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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 19 November 2024

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's proceedings, I know the House will wish to join me in acknowledging that today marks 1,000 days since Russia launched its attack on Ukraine. We can be proud of the fact that this House has continued to stand with the people of Ukraine, who are fighting and dying for the ideals that underpin a peaceful, prosperous, stable and democratic world. The whole world is paying the cost of Russia's aggression but would pay even more if we stood by and allowed it to succeed. Our thoughts today are with the people of Ukraine, as well as with our colleagues in the Ukrainian Parliament.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Primary Care: Patient Access

1. **Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient access to primary care services. [901283]

8. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient access to primary care services. [901290]

21. **Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient access to primary care services. [901305]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Mr Speaker, I associate myself with your remarks about the war in Ukraine. I know the whole House stands with Ukraine as it defends its freedom and democracy. This is precisely why the Prime Minister's leadership at the G20, and in other international fora, is vital in standing up not just for our national interests but for our values across the world.

Over the past decade, the Conservatives' mismanagement has left the NHS with 1,400 fewer full-time equivalent GPs than in 2015, hundreds of practice closures, the loss of over 1,000 community pharmacies, and NHS dentistry a distant memory, which is why this Government took immediate action to employ 1,000 more GPs. Through the additional roles reimbursement scheme, through the Chancellor's Budget measures and through our 10-year plan, we will shift the focus of healthcare out of hospitals and into the community.

Josh Simons: In my Makerfield constituency, Wigan council and my local NHS trust are working closely together to pioneer a health system focused on prevention and delivered through neighbourhood health centres, but they need help. What is the Secretary of State doing to improve access to primary care, especially data-driven preventive care, through neighbourhood health centres?

Wes Streeting: I agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of prevention at a local level. We are trialling neighbourhood health centres across the country to bring together a range of services, ensuring that healthcare is closer to home and that patients receive the care they deserve. This is part of our broader ambition to move towards a neighbourhood health service, with care delivered close to home. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to hear more about what is going well in his community and what further action we need to take.

Chris Vince: Does the Secretary of State agree that access to primary care is hugely important to supporting accident and emergency departments at hospitals like the Princess Alexandra in Harlow? Does he also agree that access to primary care is about not just GPs but dentists? Finally, what are the Government's plans to support dental surgeries such as the aptly named Harlow dental surgery, which I visited last week?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is right that many of the pressures on our hospitals, such as the Princess Alexandra in Harlow, are a result of pressures in other parts of the health and social care system. It is outrageous that the biggest reason for five to nine-year-olds presenting to hospital is tooth decay, which is why we need to get NHS dentistry back on its feet, along with the rest of the NHS.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Care and I have regularly met the British Dental Association since the general election to consider how the dental contract can be reformed to retain dentists and rebuild NHS dental services.

Sam Carling: In my local area of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, GPs are reporting feeling increasingly burnt out, with working conditions becoming more extreme. The number of patients per fully qualified GP in my area has increased by nearly 400 since December 2016, a higher increase than the national average. Can the Secretary of State tell me what his Department is doing to make the situation more sustainable while improving access to primary care?

Wes Streeting: General practice is a valued part of the NHS, and GPs are a vital part of our NHS family. In fact, they are delivering more appointments than ever before, and we recognise the significant pressures they face. At the same time, we know that patients are struggling to see their GP, which is why we have invested an additional £82 million into the ARRS to recruit 1,000 more newly qualified GPs this year. This will take pressure off general practice, and we will be announcing further budget allocations in the not-too-distant future to set out what further support we will provide for general practice.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Last week, I visited Summertown health centre. Staff there implored me to say to the Government that the issue is not just more money—we welcome the £100 million that has been allocated for capital investment in primary care—but the snarled-up process at integrated care board level and getting investment to the right places quickly. What will the Secretary of State's Government do to ensure ICBs deliver that money to where it is needed, and fast?

Wes Streeting: The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee is right that investment is vital, but so is reform. We tasked ICBs with leading the development of the new neighbourhood health service. We are removing their responsibility for performance management of trusts in order to free up their focus, so that primary and community services have the attention that is desperately needed. In the coming weeks, we will be talking to the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners about how we ensure the investment announced by the Chancellor leads to improved patient care and a reformed neighbourhood health service.

Lewis Cocking (Bromley) (Con): Goff's Oak, in my constituency of Bromley, has seen a lot of development. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that GP surgeries are delivered before hundreds of new homes are built?

Wes Streeting: Of course we need to deliver both new homes and GP surgeries, but the previous Conservative Government delivered neither. We have a housing crisis and an NHS crisis in this country; I would have thought Conservative Members might have shown some humility and responsibility for those facts before challenging a Government who have been in office for only four months.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): In Cornwall, only 25% of delayed discharges from hospital are because of lack of social care packages, with the remainder involving the significant degree of support needed from primary and community NHS services. The Royal College of Nursing has pointed out that there has been a 45% reduction in district nurses in the last decade, so what can the Government do to replace those essential roles at a primary care level?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is right. Last weekend, I was up in Middlesbrough with local Members, where we saw a great example of hospital at home delivered by the community nursing team and the community health trust. We have to do a lot more in that space to ensure we provide care closer to peoples' homes—indeed, often in the home—keeping them out of hospital and close to home, which is better for them and better value for the taxpayer.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Royal College of General Practitioners has said the national insurance tax increase is expected to cost 2.2 million appointments. We know from answers to written questions that have been submitted that GPs, hospices and care homes are not exempt from the increases, and will not find out until April what, if any, mitigation will be put in place, so cutbacks are now being planned. Will the Secretary of State explain how his choice to tax GPs will increase GP access?

Wes Streeting: I can reassure health and care providers that we will be setting out allocations long before April next year. I recognise that people need to plan ahead of the new financial year. When deciding allocations, we take into account the range of pressures on different parts of the system. People have heard what I have said already about the need to shift out of hospital into primary and community services. The shadow Minister talks about choices; Conservative Members seem to welcome the £26 billion investment, but oppose the means of raising it. I am afraid they cannot do both. If they support the investment, they need to support the way in which we raise the money; if they do not support the way in which we raise the money, they need to spell out how they would raise it or be honest about the fact that if they were still in government, they would continue to preside over a mismanaged decline.

Dr Evans: One GP described the situation as "Schrödinger's primary care": GPs are seen as private contractors, so not exempt from the NI increases, but they are exempt from the small business relief because they are deemed to be "public". Did the Department of Health team knowingly go along with the Treasury team's plan to tax primary care without mitigation, leading to cuts? Or did it not understand or spot the complexity of what is going on, so mitigations have to be put in place now? Which is it?

Wes Streeting: I was terribly impolite; I should have welcomed the shadow Minister to his place in response to his first question.

Conservative Members seem to welcome the £26 billion investment and are happy to tell us how it should be spent, but they oppose the means of raising it. They cannot do all those things. They need to be honest with the country: either they support the investment in the NHS or they say they would cut it. Which is it?

NHS Hospital Equipment

2. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the condition of NHS hospital equipment. [901284]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The Darzi review made it absolutely clear that the NHS has been starved of capital. It is 15 years behind the private sector in its use of technology and we have fewer scanners per person than in comparable countries. That is why at the Budget the Chancellor announced an investment of £1.5 billion for capital funding, which will include investment for new artificial intelligence-enabled scanners, which will help tackle that backlog.

Tessa Munt: Residents in Somerset, and in North Somerset, my part of the world, recognise the £70 million that has been granted for new radiotherapy machines, as announced in the Budget, which will fund up to 30 machines. However, 70 machines will pass their sell-by date—their 10-year recommended life—by the end of this year. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister agree to meet Radiotherapy UK, which wants to highlight the huge cost benefits of having a more consistent, rolling programme of machine maintenance and replacement in the NHS 10-year plan?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady highlights the important matter of the lifetime of some of the machines, which we are finally addressing after the last 14 years of not addressing issues that include providing support to ensure that the machines work properly. Officials regularly meet Radiotherapy UK and the Department values its input. If there are specific incidents that the hon. Lady wishes to highlight, I am happy to respond to her.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the NHS cannot continue to rely on outdated and obsolete equipment? It is ridiculous that GPs still use pagers and hospitals communicate with each other using fax machines. After 14 years of decline under the previous Government, will she commit to bringing our NHS into the 21st century?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend lays bare an important issue. We all know, and critically, staff know, that we are asking them to do the most incredible job with outdated technology. It is bad for staff and it is bad for patients. That is why moving from an analogue to a digital system is crucial. I was fortunate to visit colleagues at NHS England offices up in Leeds last week to see some of the fantastic work they are doing on the app. We will ensure that the NHS comes into the 21st century.

Mental Health Support

3. **Abtisam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve mental health support services. [901285]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): Lord Darzi found that mental health waiting lists have surged, with more than 100,000 children waiting a year for their first appointment. That is why we will recruit 8,500 more mental health workers, provide access to mental health support in every school and roll out young futures hubs in every community. I am delighted to tell my hon. Friend that a Bill to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983 was introduced in the other place on 6 November. That was a promise that we made before the election—a promise that we kept.

Abtisam Mohamed: I welcome the Minister's comments. My brother has very complex mental health needs. We as a family know at first hand the difficulties not only of accessing the services and of the long waiting times, but the challenge of support staff who are not constantly on a churn and the lack of community-funded support services. Our experience is no different to that of many other families. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we will make mental health services more accessible in communities, invest more in preventive services and fund more community-based provision?

Andrew Gwynne: I will be pleased to meet my hon. Friend. This Government think it is unacceptable that too many people are not receiving the care that they deserve, and we know that waits for mental health services are far too long. We are determined to change that with the measures I set out in my opening. The Government have also introduced NHS 111 for mental health so that people who are in crisis or are concerned about a family member or loved one can now call 111 and speak to a trained mental health professional.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Facilities such as leisure centres and swimming pools—like the Sovereign Centre in Eastbourne where I learned to swim—are critical in supporting people's mental health locally. Will the Minister support me in putting pressure on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to expand the criteria of the towns fund to allow us to be able to spend it to invest in our leisure centres and sports and fitness facilities for local people?

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. We are a mission-led Government and, of course, tackling health inequalities is a job not just for the Department of Health and Social Care, but for all Government Departments. I will be very happy to raise the role that Ministers can play in improving mental health and wellbeing in my bilaterals with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Dental Training Places: East of England

4. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of new dental training places needed in the east of England. [901286]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Fourteen years of Conservative neglect and incompetence have left huge swathes of the east of England as dental deserts. As part of our 10-year plan, we will be working with NHS England to assess the need for more dental trainees in areas such as the east of England where we know that many people are struggling to find an NHS dentist. I am aware of the University of East Anglia's plans to open a dental school and I recently met MPs from the east of England, including the hon. Gentleman, to discuss that process. I encourage the UEA to continue with its bid for a new dental school.

Jerome Mayhew: The Minister well knows that there is a lack of dentists in the east of England, because there is no undergraduate training facility. The nearest place is either Birmingham or London. He has kindly mentioned the University of East Anglia, which is ready to go with a new building under construction. It has wide cross-party support, as he also knows from the meeting that he held recently, so when will he make the announcement?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that follow-up question, but he will recall that, when we met, I and my officials made it clear to him that the UEA has not yet submitted its bid for a dental school. In that meeting, we said: "Please go back to the UEA and encourage them to submit that bid. When they do, we will look at it very carefully."

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Bedford are struggling to get an NHS dentist. I am also hearing from those who have tried to book an appointment only to discover that they have been removed from the NHS list without any warning. The Government have committed to improve the dental contract. In doing so, will they ensure that dentists can no longer drop people from their books—leaving them without any access to care—without prior notice?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right: we will reform the dental contract to rebuild dentistry in the long term and to increase access to NHS dental care, with a shift to focusing on prevention and the retention of NHS dentists. We continue to meet representatives from the British Dental Association and other representatives of the sector to discuss how we can best deliver our shared ambition to improve access for NHS dental patients.

Health and Care Staffing Costs: Employer NI Contributions

5. Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposed changes to employer national insurance contributions on staffing costs for health and care providers.

[901287]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): The leadership shown by the Chancellor has enabled her and the Government to fix the foundations of the public finances and fill the £22 billion black hole left by the previous Government. The decisions that she took meant that she was able to provide this Department with an extra £26 billion and a real-terms increase in core local government spending power by about 3.2%. That was the right decision for the right reasons in the national interest, and I am taking into consideration pressures on all parts of health and social care before making final allocations for the year ahead.

Wendy Chamberlain: In North East Fife, we have a particular issue with access to dental surgeries, especially with the recent closure of a surgery in Leven. Difficulties stem from recruitment from abroad as a result of visa changes and also simply from practices going private and coming out of the system. Obviously, the NHS is devolved in Scotland, but does the Secretary of State agree that putting staffing under further strain from increasing national insurance contributions will only make things worse for dentists? What in his conversations is he doing to ensure that dentists get the support that they need?

