covenant. We have a duty to support and protect the wellbeing of the police and that should never be forgotten.

[HCWS385]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Cambridge: Development Proposals

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today, I set out the next steps in this Government's commitment to realise the true potential of greater Cambridge.

Cambridge, as part of the "Golden Triangle", is an exceptional place that for centuries has been one of the intellectual centres of the world. The city is internationally renowned for its strengths in research and innovation,

particularly in the life sciences sector. It is one of the UK's most prized assets, with an academic, scientific, financial and technical ecosystem that is already well established—but can go much further. "The Case for Cambridge" published at spring Budget 2024, explains why its successes can neither be taken for granted nor easily replicated elsewhere, and sets out the economic and architectural opportunity in growing the city to achieve its full potential.

The Government are firmly committed to supporting Cambridge through its next chapter, both for the benefit of the local area and the UK economy as a whole. That is why at spring Budget 2024 we announced that the next spending review will confirm a long-term funding settlement for the future development corporation in Cambridge, commensurate with the Government's level of ambition. This long-term commitment is being bolstered by funding for immediate priorities: a £7.2 million investment for locally led transport schemes to provide the Cambridge biomedical campus with the connectivity it needs to thrive; and £3 million to support Cambridge University NHS Trust to support plans for future growth.

We are also delivering ambitious plans to make sure that greater Cambridge has a safe and sustainable supply of water. We set out these plans in a policy paper, published at the Budget, which includes a unique offsetting intervention to save water now through improving efficiency, and support sustainable growth. In addition, DLUHC issued a joint statement with the Environment Agency, greater Cambridge shared planning and DEFRA, outlining our commitment to sustainable growth and development on the basis of our water credits scheme.

I have asked Peter Freeman, who is leading the Government's Cambridge delivery group, to establish a dedicated growth company for Cambridge as the next step towards a development corporation. As set out in the terms of reference, published today, the growth company will focus on establishing a strong Cambridge presence and brand, developing the evidence base and case for investment to support our long-term strategy, and enabling and accelerating existing developments in and around the city.

A range of local partners, including local authority leaders and representatives of the academic, innovation and infrastructure sectors, will be invited to an advisory council to support the growth company.

This Government remain steadfast in their commitment to promoting and increasing the use of high-quality design for new build homes and neighbourhoods. Ambitious development and growth should not come at the expense of this commitment. In Cambridge, the very best design principles will be used to enhance what is special about the city and to create a model for ambitious urban growth, based on connected city quarters, that reflects what communities want and demonstrates how new places can be equal to, and even better than, the old.

[HCWS390]

Supporting Families Annual Report 2024

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I am pleased to inform the House that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has published

the 2023-24 annual report of the Supporting Families programme, as required by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, section 3(1). The report sets out how the programme is helping our most disadvantaged families who face multiple and complex problems. A copy of this report will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

Supporting Families—previously the Troubled Families programme—funds local authorities to join up local services to help families combat problems such as domestic abuse, unemployment, poor school attendance, and crime. Funding allocations are based on deprivation and population figures. It has been at the heart of the Government's work to strengthen families and improve their futures for over 10 years. This phase of the programme has been expanded with an increase of £200 million additional investment. This is approximately a 40% real-terms uplift in funding by 2024-25, taking total planned investment over the spending review period to £695 million.

This is the Supporting Families programme's final year under the remit of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The programme moves to the Department for Education on 1 April 2024, bringing together the spectrum of reforms to children's services following the independent review of children's social care. These reforms aim to deliver a co-ordinated system of support for children and families, as well as ensuring services are sustainable for local government.

Since 2012, the programme has directly helped vulnerable families across the country. Importantly, the programme has shown what is possible when we act early to help families and prevent problems from escalating. The programme's evaluation showed that, of those on the programme, children going into care reduced by a third, the proportion of adults receiving custodial sentences decreased by a quarter, juveniles receiving custodial sentences decreased by almost 40%, and the proportion of adults claiming jobseeker's allowance decreased by 11%. Not only has the programme delivered benefits for families, but it has provided a net benefit to the taxpayer. By reducing demand on high-cost acute services, every £1 spent on the programme delivers £2.28 of fiscal and economic benefits.