Wes Streeting: It is because the Chancellor took the decisions that she did in the Budget that my Department has received £26 billion to reform and improve health and social care. As I said before the general election, all parts of the United Kingdom suffered under the previous Conservative Government, which is why I am sure that Members from across Scotland will welcome the extra £1.5 billion this year and £3.4 billion next year—the biggest funding increase since devolution. I am sure that the SNP Government will welcome the increase, and they certainly have no excuses now for not acting.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Fourteen years of neglect have left hospices in a perilous condition. They are dealing with the rise in national insurance contributions, pay and other cost pressures, so I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is putting in place measures to ensure that the funding recovers. Will he assure me that integrated care boards not only will pass on that recovery from the increased costs to hospices, but will help them catch up from the Tory years of neglect of the whole sector?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I am looking carefully at the pressures on hospices. In fact, only last Friday I visited Saint Francis hospice, which serves my constituents and people right across east London and west and south Essex. I saw at first hand the brilliant work it is doing on end of life care, but also the pressures it is under, and I am taking those pressures into account before deciding allocations for the year ahead.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I have tried repeatedly through written parliamentary questions to get an answer to this without success, so I will try asking it face to face: will the Secretary of State tell the House how much his Chancellor's changes to national insurance contributions will cost the NHS?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member talks about the employer national insurance contributions as if they were a burden on the NHS. It is thanks to the decisions taken by the Chancellor that we can invest £26 billion in health and social care. The Conservatives welcome the investment but oppose the means of raising it. Do they support the investment or not? They cannot duck the question; they have to answer.

Dr Johnson: The right hon. Member speaks of ducking questions, but it is worrying that three weeks after the Budget he still does not know, or will not tell the House, how much it will cost the NHS. Of course, changes to national insurance contributions affect not just the NHS directly, but suppliers, contractors, charities and other NHS care providers. I know you are a great supporter of your local air ambulance service, Mr Speaker, as I am of the Lincs & Notts air ambulance, which now needs to raise £70,000 extra just to fund this Government's ill-advised changes to NICs. That £70,000 is a lot of cakes to sell, cars to wash and fun runs to complete, and that is just one example of pressures placed on lifesaving services right across the country. Will the Minister confirm that he will meet the Chancellor, explain the disastrous effects of the policy and insist that she reverses it?

Wes Streeting: Again, we have not yet announced how we are allocating the budget for the year ahead, but I remind the Conservatives that it is thanks to the choices the Chancellor made in her Budget that she is able to invest £26 billion in health and social care. Would they cut the £26 billion this Labour Government are investing in the NHS? If not, how would they pay for it? Welcome to opposition.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Hospices provide essential care for people at the most difficult point of their life, and they are usually only partially funded by the NHS. Hospice UK says that real-terms funding has fallen by £47 million since 2022, and hospices are struggling with this hike in national insurance contributions. Hope House children's hospice in North Shropshire estimates that it will cost £178,000. Will the Secretary of State commit to either exempting hospices from the NICs increase or ensure that they are funded to cover those additional costs?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for her question. I pay tribute to the children's hospice in her constituency and, indeed, to Haven House children's hospice, which serves my constituency.

Mr Speaker: And Derian House children's hospice.

Wes Streeting: And indeed your very own local hospice, Mr Speaker—I am sure that will appear on the record. I am particularly thankful for the advocacy we have received from Hospice UK and charities such as Together for Short Lives and others that are making their voices heard about the pressures on the system. I say to all hospices across the country that I am taking those pressures into account before deciding allocations for the year ahead, because I want to ensure that everyone, whatever their age, receives access to the timely and good-quality end of life care, palliative care and, of course, support for people with life-limiting conditions that all of them deserve.

Care Sector: Staff Salaries

6. **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on staff salaries in the care sector. [901288]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I was proud that the Chancellor raised the salaries of hundreds of thousands of care workers in the Budget. Last month, the Government introduced legislation to deliver the first ever fair pay agreement for adult social care. While we were giving care workers a pay rise, the Leader of the Opposition was belittling their work as merely wiping bottoms. I gently say to the Conservative party that it is better to be wiping bottoms than talking out of them. This is an important issue, and I am dealing with ministerial colleagues on it.

Antonia Bance: According to last month's Skills for Care report, most care workers are paid only a couple of pennies above the national minimum wage, while the sector cannot recruit and retain the people it needs. Will the Minister set out the timetable for establishing the fair pay agreement and adult social care negotiating body, and will he give the House an assurance that the care trade unions will be closely involved in its design?

Stephen Kinnock: We took quick action on the Employment Rights Bill, which includes the fair pay agreement, within 100 days of taking office. The consultation process on the negotiating body can begin only once the Bill has become an Act. We are engaging widely with stakeholders, and I assure my hon. Friend that unions will play a central role in that process, but let us remember that, through the national living wage, we are giving the lowest-paid full-time care workers a pay increase of £1,400 per year.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): One barrier to better staff salaries in the care sector is the additional employer national insurance contributions. Are the Minister and his colleagues considering an exemption for GP practices, charities and hospices from national insurance employer contributions?

Stephen Kinnock: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care pointed out, when we won the general election on 4 July, we inherited public finances in their worst state since the second world war. Through the Chancellor, we have taken responsible action to deal with those issues. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has also said that we are looking at the Budget in the round, and we will report on that in due course.

NHS Dentists: Access

7. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of access to NHS dentists. [901289]

18. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of access to NHS dentists. [901300]

23. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of access to NHS dentists. [901307]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): After 14 years of Tory neglect and incompetence, NHS dentistry in England has been left in a parlous state. Tooth decay is the most common reason why children aged five to nine are admitted to hospital, and 28% of the country—13 million people—have an unmet need for dentistry. Rescuing NHS dentistry will not happen overnight. We will expand the provision of urgent dental appointments across the country, and we are working with the sector to reform the dental contract in order to increase access and incentivise more NHS care.

Andrew Pakes: Yesterday, I heard from a disabled constituent who has spent over a year trying to find an NHS dentist, but without success. The only solution was to come to London for emergency treatment—that became a shockingly common story under the previous Government. As a first step, our integrated care board is putting 12 extra dentists into Peterborough and the surrounding towns to increase access. Will the Minister update the House on progress and on how we will further improve access to NHS dentistry?

Stephen Kinnock: I am very pleased to hear about what my hon. Friend's ICB is doing. Working with the dental sector, we will deliver measures to improve access, targeting areas that need it most. Those measures include 700,000 additional urgent appointments and reform of the dental contract. The golden hello scheme, which incentivises dentists to work in underserved areas, is under way across the country, and dentists are also being offered a new patient premium to treat new patients.

Richard Baker: Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable that more than 40,000 people in Fife are not registered with an NHS dentist? Will he share any learning from this Government's action to increase access to dentistry with his colleagues in the Scottish Government, and urge them to fulfil their responsibilities so that people in my constituency can get the dental treatment that they need?

Stephen Kinnock: Responsibility for dental services in Scotland is of course a matter for the Scottish Government, but Governments across the UK work together to spread best practice and deliver on our common goals. The Scottish National party Government have an extra £1.5 billion this year, and £3.4 billion next year, through the Barnett formula. I hope that they will prioritise health, including dentistry, and undo some of the damage that they themselves have done to dentistry in Scotland.

Dan Aldridge: Some 37% of five-year-olds in Weston-super-Mare have enamel or dental decay—a figure well above the national average. The Better Health North Somerset team does amazing work to promote good oral health, but regular dentist check-ups are the oral health silver bullet. Will the Minister explain and outline the work he is doing to ensure that children in Weston and Worle and across the country get the dentistry service that they so desperately need?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this vital issue. Prevention is of course always better than cure, so I am very proud of the fact that we are introducing supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds in the most deprived communities and where there is the most unmet need. We are also working to sort out the NHS contracts so we can ensure that children get the care they need.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Having training locally at the University of East Anglia is important for my constituents, but in the short term, what steps is the Minister taking to speed up the process by which dentists get on the dental performers list, so that they can work in the NHS and not just privately? Is he also considering bringing in a provisional overseas registration scheme?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. We are looking at provisional registration. As I also mentioned to his hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), we are very open to the idea of a dental training school at the University of East Anglia. We need to ensure that we push on the full spectrum of all these measures, because there is a crisis in NHS dentistry and we need to get on and fix it.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Toothless in Huntingdon in my constituency has written to me highlighting that 36% of patients under Cambridgeshire and Peterborough integrated care system no longer have an NHS dentist. It wants dental practices to provide access to those needing emergency treatment and a priority pathway for referrals from hospital departments such as cardiology and oncology. To that extent, what steps are being taken in Huntingdonshire to improve dental access across rural Cambridgeshire? How are the Government helping the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough integrated care system to address those issues?

Stephen Kinnock: Obviously the golden hello scheme for rural areas is very important. We are pushing forward on that, and I am pleased to say that hundreds have expressed interest in it and appointments are starting on that basis. The hon. Gentleman is right about training places. As I have already mentioned, we are very open to establishments and institutions coming forward with

proposals for that. We are living in a country where the biggest cause of hospital admission for five to nine-year-olds is having their rotten teeth removed. That is a truly Dickensian state of affairs, and it needs to be fixed as a priority.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Earlier this year, I was at an orthodontist's practice that carries out work on behalf of the NHS. It said the issue is that when people are referred to it by their general dentist, it cannot go on to do the orthodontic work because their teeth are in too bad a state, so they are referred back to the dentist, but they cannot get in because of waiting lists and issues. When we look at reforming dental contracts, will we look at orthodontic ones too?

Stephen Kinnock: Absolutely. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we have already met with the British Dental Association, and no issues are off the table. We absolutely need to look at orthodontists in the round as part of the contract negotiations, and we will certainly report back on that in due course.

NHS Health and Social Care Reform

9. **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): What plans he has to reform NHS health and social care services. [901291]

22. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What plans he has to reform NHS health and social care services. [901306]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Before the election, we made it clear that investment and reform were needed in the NHS. The Chancellor announced the investment in the Budget, and since the general election we have confirmed the introduction of new league tables of NHS providers, with high-performing providers being given greater freedom over funding and flexibility. We are sending turnaround teams into struggling hospitals, giving the best performers greater freedoms over funding to modernise technology and equipment. We are creating a new college of executive and clinical leadership that will help to attract, keep and support the best NHS leaders. We are banning NHS trusts from using agencies to hire temporary entry-level workers in bands 2 and 3, such as healthcare assistants and domestic support workers. We are sending crack teams of top clinicians to areas with long waiting lists and high economic inactivity to improve the productivity of their clinics, and we are running a GP red tape challenge to slash bureaucracy. I could go on, because this is a Government who are walking the talk on NHS reform.

Mr Speaker: I think you already have, but there we are.

Tristan Osborne: I wish my right hon. Friend would go on. Irresponsible promises were made by the Opposition about capital investment in hospitals and elective surgeries across the country, including in the three Medway constituencies. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and my hon. Friends the Members for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards) and for Gillingham and Rainham (Naushabah Khan) to discuss the much-needed NHS investment in our area?

Wes Streeting: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and other Members from across Medway to discuss the challenges that their part of the south-east faces, and to explain why our predecessors made promises they could not keep, with timetables that were completely fictitious and funding that runs out in March. I am really sorry for the way that communities were let down by the previous Government. This Government will not make the same mistakes.

Kevin Bonavia: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his earlier answer. Last week, I spoke to one of my constituents, Norman Phillips, who has been an unpaid carer for his wife Ros for the past 18 years. Like many unpaid carers across Stevenage, Norman has been put through absolute hell by the previous Tory Government's complete inaction on social care for over 14 years. Does the Secretary of State agree that unpaid carers such as Norman play a vital role in providing care, and that unpaid carers need to be at the heart of any reforms to the social care system—reforms that are much needed?

Wes Streeting: I, too, pay tribute to Norman and to family carers like him, who play such a vital role supporting loved ones. Through the carer's allowance uplift in the Budget, the Chancellor announced the largest increase to the weekly earnings limit since the introduction of carer's allowance in 1976. As well as that investment, we will have a 10-year plan for social care, and I see the care workforce, care providers and family carers as all being important partners in building that plan.

Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's plans to reform the NHS, but may I caution against the idea that the answer is to fire more incompetent managers? The problem is not bad management: it is micromanagement from the centre that sees hospitals managed with more than 100 targets by NHS England, making ours one of the most micromanaged healthcare systems in the world. Will the Secretary of State's plans allow managers more autonomy, helping them to innovate, save money and improve care for patients?

Wes Streeting: I am happy to confirm that it is my view that, when there are too many targets and everything is being measured, nothing ends up being measured. We need to give more freedom and autonomy to good leaders, including clinical leaders and managers in the NHS who are coming up with some of the best productivity gains in the system. That is why we have announced new support for, and investment in, the college of leadership for both clinical and executive leaders in the NHS. I would be delighted to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss those issues. He was a great Chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, but back in July, we saw a great example of how we can improve things by sacking bad managers.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): One of the lessons from the pandemic is the importance of NHS communications. Last week, I joined victims of the sodium valproate scandal to hand in a petition. They tried to download from the website the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's yellow card adverse drug reactions literature, but were unable to do

so. Will the Secretary of State look at this as a matter of urgency? People need to be warned about the risks of taking certain drugs.

Wes Streeting: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a great champion of patient power, and a key part of giving patients more power and control over their healthcare is better access to information. That is why, as well as improvements to the NHS app—which will provide far easier interaction with the NHS for patients—I am working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology to make sure all the information held by Government is more accessible for our citizens, particularly where that includes vital safety information and guidance, as the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Autumn Budget Impact

10. **Pamela Nash** (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke) (Lab): What assessment has his Department made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on health and care services. [901292]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (**Wes Streeting**): Thanks to the decisions that the Chancellor took in the Budget, we are able to provide an additional £26 billion to give the NHS the funding it needs. This will support the NHS in England, enabling it to deliver an extra 40,000 appointments a week to cut waiting lists. Of course, for my hon. Friend and her constituents, the Budget has given Scotland the biggest real-terms increase in funding through the Barnett formula since devolution began. I hope the Scottish Government will use that investment to deliver improved services for the Scottish people.

Pamela Nash: The Labour party is the party of the NHS, and the significant additional investment announced in the recent Budget has reaffirmed that. The Secretary of State has made it very clear in this question session that the benefits of that additional funding must be felt across the UK. Will he join me in urging the Scottish Government to ensure that that funding reaches the frontline and creates the badly needed additional appointments in GP, dental and hospital services that my constituents and people across Scotland badly need?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. It is thanks to the people of Scotland sending 37 Labour Members of Parliament here at the last election—not only have they shown that they value the NHS and are demanding change, but they voted for change—that we are now delivering that change through the Budget. I say to Scottish Government Ministers that, as they know, I said before the election that all roads lead to Westminster and that we all suffered under the Conservative Government, but this year that road is carrying an extra £1.5 billion to the Scottish Government and next year it will carry an extra £3.4 billion to the Scottish Government, so they have no excuse not to act.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Approximately 220,000 people currently reside in the Solihull borough, and if Government planning reforms go through, the number will increase significantly. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) and I have written to the Health

Secretary about the need for infrastructure and A&E services at Solihull hospital. Will he agree to meet us to see how we can make this Budget work for the people of Solihull?

Wes Streeting: I know, not least because of the mismanagement of the NHS during the last 14 years, that communities right across the country, including the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Solihull, are struggling with poor services and crumbling estates. We would be happy to receive representations from him, but he has to level with his constituents. If he wants money to be spent in his community, he must support the investment and be honest about the fact that he supports the means of raising it. If he does not support the means of raising it, he should tell us where that investment would come from.

Mr Speaker: We have been very slow to get to topicals, so let us see if we can speed it up. Dan Tomlinson will set a good example.

Topical Questions

T1. [901308] **Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): This weekend, we launched the first in-person consultation as part of change.nhs.uk, the biggest national conversation about the future of the NHS we have ever seen. We know that the Leader of the Opposition wants a conversation about whether the NHS is free at the point of use, and I can tell her, from that first conversation, that no one agreed with her.

Dan Tomlinson: Earlier this month, I visited Barnet hospital to see the way in which it is changing the emergency care department so that more patients can be seen more quickly, freeing up capacity in accident and emergency. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that trusts such as the Royal Free and others across the country get the support they need, through investment and reform, to improve patient care?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. The Royal Free hospital saved my life when I went through kidney cancer, so it holds a special place in my heart. Thanks to the Chancellor's decision and the investment she put into the NHS at the Budget, and the reform my Department is delivering, we will deliver the change and improvement that his constituents and mine, and the rest of the country, deserve.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that every year, irrespective of which party is in government, winter is challenging for the NHS. Possibly, it will be all the more so this year with the potential impact on older people's health of the loss of the winter fuel allowance by many. What winter preparedness steps has he taken, like previous Governments, to increase A&E capacity and to increase the number of beds this winter, and can he say by how many?

Wes Streeting: It is thanks to this Government and the action we have taken that, for the first time in three years, we go into winter without the spectre of national strikes looming over the NHS, and with NHS staff on the frontline not the picket line. It is thanks to the priority this Government have given to prevention that we have already delivered almost 15 million covid-19 and flu vaccinations, alongside the new RSV—respiratory syncytial virus—vaccination to help vulnerable groups for the first time. The shadow Secretary of State mentions the winter fuel allowance. This Government are protecting support for the poorest pensioners to protect them not just this winter, but every winter, and over the coming years the value of the pension will of course rise with the cost of living.

Edward Argar: I am grateful for that response but, just as my hon. Friends have highlighted in respect of the damaging impact of increases in employer national insurance contributions on GPs, hospices and care providers, I fear it was another example of the Government simply not answering the question and not having a plan yet. Either the Government have not done their homework and, as with the impact of NICs increases, they have not thought this through and do not know, or worse, they do not care—which is it?

Wes Streeting: This Government are prepared for winter and we are already standing up the operational response to winter pressures. On funding, the right hon. Gentleman was in government just before the general election. Is he saying that his Government did not provide enough funding for the NHS this winter? If not, why not? If he does accept that it is enough money, he will surely welcome the extra investment that the Chancellor is putting into the NHS from next year.

T2. [901309] **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesend) (Lab): What steps are Ministers taking to address the ongoing shortages of medications for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which have been going on for 18 months?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The Department has been working with suppliers of medicines used to treat ADHD to seek commitments from them to address the issues, expedite deliveries and boost supplies. We are working with NHS England to approve the modelling for industry and communications regarding ADHD medicine supply issues. We will continue to engage with industry to address the remaining issues as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The Conservatives' disastrous legacy on dentistry means that more than 4.4 million children have not seen a dentist in the past year. In Shropshire, dentists continue to hand back their contracts, including one in Wem in recent weeks. Will the Minister outline his plan to reverse that terrible decline and ensure that the issue is addressed in rural areas where there are dental deserts?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): There will be 700,000 extra urgent appointments, golden hellos, and a prevention and supervised toothbrushing scheme for three to five-year-olds.

T3. [901310] **Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): Many of my constituents are worried that online GP appointments are too often used as a substitute for face-to-face consultation, which risks adding pressures to NHS waiting lists further down the line. Will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that they will receive timely, in-person GP access and the quality of care that they deserve?

Wes Streeting: We all know that general practice is under enormous pressure, and that will be a big part of this Government's agenda. I reassure my hon. Friend that our view is that there should be patient choice, patient control and different courses for different horses. I value online and over-the-phone appointments, but they will not be right for everyone on every occasion. Patients should have a voice and a say.

T4. [901311] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): I recently met a GP who was in the market to hire a new seven to eight session GP to meet demand. Following the Budget and the increase in national insurance contributions for employers, he can now only afford a three to four session GP. What advice does the Secretary of State have for my friend the GP?

Wes Streeting: I would say to GPs who are thinking about staffing for the next financial year that they should hold tight and wait for funding allocations shortly, so that they can make informed decisions about staffing and care for patients.

T6. [901313] **Damien Egan** (Bristol North East) (Lab): On the doorstep in Bristol North East, people regularly talk to me about the difficulties they have getting a GP appointment. Will the Minister assure primary care services in my constituency, such as Kingswood health centre, that the Budget will help them and marks the first steps in transforming our NHS?

Stephen Kinnock: We have pledged to bring back the family doctor, and we have already invested an additional £82 million in the additional roles reimbursement scheme to recruit 1,000 more newly qualified GPs in 2024-25. We are also committed to fixing the front door of the NHS, for example through £100 million of capital funding that was announced in the Budget. We are fully aware of the pressures, and we will set out further details on funding allocations for next year in due course.

T5. [901312] **Charlie Maynard** (Witney) (LD): Will the Secretary of State give a clear date by which QR codes will be incorporated into the NHS app at the point of care, thereby making the process faster and safer, as was highlighted to me by Dr Steve Bright at the Windrush health centre in Witney?

Wes Streeting: I might resist the invitation to give a specific date today, but the hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point about the ease of use of the NHS app, and I will write to him further on that point.

T7. [901314] **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Usher syndrome is a rare inherited disease that can lead to both deafness and blindness. As chair of the Usher syndrome all-party parliamentary group, I have met many of those who suffer from Usher

syndrome. What assessment has the Department made of the adequacy of support for those suffering from Usher syndrome and their family members?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): The UK rare diseases framework aims to improve the lives of people living with all rare diseases. I am more than prepared to meet my hon. Friend to look at the adequacy of support available to people with Usher syndrome.

T8. [901315] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Last Friday, I met GPs at the Fairhill medical practice in north Kingston in my constituency. They have told me that the increase in national insurance contributions will add £50,000 a year to their costs. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether GPs can expect to see an across-the-board cut in the NICs payable by GPs to help them manage to continue delivering services for families in the area?

Wes Streeting: We have not yet announced allocations for general practice for the year ahead, and we are taking into account all the pressures that general practice is under.

T10. [901317] **Dr Becky Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): The renewed focus on prevention in our health system is welcome, but under the previous Government, the public health grant that facilitates much of that work was cut by 28%. Has the Minister, in partnership with the Treasury, considered when we might be able to address that public health funding issue, which is essential to enabling progress in prevention?

Andrew Gwynne: We will confirm the 2025-26 local authority public health grant allocations in due course. Local government plays a critical role in delivering the Government's health mission and driving action on the prevention of ill health. We are committed to working in partnership with local government to tackle the wider determinants of ill health.

T9. [901316] **Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): I have been shocked this week by all the major GP groups in my constituency detailing their financial situations. They are all close to the edge and are considering the options of bankruptcy, redundancies or handing in their contracts. What urgent respite can the Secretary of State give them?

Wes Streeting: I am in no doubt about the state that general practice was left in by our Conservative predecessors. That is why, in making decisions about funding allocations for the year ahead, we are taking into account all the pressures that general practice is under, as we clean up the mess left by the Conservatives.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): In summer 2023, I spoke to Rachel, who suffers from endometriosis. She was told that she might have to wait 18 months for urgent surgery. She is still waiting. In fact, she has had the menopause induced to help tackle her symptoms. Can the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to improve the diagnosis and treatment of women, including Rachel, who have had to wait far too long?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on behalf of Rachel and many other women suffering from this disease. We are looking urgently at gynaecological waiting lists. They are far too high, including for endometriosis. I welcome the new National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. We will be looking at women's health hubs and how they work, and future guidelines will help women to get a diagnosis more quickly and help with situations like Rachel's.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Respiratory health conditions are one of the main drivers of NHS winter pressures, yet only 32% of asthma sufferers in Bath and across the country can access the most basic level of care. What will the Government do to improve access to basic levels of care for the 68% of asthma sufferers who are currently missing out?

Andrew Gwynne: NICE is reviewing its guidelines for the diagnosis, monitoring and management of chronic asthma, and an updated version is due to be published in late November 2024. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss it further.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Women with spinal cord injuries face significant challenges in accessing core health services, including breast screening, cervical screening and gynaecological care. Research shows that women with disabilities, including spinal cord issues, are 30% less likely to attend routine breast screening appointments, in significant part due to the physical inaccessibility of the screening equipment. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the all-party parliamentary group on spinal cord injury to discuss these unacceptable disparities and ensure that women receive the equitable and accessible care they deserve?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend highlights a shocking example of inaccessibility in these important services. I will make sure that the Department responds to him and that either me or a ministerial colleague meets him.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Ludlow community hospital in my constituency provides a great service for the local community, but it is restricted by its location and its building. There is a business model that would be more cost-effective in the long term that involves moving the facility to the eco park. Will the Secretary of State meet me, healthcare stakeholders and the league of friends in Ludlow to take that forward?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is welcome to make representations to the Department for the capital investment that he is calling for, but he should welcome the means of providing it, which was the Chancellor's decision in the Budget.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I welcome Ministers' leadership in attacking the record waiting times inherited from the Tories. Will they in turn recognise Guy's and St Thomas' efforts to reduce delays, especially in the ear, nose and throat and paediatric spinal surgery teams? Will the Secretary of State outline measures to protect our NHS from cyber-attacks, which was another issue neglected by the last Government but is affecting patients in Southwark?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the question and pay tribute to the work being done by Guy's and St Thomas'. He is right to raise cyber-security. That is why the capital investment announced by the Chancellor is welcome and necessary, and joint working across Government, including with security colleagues and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, is vital to keep patients' data and information safe and to keep critical systems running.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): When the Secretary of State reviews GP funding, will he also consider the burden that sits on GP practices when they have to hold the lease for their surgeries and what role integrated care boards could have in holding that risk, which is stopping the recruitment of GPs to join practices as partners?

Stephen Kinnock: NHS England currently accepts ICBs holding leases only as a last resort or by exception due to the significant capital required. While we know that is not the most effective use of ICB resources, it is an important safeguard. We are committed to fixing the front door of the NHS by supporting GPs and ICBs through, for example, the £100 million of capital funding announced at the Budget for GP estate upgrades.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): My constituent Ollie Horobin's life has been completely transformed after contracting covid, leaving him wheelchair-bound with a feeding tube and battling debilitating symptoms every single day. His story is a stark reminder of the devastating impact that long covid can have. Will the Minister commit to meeting Ollie and me to hear about his experience at first hand, and prioritise further research into the causes, treatments and long-term impacts of extreme long covid?

Andrew Gwynne: As somebody who still suffers from long covid, I know how debilitating and complex it can be, and I am committed to improving support for people affected by it. There are now more than 100 long covid services across England, and £57 million is being invested in long covid research. I recently co-chaired a roundtable on strategies to stimulate further research into treatments. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and Ollie for further discussion.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Opt-out testing for HIV at A&E has been a great success since it was announced last year, particularly in identifying those who were not aware they had the disease and among difficult-to-reach communities. Can the Health Secretary confirm whether the programme will continue?

Wes Streeting: Opt-out HIV testing has been a great success so far. Of course, we will make further announcements on its future in due course. I would like to say, as a former member of the HIV commission that made the representations to the previous Government, that he has me at a real advantage—or disadvantage, depending on the side of the spending fence. I very much welcomed the approach taken by the previous Government, which this Government plan to continue.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain what plans he has—if any—to limit the scope of practice of anaesthetic associates and physician associates, about whom there has been such publicity lately?