"Supporting Families—a foundation for family help: Annual report of the Supporting Families programme 2023-2024" is the eighth annual report of the Supporting Families programme. This document provides an update on the programme's performance figures and policy developments for the programme.

Between April 2023 and January 2024, the programme has achieved positive outcomes with 77,203 families. The programme is progressing towards its aim of helping 300,000 families between 2022 and 2025. This year's outcome takes the total number of families helped since 2015 to 612,164. The programme continues to join up with support for children and families across Government. This includes contributions to the "Working together to safeguard children" guidance and the Families First for Children pathfinder which is testing a new family help system.

As well as outlining our key national policy developments, the report sets out how the programme has continued to drive improvement of local services for families. For example, the programme produced a high-level "blueprint"

for local authorities to rebalance their children's social care system towards earlier, whole-family help and has begun implementation of its national good practice projects.

Alongside the annual report, I have also published the evaluation report for the data accelerator fund. The evaluation report looks at effective practice and service delivery. The report has found that the data accelerator fund has progressed the data maturity of participating local authorities and partners. A copy of this evaluation report will be also placed in the House of Commons Library.

I am immensely proud of the achievements made in the last 11 years, and I look forward to working alongside the Department for Education as we hand the programme to it for future delivery.

[HCWS392]

PRIME MINISTER

Investigatory Powers Commissioner: Annual Report 2022

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I have today laid before both Houses a copy of the annual report of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, the right hon. Sir Brian Leveson. This report covers the activities of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office, the Office for Communications Data Authorisations, and the Technology Advisory Panel for 2022.

Sir Brian Leveson oversees the use of investigatory powers by over 600 public authorities, including the intelligence and security services and law enforcement agencies. Overall, his report demonstrates the extremely high levels of operational competence and respect for the law, of our security and intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies, and other relevant public authorities when using investigatory powers.

Where the Investigatory Powers Commissioner has identified concerns, he is clear to point out that this does not detract from the strong culture of compliance and dedication across our agencies, Departments, and public authorities. I am confident that our agencies and Departments are working hard to address any concerns, and I thank them for their hard work to protect the UK at home and abroad.

Now in its sixth year, the IPCO continues to provide independent oversight of the use of investigatory powers, providing assurance to both the public and Parliament that privacy safeguards are applied. For this reason, I wish to express my sincere thanks to Sir Brian, his team of judicial commissioners, and all their staff, for their work.

Maintaining public trust and confidence in the exercise of investigatory powers is vital for national security and public safety, and a top priority for this Government. This report demonstrates the high quality of oversight over our intelligence and security agencies' use of the most intrusive powers. I am satisfied that our oversight arrangements are among the strongest and most effective in the world.

In accordance with section 234(6)(b) of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, I wish to notify both Houses that there is material considered too sensitive for the open report, on which I have been briefed separately. I am satisfied that, following consultation with relevant Departments and agencies, the contents of this open report are not prejudicial to national security or ongoing investigations.

A copy of this report has been provided to Scottish Ministers for laying in the Scottish Parliament, as required under section 234(8) of the Investigatory Powers Act, and I commend this report to the House.

[HCWS387]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 26 March 2024

TRANSPORT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Transport questions on 21 March 2024.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): My constituents and businesses face an additional tax to cross the River Tamar to our main city and beyond. Taking over such key pieces of infrastructure and funding them through tax measures which they already pay would create a level economic playing field and help level up my part of the country. Will the Minister at least give a contribution towards the maintenance of these facilities, so this tax does not go up again?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend raised this issue with the Prime Minister only yesterday; she is a fantastic campaigner on issues relating to the Tamar bridge. I accept entirely that the Tamar Bridge and Torpoint Ferry joint committee has recently looked at the situation. An application is being considered by the Transport Secretary, and I am happy to meet her again to discuss it further.

[Official Report, 21 March 2024, Vol. 747, c. 1047.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). The correct response is:

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend raised this issue with the Prime Minister only yesterday; she is a fantastic campaigner on issues relating to the Tamar bridge. I accept entirely that the Tamar Bridge and Torpoint Ferry joint committee has recently looked at the situation. **Any application for a toll revision will be** considered by the Transport Secretary, and I am happy to meet her again to discuss this further.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 26 March 2024

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 2 April 2024**

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