Wes Streeting: Indeed there has. Medical associate roles can and do play a valuable role in freeing up other clinicians' time to do the things that only they can do, but there are legitimate concerns within the professions about scope of practice, doctor substitution and transparency for patients. We need to grip that and address it. We will have a further announcement to make about that shortly.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): South Green surgery in my constituency has been given notice by its landlord that it has to move by the end of March next year. Will the Secretary of State meet me to see what we can do to ensure that other facilities can be provided if available, or to do the best for those local patients?

Wes Streeting: That would be a matter for the right hon. Gentleman's ICB. I know that he is new to the area, so I am happy to make some introductions.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): My constituent Craig Eskrett was diagnosed with motor neurone disease 12 months ago. He says that the services are there in the local NHS trust, but there is a distinct lack of co-ordination. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what improvements can be made to co-ordinate those services for sufferers of MND?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend raises a real issue about how we join up the whole of the patient journey. Once diagnosed, patients need appropriate treatment and wraparound care. I am more than happy to meet him and his constituent.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): At the weekend in Devon, I met a psychiatric nurse who previously worked in London and has been recruited to the south-west.

She does not have a start date, and is still subject to routine checks after waiting months. Can the Secretary of State expedite these routine checks, given waiting lists for mental health?

Wes Streeting: Absolutely. That is a good example of why investment needs to be matched with reform to speed things up, improve productivity and get staff to the frontline, where they want to be.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): Last week, the chief executive of Forget Me Not children's hospice visited Parliament with local dad Steve, whose son is supported by the hospice. The hospice provides vital services to families such as Steve's, but its services are at risk in the longer term without sustainable funding, including the NHS England children's hospice grant. Can the Health Secretary take urgent steps to improve funding for hospices?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful for the steps that my hon. Friend is taking to make representations on behalf of her local children's hospice, both on the Floor of the House and outside the Chamber. I recognise the pressure she describes. We are determined to help hospices to overcome them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Secretary of State confirm what assessment has been made of the number of women waiting for endometriosis surgery across the United Kingdom? What has been done to reduce waiting lists?

Wes Streeting: As my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care said, the wait for women with common conditions such as endometriosis is far too long. That is why we are taking steps to cut waiting times and stop the merry-go-round of repeat visits to the same clinician to get the same answer, until someone finally listens to what a woman has to say.

Point of Order

12.37 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance about how this House can obtain answers from the Government, particularly the Department of Health and Social Care. On Budget day I tabled a question asking what the changes to national insurance contributions would cost the NHS both directly and indirectly. On 4 November I got a holding answer, and on 11 November I was given an answer that did not answer the question. On 8 November I tabled a question to break it down into small pieces. Last night I received yet another holding answer. We have had very little clarity from the Minister this morning. Are we truly supposed to believe that, three weeks after their own Budget, which the Government took almost four months to prepare, they do not know or cannot quantify its effects? *[Interruption.]* Surely, it is a discourtesy not to provide the House with an answer to a written question, and incompetent not to know the answers—

Mr Speaker: Order. First of all, a point of order is meant to be short. And I remind Members who are joining in that I do not need any help.

Dr Johnson: Could you please advise me, Mr Speaker, on how to get to the truth, so that this House and my constituents can understand the magnitude of the effect of these national insurance contribution changes on the NHS?

Mr Speaker: All hon. Members on all sides of the House are entitled to answers. I am sure that Government Members have heard what has been said about the failure to answer within time, and I am sure that it will be rectified. We will leave the point of order at that.

Jailing of Hong Kong Pro-democracy Activists

12.38 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's response to the jailing of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong.

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I thank the right hon. Member for her question on this important matter, and I welcome her to her new role. It is a real pleasure to be across the Chamber from her this morning.

I am glad to reassure the right hon. Lady that my colleague the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), has issued a statement on the verdict. She makes clear that China's imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong has eroded the rights and freedoms of Hongkongers. She makes clear that the sentencing decision was a clear demonstration of the Hong Kong authority's use of the NSL to criminalise political dissent. As she says, the so-called NSL45 were guilty only of exercising their rights as guaranteed under the international covenant on civil and political rights and basic law, and of exercising their right to freedom of speech, assembly and political participation. China's imposition of the NSL in Hong Kong has eroded the rights and freedoms of Hongkongers, and the UK Government will always stand up for the people of Hong Kong.

Priti Patel: The jailing of 45 pro-democracy campaigners in Hong Kong under the draconian national security law is appalling. It is a serious blow to freedoms in Hong Kong. The harsh application of this disturbing law to suppress people in Hong Kong cannot go unanswered. In government, my party consistently championed for that law to be repealed, and we gave safe routes for British nationals overseas in need of protection. I am proud to have established that scheme as the then Home Secretary. We also published reports twice a year on the situation in Hong Kong to raise our grave concerns about the erosion of freedoms with the Chinese authorities and at the United Nations.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister met President Xi and said he wanted a respectful relationship where both countries tried to avoid surprises. He even confirmed that he had called in the application for the new Chinese embassy. But less than 24 hours later, the Sino-British declaration has been trampled on yet again, with the sentencing of 45 pro-democracy campaigners. Where does that leave the Government's reset with Beijing? Did the Prime Minister actually secure any commitments on Hong Kong yesterday? Will the Prime Minister now be holding further conversations with President Xi to convey his concerns about this appalling jailing? Why did the Minister for the Indo-Pacific this morning not call, in her statement, for the repeal of the national security law?

The official No. 10 read-out of the Prime Minister's meeting with President Xi failed to mention Jimmy Lai's case. We understand the Prime Minister did raise concerns, but that is not enough. Did he call for Jimmy

Lai to be released and for an end to his politically motivated trial? A yes or no answer is needed, because there is an important distinction between the two.

The UK has an historic and moral commitment to the people of Hong Kong. We must stand up for their rights under the international covenant on civil and political rights and basic law. The Government must provide the mettle needed to handle the relationship with China, to stand up for the freedoms and democracy of Hong Kong, and to raise their game.

Anneliese Dodds: The Government absolutely agree about the historic relationship between the UK and Hong Kong and the current incredibly strong and important relationship. In opposition, my party rightly supported the measures for British nationals overseas. We have been crystal clear in our view on yesterday's sentencing. I repeat that it was a clear demonstration of the Hong Kong authority's use of the NSL to criminalise political dissent.

Respectfully, I have to say to the right hon. Lady that when she seeks to lecture the new Government on our approach to China she should be aware of what we saw over the past 14 years: a wild oscillation in policy towards China that went from the golden era period right through, finally, to a complete lack of engagement that was out of step with our partners, including the US, France and Germany, which were having those conversations. The new Government have been determined to have those conversations.

The right hon. Lady referred to the Prime Minister's meeting, where he made very clear his concerns about human rights issues. He did raise Jimmy Lai's case. That is very clear from the footage of that meeting. If she has not seen it, I respectfully encourage her to look at it. We will continue to raise human rights issues as part of our consistent approach to China.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The verdicts and sentences of the 45 are, like the 2020 national security law itself and the treatment of Jimmy Lai, clear violations of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong. Following the meeting between President Xi and the Prime Minister, will my right hon. Friend please share with the House what steps the Government plan to take to ensure that the joint declaration is adhered to?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the work that she is undertaking on this matter through her leadership of the Select Committee.

The UK Government have been very clear about these issues. The right hon. Lady rightly mentioned the case of the British national Jimmy Lai, whose trial will resume tomorrow and whose case is a priority for the UK Government. The Foreign Secretary raised it during his first meeting with China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, at the summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on 26 July, and, as I have said, the Prime Minister also raised it during his engagement a few days ago. We will continue to call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their politically motivated prosecution and release Jimmy Lai immediately, and we will continue to press

for consular access and, indeed, exert pressure in relation to the other human rights issues that are of such concern to everyone in the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): We are deeply concerned by the sentencing of the NSL45. Beijing's assault on fundamental liberties in Hong Kong—liberties that it is obliged to preserve under the joint declaration—continues. We have a moral duty to stand with Hongkongers, not least Jimmy Lai. I met his son Sebastian last week. His father has been held for in solitary confinement for more than four years, despite a serious health condition. Does the Minister understand that meeting Chinese Ministers, as the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have in the last month, without setting out any consequences gives China the green light to continue? We saw under the Conservatives that this passive approach yielded no results, so does the Minister agree that there should be no further ministerial meetings until these human rights abuses are addressed, and specifically, does she agree that there should be no visit by the Chancellor to Beijing until Jimmy Lai is released?

Anneliese Dodds: The Foreign Secretary has also met the family of Jimmy Lai and, like all of us on this side of the House, is deeply concerned about his situation. Jimmy Lai is, of course, 76 years old, and there are deep concerns about his welfare. The UK is absolutely clear about the fact that he must be released immediately. I have to say, however, that I do not agree in any way with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the current UK Government's approach. During the latter years of the previous Government we saw what was arguably a passive approach and a lack of engagement, with no meetings and visits, and that was not the right approach to take. It followed the golden era when there was a very different approach—an approach, some would say, that was not clear-eyed. The current Government are instead being consistent. We are engaging where it is necessary to challenge as well as engaging where it is necessary to compete and, indeed, to co-operate. That is the right approach when it comes to these matters of human rights, as well as our relationship with China more broadly.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Hong Kong, I thank Ministers for their efforts and recognise the efforts of the Prime Minister. However, after nearly four years in solitary confinement for Jimmy Lai and with a trial beginning in a court that we know will only ever find him guilty, at what point does the delicate diplomacy have to give way to something more like a demand for his freedom?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his recognition of that engagement. As I mentioned a few moments ago, the UK Government are deeply concerned about Jimmy Lai's situation, but we have been crystal clear—and that includes the clarity provided by the Prime Minister, which, in respect of this issue as well as others, was very much in evidence during his meeting at the G20.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I have sat watching both Governments on this one, and I do not think that any Government have the right to accuse the party that was formerly in power and talk about what it got wrong, because that Government got it all wrong and this one are getting it all wrong as well.

The key point is this. The Minister has referred to all those who have been incarcerated but particularly to Jimmy Lai, who is in solitary confinement. Yesterday, when the Prime Minister rightly started to raise the issue of Jimmy Lai and human rights, all the journalists were cleared out of the room straightaway because the Chinese Government did not want them to hear what he was saying. Just before that meeting, President Xi said that China would “brook no interference” when it came to democracy and human rights, and that is one of his four red lines. I put this question simply to the Minister: does she not think that without some kind of sanction, China will go on and on? America has sanctioned many senior officials in Hong Kong for these abuses, and we have sanctioned none. Does she not think it is time for us to say, “We will sanction someone if you do not stop”?

Anneliese Dodds: I believe it is appropriate to make relative judgments so that we can assess the right way forward for the UK’s relationship with China. That is why the UK Government are conducting an audit of our relationship with China so that we can have a consistent approach. We believe that is incredibly important, so I am afraid that I respectfully do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I had a ringside seat for some of the actions of the previous Government during the golden era, and for what was suggested then around trade protections. We need to move forward with a more clear-eyed approach, and the UK Government could not have been clearer on these matters of human rights, including the Prime Minister himself, as the right hon. Gentleman just acknowledged. On sanctions, he will understand, of course, that I will not speculate on future designations, as to do so could reduce their impact, but I can reassure him that the FCDO continues to keep potential sanctions designations under close review.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Over 5,000 Hong Kong families have settled in Reading over the past few years, including in my constituency, and I have stood alongside Hong Kong activists in peaceful demonstrations here in the UK. The onerous sentencing of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong will give people a broad reason to fear transnational repression and continued harassment here in the UK. Can the Minister assure us that she will work to upkeep not only the BNO visa programme and the path to citizenship, but the civil liberties of Hongkongers here in the UK who may be at risk of transnational repression?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I have read her fascinating book, which covers human rights in China, and she is clearly an expert on these matters, as well as having constituency experience. The UK Government’s view is that any form of harassment is unacceptable and that political freedoms must be retained, including in the UK and, above all, for BNOs. We will continue to ensure that that is the case.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In 2023 the Hong Kong police issued arrest warrants for eight overseas activists under the national security law. What are Ministers doing to challenge the extraterritorial reach of the national security law?

Anneliese Dodds: We were very clear, as were the previous Government, at the time of the passage of that law. We believe it is incredibly important that people in Hong Kong and beyond are able to exercise political rights and, indeed, to participate politically. All that the group of individuals who have just been sentenced were doing was exercising their right to political participation. We will resolutely defend that right, including in the UK and elsewhere.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I look forward to the Minister’s report on the audit of the relationship with China and of the continuum of actions, from sanctions onwards, that the Government are looking at. In the meantime, may I ask the Minister to raise with the Chinese Government the case of Carol Ng Man-yee, who is a colleague of mine in Unite and a Labour party member? She was involved in organising for Unite in the disputes with British Airways over the years, and she became president of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions. She stood in the primaries and lost, but then took no further action. She was sentenced to four years and five months. May I ask the Government to raise her case, and particularly the need for her to have visits from her family and her trade union rep, so that we can impress upon the Chinese Government that, in addition to our lobbying for her release, we need to ensure that there is humanitarian treatment of such prisoners?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his support for the Government’s ongoing audit of our relationship with China, and for the information that he has provided about one of the individuals who has been sentenced in China. I am aware that an Australian citizen is among those who have been sentenced, but I was not aware of the information provided by my right hon. Friend about his colleague who has been sentenced for her work in the UK. It is very helpful to be aware of that, and I would be grateful if he sent me more information about this matter.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Today I brought together 118 parliamentarians from 24 countries and the EU to call for the Chinese Communist party to immediately release Jimmy Lai. It is extraordinary for the Prime Minister to meet Xi Jinping in the same week that Jimmy’s sham trial resumes, yet the Prime Minister used just 13 words in support of Jimmy’s cause in his meeting with Xi—and no, he did not call for Jimmy’s release; he just mentioned his poor health. What we learned was that the Government have called in plans for a new Chinese Communist party mega-embassy as a favour to Xi, and at his request. Why?

Anneliese Dodds: I am sure that the hon. Lady, with her considerable experience, will be well aware of the fact that the Prime Minister was at the G20 leaders’ summit, which every member of the G20 attended. I am sure that she will be aware of how these meetings work. On the embassy to which she refers, it is standard for applications to be called in if they affect other Governments.

Calling in the application should not be taken as any indication of our views on the merits of the scheme. As this case will be determined by Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I was pleased to sign the letter from parliamentarians of 24 countries that the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) just mentioned, and I thank the Minister for confirming that a meeting took place with Sebastien and the Foreign Secretary. Can the Minister outline how we will work with other countries in a concerted, co-ordinated effort? As we have heard, many of them have individuals in arbitrary detention in Hong Kong. How can we co-ordinate across those countries to get the release of activists such as Jimmy Lai?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the need for co-ordination. Obviously, there has been co-ordination among parliamentarians, which has been very positive to see, and the UK Government will continue to co-operate with others on these issues. We have also worked with other countries' Governments on cases involving dual nationals.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) for organising a powerful letter, and I was glad to be able to put my name on it. Given the concessions that were given to China by the Prime Minister and the particular responsibility that we have to Hong Kong, what did the Prime Minister get out of the meeting? Can the Minister tell us the read-out from the Prime Minister, and when will she publish her audit? Following the question from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), will the audit include the option of sanctions?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. The read-out can be easily accessed. I will not read out all of it, but I will underline the fact that it makes it very clear that the Prime Minister said that he wanted to engage "honestly and frankly" on those areas where we have different perspectives, including Hong Kong, human rights and Russia's war in Ukraine. That is taken directly from the read-out of the meeting. As I said, there is also footage of it, which the hon. Gentleman can easily access. On sanctions, I refer him to my previous response.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So long as we are limited to saying how cross we all are about our different perspectives and the Minister keeps sanctions under review, China will take not a blind bit of notice, will it?

Anneliese Dodds: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware, I hope, that going into detail about sanctions in advance is extremely problematic for the entire sanctions system—it would reduce its effectiveness—which is why Governments of all complexions do not comment on future designations.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This is a bad day for human rights, but for the Hongkongers living in my constituency it is a frightening day. Beyond the broad reassurances that the Minister has already

given, what specific action will the Government take to protect Hongkongers living in the UK from state surveillance?

Anneliese Dodds: I recognise the concern that will be caused by this matter, as articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang). The UK Government are absolutely resolute in our determination to ensure that BNOs are able to live their lives freely, and without prejudice or fear, in our country. We remain absolutely committed to upholding their human rights, and we will continue to do so. If there are specific instances of concern, I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman informed me of them.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): My constituent and friend, Sir Henry Keswick, who died earlier this month, was for many years the chairman of Jardine Matheson. He was a great believer in the opportunity for good relations between this country and China. There is an awful inevitability in the fact that, the day after the Prime Minister met the Chinese President and declared a new era of positive relations, the Sino-British declaration was comprehensively breached. Does the pragmatic relationship that the Prime Minister thinks he can have with China include getting assurances that the national security law will not jeopardise the interests and welfare of British businesses and employees working in Hong Kong?

Anneliese Dodds: I would like to communicate my regret at the passing of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, who seems to have had great expertise and engagement on these issues. The Prime Minister was very clear that while the UK will seek to co-operate with China on areas of mutual interest, we will also compete, and indeed challenge, where we must. That was explicit in his message, as it has been from day one of the new Government. That is why we are conducting the audit—to ensure consistency towards China on all issues across Government.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is clear that any Hongkonger who crosses the Chinese Communist party faces grave risks. Will the Government update the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office guidelines on overseas business risks to include more detailed information on the risk posed to businesses by the Hong Kong national security laws, particularly article 23?

Anneliese Dodds: My Department keeps all forms of guidance continuously under review. That includes guidance for business people and, of course, for travellers. That is the case for Hong Kong, as for every other location where Brits might be operating. In those determinations, we will ensure that we look at a whole range of factors covering personal safety and legal risk.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Like other speakers in this Chamber, I have a large Hong Kong community in my constituency, in Colindale, and that community is very worried about transnational repression. Will the Minister meet me and other MPs to discuss this issue?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the concerns of his constituents. Such concerns have indeed been articulated by others in this Chamber.

[Anneliese Dodds]

Either the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), or I would be delighted to meet him to discuss this.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Last month, the Foreign Secretary told the House that he had made the release of Jimmy Lai his priority, yet the official Downing Street read-out of the Prime Minister's meeting with President Xi just says that they discussed "different perspectives" on human rights, and does not even mention Jimmy Lai by name. How can the release of Jimmy Lai be a Government priority if, on the eve of his show trial, the Prime Minister's official read-out cannot even mention his name, after he met the man responsible for his arbitrary detention?

Anneliese Dodds: I would respectfully refer the hon. Gentleman to the footage, which is widely available and which makes the point extremely clear.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sure that the right hon. Lady will gather the frustration that we all have, on both sides of the House, about what is going on; she probably shares it. What steps can she take with the Chinese Government to address what can only be seen as political lawfare, given that our Prime Minister seems to have some access to the Chinese President? Does the Minister agree that we cannot sit back while 47 people are found guilty of nothing more than proposing candidates for a democratic election, and that we are watching the death of any pretence of democracy in Hong Kong?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government are not sitting back. We are standing up, and we are being very clear indeed about our position. I mentioned earlier the clarity with which the Minister for the Indo-Pacific has stated the UK Government's position. That follows engagement on these questions from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is now beside me on the Front Bench, and of course from the Prime Minister. It is incredibly important that we have a Government who raise these matters directly with the Chinese Government. It is arguable that we had a bit of a vacuum in that respect over the few months prior to the election, but that is something we were determined to rectify.

Ukraine: 1,000 Days

1.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on Ukraine. It has been 1,000 days since Russia's full-scale invasion stunned the world—1,000 days in which Ukrainian bravery has inspired the world, and 1,000 days whose horror and bloodshed has dismayed the world. This war matters greatly for Britain and the global order, but first and foremost we must reflect on what it means for Ukrainians. Today, children mourn lost parents, parents mourn lost children, families live with constant fear, and individuals bear scars that will never truly heal, so I say to His Excellency the Ukrainian ambassador in London and to the Ukrainian people: today, as on every one of the last 1,000 days, you are in our thoughts and prayers.

Of course, Ukrainians need not just words but actions, and this Government have not wavered. We have stepped up support to Ukraine, we have ramped up the pressure on Russia, and we have made it clear to the world just what is at stake. In our first week in office, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed that we would provide £3 billion a year in military aid this year, next year and every year that it is needed. That includes what my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has announced today. There is more funding for Ukraine's navy and for drones, and the extension of Operation Interflex, which has trained more than 50,000 Ukrainian troops to date.

I have also increased non-military support. This financial year, we will give at least £250 million in bilateral assistance, including for work to protect the Ukrainian power grid, which just this weekend suffered another Russian onslaught. Crucially, our bilateral support, both military and non-military, will be greater this financial year than in any previous financial year since the war began. Let me pay tribute to the Opposition for their leadership on these issues when they were in office, because the truth is that this House has been able to speak on Ukraine with one voice, and long may that continue.

That is not all that we have done. We have also been finding creative ways to bolster the Ukrainian economy further. We have brought the UK-Ukraine digital trade deal into force, so that Ukraine benefits from cheaper and quicker trade. UK Export Finance has provided over £500 million in loan guarantees, including for Ukraine's own defence industry. British International Investment is working with the Ukrainian Bank of Reconstruction and Development to support Ukrainian trade. By the end of this year, we will have deployed a further \$484 million in World Bank loan guarantees. Tomorrow, this House will debate a Bill confirming a new £2.26 billion loan to Ukraine as part of a G7 package of \$50 billion. This extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme will sustain Ukraine in the fight, and is all paid for by the profits from frozen Russian assets.

I have made it my personal mission to do all that I can to constrain the Kremlin. Since July, we have sanctioned almost 40 vessels in Putin's shadow fleet of oil tankers, barring them from our ports and denying them access to our maritime services. We have sanctioned firms that supply Russia's military industrial complex, including Chinese firms sending critical components for

drones. We have sanctioned cyber-criminals from the aptly named Evil Corp, Russian troops who have used chemical weapons on the battlefield, and mercenaries responsible for destabilising Africa.

We have taken further action this week. Yesterday, in response to Iran's transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia, I imposed more sanctions, including on Iran Air. Today, I am announcing measures against those monsters who have forcibly deported Ukrainian children for attempted indoctrination by the Kremlin. I am proud of all that this Government have done to support Ukraine, proud of the unity that the House has shown on this issue, and proud that we have shown that Britain will remain Ukraine's staunchest friend, both throughout this war and in the peace that follows, but we are always stronger when we work with others. I am also proud of what we have done to rally international support for Ukraine. I visited Ukraine with US Secretary of State Tony Blinken—the first such joint visit to any country in over a decade. I discussed Ukraine with the EU Foreign Affairs Council, marking the first appearance by a UK Foreign Secretary at a regular council meeting since our EU exit. Yesterday, I chaired a meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Ukraine, and just this morning, I joined a meeting of close European allies to discuss how we can bolster our support for Ukraine in the coming months.

We are stressing three fundamental truths about the war in all our discussions with allies and partners across the globe. First, Ukraine's cause is just. It is Putin who chose to invade a sovereign country that posed no threat to Russia; it is Putin who disregarded the UN charter; it is Putin who tried to turn back the clock to an age of empire building, when might made right and ordinary people suffered the consequences; and it is Putin and his allies who are recklessly escalating this war, with Iranian ballistic missiles being used to strike Ukrainian cities, and North Korean troops being sent to attack Ukrainian soldiers. When we support Ukraine, we are not just aiding its fight for freedom; we are also contributing to our fight for our freedom—the freedom of all states, all over the world, to choose their own destiny and future.

The second truth is that Putin's war is not, in fact, going that well. Russia is almost 1,000 days into a war that it thought would end in days, and we should never forget that. Russia has suffered record casualties in the past two months, with the number killed or injured due to exceed 1 million next year. Russia is slashing welfare payments and raising interest rates to levels not seen in decades, all to fund more arms, and it has had to turn to Tehran and Pyongyang, as reserves of Soviet-era equipment and targets for Kremlin press gangs run low. That is not sustainable. The war is costing Putin dearly—all in a fight for land to which Russia has absolutely no right, a fight for which the Russian people are paying an enormous price.

The final truth is that Putin has no interest in a just peace. It is 1,000 days since his full-scale invasion, over 10 years since he first seized Crimea and sponsored insurrection in Donbas, and even longer since he has sought to meddle in Ukrainian affairs, all to further his own interests. He has a track record of violating past agreements. He shows no sign of wanting peace. He would seek to exploit any pause in fighting to win his troops a respite before resuming hostilities, as he did after the failed Minsk talks.

I underline these truths because they must inform our strategy. If we want to see peace restored in Europe, we need Putin to see that there is no route to military victory. We need to make the price that he pays for his senseless war even higher. We need to remember that the price that we would pay for his victory would be higher still. We need Ukraine to stay strong, so Ukraine needs us to stay strong by its side. That is what this House wants us to do; that is what this Government will do; and that is what we call on our allies to do. Slava Ukraini! I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

1.13 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement and, importantly, to the Government for making time to acknowledge and mark this tragic and terrible anniversary.

Like so many in this House, I remember the early morning of that dark day in February 2022, 1,000 days ago. As Home Secretary at the time, I recall the early-morning call notifying me of Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. It was a day we had all feared, having seen Russian troops gathering close to the border for several weeks beforehand, and indeed over the previous decade, since the invasion of Crimea and Russia's support for the separatists in Donbas.

The sovereign territory of a European nation has been violated, and as the Foreign Secretary said, we have all watched the horrors unfold over the last 1,000 days. In those early days, we saw the Russian military machine advance deep into Ukrainian territory. I pay tribute to the heroism, courage and bravery of the Ukrainian armed forces and the Ukrainian people, who have proudly defended their sovereign territory.

Let us be in no doubt that Putin expected Ukraine to capitulate and for its Government to fall. He thought he could bully his way into Ukraine's territory. Instead, President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people have bravely stood tall. They have fought on, and they are fighting every day. The cost to Russia has been catastrophic. Ukrainians are not just fighting for their country; they are fighting for our shared values of freedom, democracy, sovereignty and fundamental rights.

We should be proud that ever since Russian troops crossed the border, and before, this Parliament has stood shoulder to shoulder with our Ukrainian friends. Mr Speaker, you will recall that, in 2022, the entire machinery of government mobilised to support Ukraine. To this day, that cross-party support has been pivotal. We created safer routes to enable 20,000-plus Ukrainians to come to our country, and the Ministry of Defence, under Ben Wallace, was one of the first to supply weapons and key capabilities. We trained Ukrainian troops in this country, and we signed the security co-operation agreement that the Foreign Secretary mentioned. We announced a multibillion-pound funding package, too. The then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, flew the flag for Ukraine across the world, making the case, imposing sanctions on Russia, persuading others and fighting the cause of freedom. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the Government in every single effort. The commitment has been solid as we have worked unstintingly with all our partners.

[Priti Patel]

I saw the devastation when I met Ukrainians on the Polish border who were fleeing the conflict, and I know that many Members have visited Ukraine and met families over the last 1,000 days. We have all been touched by the personal horror stories of loss and grief from people, including children, whose lives have been shattered. Our thoughts are with them. It is a sobering and stark reminder that, although the modern world has delivered so much progress for humankind, unreconstructed tyrants are inflicting misery beyond comprehension with their contempt for human dignity, democracy and the rule of law. We saw that so clearly over the weekend, with the devastating waves of attacks unleashed by Putin.

I have a few questions for the Foreign Secretary. Will he confirm that we will continue to provide all the resources we can from our own stocks, and that we will work with our NATO allies to ensure that equivalent equipment is available for Ukraine if we do not progress with specific capabilities ourselves? NATO countries, as we know, are able to leverage a collective GDP that is 20 times greater than Russia's, and a combined defence inventory many times larger than the Kremlin's, so Russia's victory in this war is not inevitable.

The Defence Secretary is sitting on the Front Bench, and he will have views on this, but I would welcome an indication on what steps the Government will take to replenish our stocks. Does the Foreign Secretary, on behalf of the Government, agree that this shows why it is important that we have a clear pathway to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by 2030? Beyond the provision of lethal aid and capability, can he give an update on his diplomatic activity to further isolate Russia and to address the influx of North Korean troops?

We welcome this week's announcement on sanctioning Iran for supporting the Russian war effort, and we must pursue those sanctions with vigour. We seek assurances that the Government will continue to review the measures on people and entities within the scope of sanctions, so that we can do more to prosecute Russia's role in this conflict. Will the Foreign Secretary outline the approach that will be taken to engage with the new US Administration more widely, with our allies, to back Ukraine?

It is vital that this House stands united. As we mark 1,000 days of this war, we must ensure we continue to stand shoulder to shoulder on the side of freedom. Slava Ukraini!

Mr Lammy: This is my first opportunity to congratulate the right hon. Lady on taking up her post as shadow Foreign Secretary. We will probably disagree occasionally across the Dispatch Box about a few things, but I hope that we will never disagree on the support that we have to give to Ukraine. Her response to my statement underlines the unity of the House.

The right hon. Lady is right to recall the mobilisation of the last Government back in 2022. I am glad she reminded the House about the way British people have been prepared to open their homes in record numbers to so many Ukrainians, and about her leadership of the Home Office at that time. She is also right to raise our military-industrial capacity. I assure her that since coming into office, my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has made it his business to get underneath the bonnet of

how we procure, contract and ensure innovation. British support is driving immense innovation in Ukraine, which the Defence Secretary and I have been able to see close up. It is something like a Blitz spirit, which is quite incredible; it is a whole-nation effort. Working in partnership can also drive innovation in our own system.

The right hon. Lady raises, quite rightly, defence spending. She will know that there are still countries in Europe and beyond that are not spending the 2% that is necessary. We urge them to do that. Successive US Presidents, long before Donald Trump, have been raising that as an issue. It is our intention to get back to 2.5% of GDP—that was the figure when we left office and we want to get back there. I remind her that this country has now committed £7.8 billion to military support, and the Prime Minister has committed to provide £3 billion a year in military support for as long as it takes.

She is right to raise the huge concerns about the DPRK. Some 10,000 North Korean troops are in Russia as we speak, which is a major escalation. That has been noted deeply in the Republic of Korea, because it links the Indo-Pacific to the Euro-Atlantic. As she knows, our system has been concerned about that subject for many years, but this is a major escalation in relation to those concerns.

The right hon. Lady is right to raise sanctions. The UK has now sanctioned over 2,100 individuals and entities under the Russian sanctions regime, as I have set out. I have gone after the Russian shadow fleet particularly. There is more to come. We will bear down heavily over the coming months and work with partners, both in the United States and Europe, to achieve that. She will have read about my dinner with the Prime Minister and Donald Trump. We discussed Ukraine and he was seized of the important issues. Donald Trump is a winner, not a loser, and I am sure he wants to ensure that the west is on the winning side.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Members of my Committee and I have been meeting large numbers of European friends and neighbours, not just Ukrainians. Last week we met the Foreign Minister from Estonia, who told us that North Koreans were fighting on European soil only a few hundred kilometres from his country. Yesterday, we met Moldovan Members of Parliament, who pointed out that Russian rockets had been in their airspace the night before. We are hearing mounting concern from everyone that the change in leadership in the United States and potential elections in Germany might mean there is a challenge to the united support that we, in the west, have had for Ukraine over the last 1,000 days. What strategy does my right hon. Friend have to ensure that we remain strong, and that we all understand that a defeated Ukraine and an emboldened Putin is a defeat for all of us?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her leadership of the Foreign Affairs Committee. She is right that Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine poses a serious risk to the UK and Euro-Atlantic prosperity and security, but it is also a direct threat to the international rules-based system, including international principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. When we think about our joint intelligence and military capabilities

with the United States, remembering that many US troops are stationed in our own country and tens of thousands are stationed across Europe, in the end, with the developments we have seen with Korea, I am quite sure that we will continue to stand with Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of the statement. I join Members from all parts of the House to mark 1,000 days since Putin's forces commenced their illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I pay tribute to the brave people of Ukraine, including those fighting on the frontline in defence of the democratic ideals that we share; those fighting the nightly terror of Russian missiles and drones, which continue their assault on innocent civilians; and all the Ukrainians who have sought safety here in the UK. I am hugely proud of British families who opened their doors to Ukrainians in their moment of need.

A few days ago, I visited the charity Surrey Stands with Ukraine, in my constituency in Epsom. I met the volunteers who were preparing winter survival kits that will be sent to help Ukrainian families who face a winter with limited power supplies, at best. The work of such community groups, up and down the country, is inspirational. We stood with Ukraine from the beginning, and we stand with Ukraine now.

I am afraid to say that 1,000 days on, Ukraine needs our support more than ever. The Liberal Democrats welcome the US's decision on long-range missiles, and I hope the Foreign Secretary will be able to shed a little more light on the UK's stance. However, we must go further. The clock is ticking: on 20 January, President Trump will be inaugurated for the second time. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that with the wavering US, it is incumbent on the UK to lead within Europe now? Will he commit to bolstering support for our Ukrainian allies, should it waver elsewhere? Will the Government begin the process of seizing Russian assets—the assets themselves, not just the interest—so that we can give Ukraine what is needed to liberate its territory and win the war? Let us lead the way and liberate Ukraine. Slava Ukraini!

Mr Lammy: I thank Liberal Democrat Members for their continued support. The hon. Lady is right to evoke the huge volunteer spirit across our country. I think of the thousands of people driving trucks to Ukraine, and the faith groups, non-governmental organisations and others gathering heaters and goods, and ensuring they get to Ukraine. They are doing that month after month. They do not need encouragement and sometimes their work is not in the news, but they know the importance of their endeavours.

This morning I met Foreign Ministers from France, Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain. There is no wavering in our support for Ukraine. If anything, there was a commitment to double down on that support, a determination to ensure that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position in 2025, and a renewed effort to ensure that we co-ordinate even better, particularly over the coming months.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On this grim milestone of 1,000 days since the full-scale invasion by Russia, we mourn the hundreds of thousands needlessly killed and injured because of Putin's decision to invade a democratic nation.

I recently met the Ukrainian ambassador, General Zaluzhnyi, and separately a delegation of Ukrainian MPs, who are very grateful for our solidarity but also have some concerns. The Government have rightly provided strong support to our allies, but after the escalatory deployment of North Korean troops on European soil and the constant bombardment of Ukrainian communities by Putin, what conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence about lifting restrictions on the usage of long-range Storm Shadow missiles by Ukraine?

Mr Lammy: This is my first opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on becoming Chair of the Defence Committee. He asks a question that is in the news at this time. We continue to discuss with Ukraine and international partners how best to support it going into winter. However, I know he will understand that I have nothing new to say on this, because I will not get into operational decisions, which would, frankly, be a gift to Putin. We have gifted military aid to support Ukraine's right to self-defence against Russia's illegal attacks in accordance, as my hon. Friend would expect, with international humanitarian law.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the previous Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): It has been a thousand days of Ukraine fighting for Europe's future, but more than 3,900 days that Ukraine has been under attack and under invasion—3,900 days of bravery, terror and loss. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) for all she did to create the Homes for Ukraine programme when many thought it was impossible. Consistently, though, Ukraine has been underestimated and Russia overestimated—militarily, economically and beyond.

We all know here that personalities matter, and as the Foreign Secretary said, we know that Trump likes winners. The US Government's new leader needs to see success and victory for Ukraine as a personal victory for him. What is the Foreign Secretary doing to make sure that Trump sees it in those terms and no other?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her work previously on the Foreign Affairs Committee. We were able to work together quite well when I was in my shadow role.

The hon. Lady is right to say that we have a job to do now. The mantra is: one American President at a time. We have another eight weeks first, and Ukraine is going into winter—it may well be a bitter winter. The good news is that we are now getting the money out of the door. Where there have been gaps between pledging and getting the kit and the equipment into Ukraine, there is now a doubling down across Europe and among the international G7 partners to ensure the kit gets there and puts Ukraine in a strong position going into 2025.

I am confident that on 20 January, Ukraine will be in an even stronger position than it is today. That will be because of that combined allied effort and because of

[Mr Lammy]

the work in the United Kingdom by the Defence Secretary, the Prime Minister and myself to ensure that we are Ukraine's strongest partner and that we are doing everything we can to support it militarily, economically and on a humanitarian level.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Indeed, I thank him and our right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary for their joint leadership on this matter.

The key issue, as far as I can see, is the shipment of oil. Oil is the lifeblood for Putin financing his illegal activities, and sanctions are the way we have to stop that. Will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary give an assurance that there are now no British individuals or companies engaged in the illegal shipment of oil or its financing? If he cannot give that assurance today, what further action will he take so he can come to the House in the relatively near future and do so?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend's question allows me to say that sanctions have deprived Russia of more than \$400 billion since February 2022, which is equivalent to four more years of funding for the invasion. He is also right, however, that there is a shadow fleet, and over the past few months, I have issued more sanctions on those behind that. He is also right to single out the enablers, who might exist in our own country. He can trust me: I keep this under close scrutiny and there is more to come, I suspect, over the coming days. He is absolutely right to make it crystal clear that we cannot have UK businesses and enterprising individuals supporting Russia in its war effort.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, but I will push him on the issue highlighted by the Chair of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). Britain has continuously led the way, right from the start, whether on the provision of Javelin or main battle tanks, or on the arguments about fast jets. Reading the newspapers, I would have believed that the Foreign Secretary had been leading the way in pushing for Storm Shadow to be used in Russia. He dismisses that and says that the matter is not to be discussed, but when will we hear from the Government that the Ukrainians will have the ability to use Storm Shadow on targets in Russia? Will it be next week, next month, next year? The Americans are shaming us. We should not be shamed; we should be leading.

Mr Lammy: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's strength of feeling and why, as a Back Bencher, he is doubling down on the issue. I think he will see that this Government have led and continue to lead in the debates right across our allies. He will also understand, however, that we need communication discipline on these issues. That is what we see with our opponents in Russia, the DPRK and Iran. I therefore lament a little some of the debate that we read across the newspapers. Members are not going to get those sorts of leaks or suggestions from me at the Dispatch Box.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I thank the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary for all their staunch work in support of Ukraine.

We have heard a lot of talk about escalation. Last week, we had a group of Ukrainian MPs in Parliament talking about the continued and escalating attacks on the country and particularly on Kharkiv, a city of 2 million people. Today, we have a Moldovan group here talking about an attempt by Russia, using dirty cash brought in suitcases from Moscow, to buy their elections. We are seeing a hybrid war against the whole of Europe, including us in the United Kingdom.

The threats of escalation by the Kremlin are happening irrespective of the action of the United Kingdom or any other country. North Korean troops are in Ukraine now, fighting on European soil. Will the Foreign Secretary reassure me that whatever the threats from the Kremlin, our support will be unstinting and we will not stand back from supporting Ukraine's right to self-determination?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for all he does in the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine to champion the country's cause in this Parliament and beyond, with the visits he has made and his updates to me over the past few years. He raises a number of issues and I want to assure him that we are alongside him and we continue to be alongside the Ukrainian people.

My hon. Friend raises an issue that I think is important and which has not come up so far: the malign activity of Russia and the hybrid threats it is engaged in right across the region. One country in particular—Moldova—is on the front line of Russian hybrid threats, and the interference in its elections has been entirely unacceptable. We stand in solidarity with the people of Moldova and continue to support them against the threats to journalists and the disinformation from the Russian regime, and the other extreme examples being received.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. As has been acknowledged, this war has been going on not just for 1,000 days, but for more than a decade, with Ukrainians fighting for our freedom as well as for their own country's independence. I wish to put on record my party's support for the action that we have taken so far, and in particular our support for Ukraine.

I have a number of questions for the Foreign Secretary. On drone technology, we are seeing delays in releasing some of the licences. Will he mention that to his colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade? Can we get some more in-country co-operation, given how far Ukrainian technology has advanced? Does he agree that we can no longer continue to allow the Russian Federation to be able to strike Ukraine with impunity? Finally, \$300 billion-worth of Russian assets have been forfeited. Will he at least make a commitment to look into releasing that so that we can fund Ukraine properly? Slava Ukraini.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Member asked me a number of questions. He raised the issue of licences, which I have also seen mentioned in the papers. I can assure him that we have looked at that matter thoroughly. There is no sense of our holding anything up. We have the most robust export licensing regime in the world. We stand by that regime, which was actually put in place by the previous Government, and there is no sense at all of it holding things up unnecessarily.

The hon. Member is right to raise the issue of technology. Drone technology in particular has enabled both the UK and Ukraine to target Russian attacks with precision. I can reassure him that we will continue to lead on the matter of seized Russian assets, and, over the coming months, I intend to redouble my efforts with our allies who are not as advanced as we are on this issue.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and the details that he has outlined today. Will he provide a little more detail on the discussions that we have had with our friends and allies across the west? Can he also reassure residents in Britain about the part that they can play? He has spoken very eloquently on that. Indeed, my local Ukrainian community centre has played a very important role in our area.

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I say to the British people that they should take heart from the fact that this Parliament is speaking with one voice. If we as a country do all that we can to ensure that, militarily and economically, Ukraine can get through 2025, and if we are able to push and nudge our allies to ensure that we are in that place, then things will get a hell of a lot tougher for our Russian opponents, and we should take heart from that. In thinking about the winter, we should continue to do all that we can to send equipment over to Ukraine and to support Ukrainians in this country. It is tough for the people in Ukraine at this time. Some are still leaving the country, for obvious reasons. All of our efforts are not in vain—they are hugely, hugely important, and I am hugely, hugely grateful.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Despite the Foreign Secretary's congratulatory assessment, the fact remains that Russia is running rings around western sanctions and that it is using black and grey fleets to threaten the global maritime order. I have heard nothing from the Foreign Secretary about what he intends to do about that. Can he enlighten us?

Mr Lammy: I do not take issue with the right hon. Gentleman saying that there are still gaps and holes, and that Putin has been very clever in attempting to get around the sanctions that I put in place. But on 17 October we sanctioned a further 18 oil tankers in the Russian shadow fleet, bringing the total number to 43, and in the margins of the European Political Community summit at Blenheim Palace, we led the call for action on tackling the shadow fleet, which has now been endorsed by 46 countries in the European Union. Therefore, the suggestion that we are doing nothing does not hold. We will also continue to address the circumvention of sanctions, which includes highlighting the risk to partners such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates and supporting their efforts to continue to tackle the problem.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the statement by the Foreign Secretary. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Huddersfield Ukrainian Club, which continues to support families who have had to flee Ukraine, including many children? It is really important—probably now more than ever—that we work closely with our European allies, so can he set out

how we will strengthen that co-operation? As Ukraine faces a long and challenging winter, how will we help it cope with the relentless attacks on its energy infrastructure?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. As I outlined, this morning I spoke to a meeting of the Weimar group of nations across Europe. It is not a forum in which the UK traditionally participates, but I was very grateful to the Polish Foreign Minister, Radek Sikorski, for reaching out at this time and ensuring that the UK, Italy and Spain were part of that group, along with France and Germany. That is an indication of how united we are attempting to be at this time.

My hon. Friend rightly raises the big issues around energy over the next period. She calls to mind the pernicious attacks by Russia over the past 48 hours, which have been driven at those energy supplies and are basically trying to turn the lights out in Ukraine. We must do all that we can in a co-ordinated effort to repel that activity and to help Ukraine repel that activity over the coming months.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): My question for the Foreign Secretary is about security guarantees. As we mark 1,000 days since Russia's full-scale invasion, we should remember that Ukraine's allies failed to deter Russia in advance of the invasion. I do understand why a country at war cannot be admitted to NATO, but we must never again offer some meaningless paper pledge like the Budapest memorandum. What is the Government's latest thinking about a meaningful security guarantee by Ukraine's allies, from the point when the fighting stops?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman asks a good question, but it is easy to look back in hindsight. Personally, I was critical that the UK did not play a part in the Minsk agreement. We were absent and we could have played a far greater role. Our belief is that Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO. Allies agreed in Washington that there is to be an irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership, and that is the right thing to do. In the meantime, the UK and our allies are stepping up support for Ukraine's immediate and long-term self-defence. The hon. Member is right: we must ensure that when this war ends—and it will end one day—it cannot start again, and that will mean very serious security guarantees for Ukraine.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): May I thank the Foreign Secretary and Members across the House for the very strong cross-party support for Ukraine that has been shown over recent years and no doubt will continue to be shown? On Saturday, I had the privilege of attending an annual art exhibition run by the Helping Our Ukrainian Friends organisation in North West Cambridgeshire. Although it is a small organisation that takes in a number of rural villages, it has raised more than £300,000 in financial support for Ukraine, as well as collecting over 100 tonnes of humanitarian aid, which it has delivered over the course of 20 trips. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in congratulating this group and thanking people across our country for making these personal efforts to support Ukraine?

Mr Lammy: I am pleased to have the opportunity to reply to my hon. Friend. I was once the baby of the House—I was much thinner and much better looking then. I remember sitting in his place 25 years ago. He is absolutely right: the volunteer spirit across this country has been extraordinary. People are making so many missions to Ukraine. They are facing danger as they go into Poland to provide support on the borders. It is quite incredible. Of course, I congratulate all those in his constituency on the work that they have done.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, but I cannot hide my disappointment that he has nothing to say about freeing the hands of the Ukrainians to use our long-range missiles. How can he lament the attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure when he will not allow the Ukrainians to use our weapons to strike back and retaliate? He says all the time, “We’re doing all we can,” but we are not, and we are now foot-dragging. We used to lead; now the Americans are in the lead. Can I invite him to change the paradigm of this war and lead from the front by setting an example—as the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), described—as we did in the past? Otherwise he is foot-dragging, not leading.

Mr Lammy: I am not foot-dragging. We are leading, but we must be careful not to discuss these plans in detail in the House. I gently say to the hon. Member that we must not abuse the fact that this is a democratic Chamber that Putin and others pore over. Trust me, we are leading in that debate. We want to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position. I was discussing that with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister just yesterday in New York, and I will meet the Ukrainian ambassador after this statement. We will ensure that they are in the strongest possible position.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his personal and relentless leadership on sanctions against those aiding and abetting Russia’s illegal invasion. He will agree that it is vital that those sanctions are well enforced. In his review, will he include the credible allegations of sanctions evasion via Hong Kong? Closer to home, will he do his utmost to end the continued delay to the release of the £2.5 billion from the sale of Chelsea football club, which remains untapped at a time when the humanitarian need is so high?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for his continued work. We are committed to strengthening sanctions enforcement. Through the October launch of the new Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation, we have introduced new civil monetary penalties for certain trade sanctions breaches and the ability to make details of breaches public. Yes, we will look at the situation in relation to those entities in Hong Kong. I saw that he raised the issue of Chelsea football club during questions to the Defence Secretary just a few weeks ago. Again, I confirm that that definitely remains in view.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement. He said that we would provide £3 billion a year in military aid

this year, next year and every year that it is needed. That is very much welcome, not least in Ukraine. Equally, eight weeks from today there will be a new Administration in Washington, so Ukraine needs assistance now. Putin will probably not pay a price in eight weeks’ time because of all the soundings coming out of Washington. Ukraine needs help now to hit back at Putin now.

Mr Lammy: The point the hon. Gentleman makes is precisely the point I made to European allies this morning. I did not have the Northern Ireland accent, but—believe me—I made the point as forcefully as he has just done.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I want to put on the record my thanks to the hundreds of Exeter and Devon families who have played host to over 500 Ukrainian families over the past 1,000 days. I also thank those Ukrainian families for bringing such life and vitality to the city and for readily sharing their culture with us. What are the Government doing to strengthen European co-operation in support of Ukraine as it heads into this bitter winter?

Mr Lammy: It was important for me to be at the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Luxembourg. It was important for me to go back—the first time for a UK Foreign Secretary—and the meeting I was in this morning was also important. We are serious about that reset with the European Union and our European partners. This is a time for more multilateralism, not less.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I host a Ukrainian refugee in my home, as do many other residents of Mid Dorset and North Poole. I want to publicly thank those residents for opening up their homes and to thank the families who joined them for their contribution. Those families told me this weekend over a cup of tea that they are afraid they will never be able to go back home, and they are terrified for their parents and grandparents stuck in a living hell in Kherson. They do not think they will ever leave and that they will be forever living under occupation. What assurance can the Foreign Secretary give to those people living here that we will extend their visas for as long as needed and that, if necessary, we will allow their families to join them?

Mr Lammy: I thank the hon. Lady for all she is doing and for championing these issues. The United Kingdom is preparing to sign a 100-year partnership with Ukraine. That is the nature and depth of the relationship we are setting out with the Ukrainians for the years to come. That partnership, that support, that standing with them, will survive all parliamentarians—even the baby of the House—in the Chamber today. That is the reassurance. This is a great country. It is a great privilege to stand at the Dispatch Box as Foreign Secretary with the awareness that others have stood here and stood up to tyranny. We will continue to do that, and the hon. Lady must reassure those families that they will prevail.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I welcome the statement by the Foreign Secretary. I am sure the House will agree that 1,000 days of a full-scale war are 1,000 days too many. My condolences and thoughts are with all the innocent civilians, on both sides, tragically killed or affected by the conflict. They did not ask for war. Notwithstanding Ukraine’s right to full self-defence,

will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK military aid provided to date has not been, and will not be, used against civilians or civilian infrastructure? Will he assure the House that any decision to permit the use of Storm Shadow missiles will ensure the safety of civilians and be in compliance with international law?

Mr Lammy: This is the second or third occasion on which I have been able to answer a question from the hon. Gentleman. He has a humility and gentleness that I am sure will serve him well in the House. I reassure him that all that we do in this country is always in compliance with international humanitarian law. The modern architects of this country, on both sides of the House, gave us the rules-based system. We are one of the champions of it across the world, and so we will always behave in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Aviation (Accessibility)

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

1.58 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the accessibility of air travel for disabled passengers; to make provision about the powers of the Civil Aviation Authority to enforce accessibility requirements; to remove the limit on compensation for damage to wheelchairs or other mobility equipment on domestic flights; and for connected purposes.

I seek to introduce legislation to create stricter regulations for airports and airlines to ensure that they can facilitate the smooth journey of disabled passengers to enter the airport, navigate security, board the aircraft and have a safe journey before disembarking at their destination. The Bill aims to grant greater powers to the Civil Aviation Authority to fine airports and airlines for not complying with regulations to accommodate disabled passengers. It also aims to provide adequate compensation to them and to promote further accessibility in future development in the aviation industry.

Accessibility in air travel is not just a matter of convenience; it is a matter of rights, dignity and equality. It is about ensuring that everyone, regardless of their mobility or physical condition, can enjoy the freedom to travel—whether for work, family or leisure—without facing undue barriers or discrimination.

I pay tribute to Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, and thank her for spending time last week to discuss with me her direct experience of these issues. I also pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Transport for announcing this month that she is setting up the aviation accessibility task and finish group. That group, to be chaired by Baroness Grey-Thompson, will report back next summer, and will be dedicated to examining the current legislation. It will report on how to break down barriers in order to make air travel better and more accessible for disabled passengers.

My Bill aims to assist with implementing any recommendations, as well as addressing existing issues relating to fines and compensation. I place on record my thanks to Sophie Morgan, Christopher Wood and their colleagues at the Rights on Flights campaign for their work to raise awareness of these issues. Since its creation in 2023, their group has campaigned admirably on accessibility in air travel. My Bill takes into account their work in designing a proposed assisted air travel Act that recommends extending the accessibility and rights of disabled people in air travel. I am grateful for their continued support in the creation of my ten-minute rule Bill.

All too often we hear stories and see videos of wheelchair users being forced to crawl through or off an aeroplane because of a lack of equipment, knowledge and space on board. I am grateful to Frank Gardner, who, like Sophie Morgan and Baroness Grey-Thompson, has highlighted those issues and his own experiences. Such experiences are sadly also shared by blind and sight-impaired passengers. Research conducted last year by Which? showed that the most inaccessible or challenging acts of air travel are navigating the airport, arranging assistance to board and disembark the plane, and getting to and

[Daniel Francis]

from the airport. The issues of accessibility can occur at check-in desks and security, alongside a lack of clear signage and inefficient procedures. Once passengers have boarded the plane, the issues begin to manifest tenfold for disabled passengers.

The current design of many aircraft does not meet the needs of disabled passengers. There is often inadequate space for wheelchair users to navigate the cabin, and facilities such as accessible bathrooms are limited or non-existent on many flights. Although airlines may offer assistance to board and disembark, the quality and availability of that assistance can vary drastically from one airline to another, and there is little, if any, regulation. Making airports legally liable for the bad treatment and discriminatory practices against disabled passengers would give consumers the ability to sue airlines for disability discrimination. Many air carriers do not provide the space or the safety requirements for a passenger to fly in their own wheelchair. To facilitate that, wheelchair blocks should be included to allow wheelchair users to remain safely in their chairs throughout the flight.

Many of those changes will be an ongoing development in new aircraft, and should also feature wider aisles, larger accessible bathrooms and priority seating for those who require special assistance. I accept that a number of leaders in the field are working to design a new range of airlines that will redesign aircraft to make that part of the journey experience easier. Those who are able to get on to a plane in the first place are often left with the worry of their wheelchair being damaged in transit or because of a lack of knowledge among airport staff. It is therefore paramount that a single set of rules and regulations be applied to all airlines, to promote better knowledge among airport and airline staff and to minimise the risk of damage to wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

It is of paramount importance that a passenger can quickly access and use their mobility equipment once they have reached their destination, but that is hindered by any damage sustained, so measures must be put in place to ensure that air carriers and airport-managing bodies have the means to transfer securely and stow mobility aids. That would avoid all forms of hand-carrying of power wheelchairs and other large mobility aids, minimising the risk of damage and the risk of injury to staff. It also requires further training for airport and airline staff on assisting disabled travellers from the airport to the boarding of the plane. Staff must also be provided with training on manoeuvring disabled passengers and their mobility equipment in an emergency.

There needs to be more consistency in the accessibility services provided by airlines and airports. Too often, the quality of service can vary from one airport or airline to another, and that inconsistency leads to confusion and delays for passengers. We need clearer, standardised protocols that can be relied upon by all. The CAA is responsible for the regulation of aviation safety in the UK, but it is inhibited in that because it lacks the power to fine airlines. Instead, it must rely on taking businesses to court to force them to uphold passenger rights. It is therefore imperative that a suitable compensation and penalty charge scheme is introduced, with new legal

rights for complaint-handling, reporting, and enforcement procedures. That would include plans for the CAA to be able to issue financial penalties to airlines that fail in their obligations to disabled travellers, and would ensure that the CAA has legal powers to fine airlines and other actors in the air travel sector if they fail to look after disabled passengers and their mobility devices, whether any harm is due to damage or neglect. That would help to create an equal basis in air travel for disabled people.

Airlines and airports typically have their own claims procedure to follow, which leads to a lack of cohesion and often to more confusion and difficulty for consumers in navigating the process. The combined outcome can lead many consumers not to claim for their owed compensation. In November 2024, the CAA's independent panel recommended new consumer enforcement powers and reformed alternative dispute resolution schemes. Without the necessary enforcement powers, consumers face lengthy waits to receive assistance and are often misinformed about their rights, and the CAA does not have the powers to investigate concerns.

Currently, the amount of compensation available through those complex rules may be limited to around £1,300, but many wheelchairs are worth six or seven times that amount. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that although airports should be responsible for providing a temporary alternative when a wheelchair or mobility aid is repaired or replaced, that does not have to be on a like-for-like basis. As the parent of a wheelchair user, I fully appreciate the issues outlined by campaigners. Like others, my family have decided for many years that flying would simply be too much hassle, and that the distress of a damaged or lost wheelchair at the end of a flight is too upsetting to consider.

Every person should have the right to use an aeroplane for leisure, family or work purposes. However, the current facilities of airports and airlines, and the CAA's lack of powers, prohibit disabled passengers from accessing aviation travel. My Bill is applicable to all carriers—domestic and foreign—undertaking flights within, from and to the airspace of the UK, as well as to all airports within the UK. The Bill's provisions extend to tour operators, ground handlers, service providers, stakeholders and subcontractors involved in providing goods and services to disabled people travelling within or through the United Kingdom.

The Aviation (Accessibility) Bill would make the necessary changes to the law to ensure that airports and airlines are better able to provide facilities for disabled passengers and allow them to access air travel safely. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Daniel Francis, supported by Mr Calvin Bailey, Richard Baker, Antonia Bance, Ruth Cadbury, Jen Craft, Marsha De Cordova, Steve Darling, Mary Kelly Foy, Ruth Jones, Anna Sabine and Melanie Ward, present the Bill.

Daniel Francis accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 134).

PASSENGER RAILWAY SERVICES (PUBLIC OWNERSHIP) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 29 July 2024 (Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question put and agreed to.

Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 2. If that Lords amendment is agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

Before Clause 1

PURPOSE: IMPROVEMENT OF
PASSENGER RAILWAY SERVICES

2.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Lords amendment 2, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 3.

Louise Haigh: I am delighted that the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill has returned to this House. I thank Members of both Houses for their careful scrutiny, and I commend the collaborative, cross-party approach taken during the passage of the Bill to date. I place on record especially my thanks to the Rail Minister, Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill, and to Baroness Blake of Leeds for their valuable support and for leading the Bill so expertly through the other place. Three amendments were made there that we will seek to address today in this House.

Before I speak on the amendments, I remind both Houses that the Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to bring franchises for train services back into public ownership where they belong, in line with the wishes of a clear majority of the British public and in direct response to the failure of the previous Government.

Public ownership will end the gravy train that sees the taxpayer footing the bill for more than £100 million each year in fees to private operators, which ultimately benefits their shareholders, not passengers and not the taxpayer. It will allow us to strip out inefficiency and waste and will pave the way for the creation of Great British Railways, ending the fragmentation of the failed franchising system and bringing together responsibility for track and train under single, unified leadership with a relentless focus on those who use the railway. I made a statement to the House only last week setting out the early progress that we have made in fixing our railways. There is a long way to go in restoring public confidence and pride in our railways after years of failure, but the journey has begun.

I will briefly set out the Government's position on the two non-Government amendments that were made to the Bill in the other place. Lords amendment 1 seeks to insert a purpose clause in the Bill and to require me to have regard to it. I am sure that the amendment is well intentioned, and I am delighted that after years of declining performance the Conservative party now

[Louise Haigh]

recognises that reliability and punctuality actually matter to passengers. I am more than happy to reassure the House that improving the performance of the railways is at the top of my priority list, especially in view of the mess inherited by this Government. I really do not need a purpose clause to remind me of that. In my first few months in office, I have spent my time making sure that railway leaders pay much more attention to punctuality and reliability than they have in recent years.

As well as being unnecessary, Lords amendment 1 is misleading and potentially harmful, because it picks out improving the performance of passenger rail services as the sole purpose of the Bill. If that was really its sole purpose, the best thing we could do would be to cut train services from the timetable; the easiest way to make trains run on time is to run fewer of them. I hope that hon. Members on all sides of the House can agree that that would be absurd. Improving performance is of course a vital objective, but it is certainly not the only one. From saving millions of pounds each year in fees to private operators and stripping out inefficiency and waste to simplifying the arcane fares and ticketing system and making rail services more accessible, all those things and many more are priorities that we will address through public ownership and our wider plans for rail reform. The Government therefore cannot support Lords amendment 1, and I urge the House to oppose it.

In my opening remarks, I set out for the House the urgent need to deliver meaningful change. In view of that, the Government cannot accept amendment 2. The practical effect of the amendment would be to delay the programme of transfers into public ownership and prolong the failed franchising system that has inflicted so much misery on passengers. Delaying the transfers would mean deferring the benefits of public ownership, as well as the taxpayer having to pay millions of pounds more in fees to private operators. Clearly, the Government cannot accept that, especially given that we promised the electorate we would manage the transfer without unnecessary cost. The additional cost to the taxpayer is why the amendment triggers financial privilege, as the House will see on the Order Paper and as you have laid out, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have also made it clear numerous times that this Government will not put up with the appalling standards of service previously tolerated for far too long. Passengers and our constituents deserve much better. I have heard loud and clear the calls for the poorest-performing services to be brought into public ownership first. I understand those calls and deeply regret that the contracts we inherited from the previous Government make it very difficult to do that, but sadly that is the position we must start from.

We have made it clear that we will bring services into public ownership as existing contracts expire, which will allow us to end franchising entirely within three years and, crucially, avoid the need to pay compensation for ending those contracts early. I assure the House that the Rail Minister and I are monitoring the compliance of train operators with their contracts like hawks. If an operator's performance is poor enough to trigger a right to end its contract early, we will not hesitate to exercise that right and bring its services in-house at the earliest possible opportunity. We will continue to hold operators' feet to the fire to ensure that they deliver better for

passengers. Our plan to bring services into public ownership as existing contracts end is the right plan and the only responsible one. Lords amendment 2 would wreck that plan, and I urge the House to reject it.

Finally, the Government were pleased to table Lords amendment 3 in response to powerful contributions by Baroness Brinton, Baroness Grey-Thompson and others who spoke on behalf of the many disabled people who use our railways. I echo the Rail Minister's comments in response to that debate. The railways have not done enough to meet the needs of disabled people. We simply must do better, and we will. Lords amendment 3 sends a very clear message by making it explicit in the Equality Act 2010 that publicly owned train operators are subject to the public sector equality duty.

Lords amendment 3 was accompanied by two verbal commitments by the Rail Minister, which I am happy to reiterate for the House. First, the Government will work with representatives of disabled passengers to develop

“an accessibility road map that will explain the actions we intend to take to improve things for disabled people or others requiring assistance in advance of GBR being set up.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 November 2024; Vol. 840, c. 1550.]

Secondly, the Government will now fund the next phase of improvements to the passenger assist app, which is to be delivered in close collaboration with disabled passengers.

Lords amendment 3 was universally supported in the other place, and I am grateful for the constructive discussions that have taken place in relation to it. I am confident that we can continue to work across parties to improve accessibility on the railways, and I urge the House to support the Government's position today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I thank the other place for providing these amendments. Although the measures in this Bill are not a surprise—and we have stated our opposition to its fundamentals from the outset—we have made the case that, in effectively nationalising the operation of our passenger railways, we risk going backwards. Its core provisions will mean that the progress made on passenger services since privatisation will not be carried on.

That said, we do agree that there is a need for reform, and we support the reform laid out in the Williams-Shapps review. But the reforms proposed by this Government go too far and will undermine any potential progress. That is why the Lords amendments we are discussing are of central importance. Neither of the two amendments passed in the upper House descend from the Government's intention to bring the franchises into public ownership, and they are clearly reasonable and measured. As the noble Lord Moylan pointed out, a

“glaring omission from the Bill is, of course, the passenger.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 November 2024; Vol. 840, c. 1510.]

This is the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, yet it says nothing about the passenger.

Lords amendment 1 attempts to put that right and put the passenger back at the head of the Bill as the driving force in what the Government are trying to do, and to require Ministers to test their actions under the Bill against the standard of whether it will improve matters for the passenger. It clarifies that the Secretary of State

“must, in taking any actions under the provisions of this Act, have regard to this purpose”,

which is the

“improvement of passenger railway services”.

It is a simple but deeply important amendment that will ensure that the Bill, which is little more than an ideological undertaking if it lacks the proposed amendments, would be required to act unambiguously in the service of passenger railway improvement. How could anyone oppose that? There is little public appetite for ideological measures that are not based on the improvement of the passenger experience, and to reject this amendment would be a tacit admission that the Government are rejecting the principle that legislation directed at the passenger services should be in line with service improvements. In doing so, they would reject the general public consensus. I urge the Government to support the amendment on those grounds. If they choose to reject it, it is incumbent on them to explain why they have decided to make a significant legislative change to our passengers' railways that could risk worsening services.

Lords amendment 2 contains a simple measure: to ensure that the Government, when terminating existing franchise agreements, consider operational performance and terminate the worst-performing franchises first, enabling franchises that are currently working well to continue. That would clearly be in the best interests of passengers.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Can the shadow Minister tell me how much that proposal would cost taxpayers? Given that he supports the amendment, I presume he has a detailed financial breakdown of exactly how much money he is asking the state to commit.

Gareth Bacon: The point of the amendment is to put passengers at the heart of the decision making we are asking for. [HON. MEMBERS: “How much?”] The point of the amendment is to put passengers at the heart of the decision making, and the proposed amendment would ensure that this legislation is in the service of improving passenger experience, not purely in the service of fulfilling an ideological undertaking.

Lords amendment 2 would also ensure that the Government, alongside stakeholders, consider carefully what performance data is most relevant to passenger experience, and would ensure that that data is taken into consideration when undertaking the actions facilitated by the legislation. I fail to understand why the Government would be opposed to such a clearly reasonable protective measure, but I can guess. In justifying this ideological legislation, the Government have made clear their intention to utilise selective performance data. Rather than clarifying the relevant performance information for its own administrative use or for passenger understanding, they are obscuring it, allowing the Government to fulfil an ideological project untethered from the public's wish to see their experiences on the railways improved.

Of course, the Government could choose to put politics aside and support the amendment, and we call on them to do so. If they did, that would signal that while they are undertaking this ideological rail project, they are also seriously considering the need for the legislation to make an actual improvement to passenger experience. This amendment will help the Government's

actions, and it is not founded on selective principles. A failure to accept the proposed amendments will also fail to ensure that the ideological measures being undertaken by this Government take into account the needs and experiences of passengers.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Gareth Bacon: I am just winding up.

Such a failure will only further the approach—already taken by this Government—of prioritising political convenience over substantive action. We urge the Government to support these amendments and, in doing so, mitigate the negative impacts of their legislation and work to protect and support passengers.

Andy McDonald: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will perhaps be relieved to know that I will not detain the House particularly long. I rise to support the Government, but also to say something in favour of the motion in the Secretary of State's name relating to Lords amendment 2.

I read the Lords debate on their amendments 1 and 2, and I sympathise with the notion that passengers receiving the poorest service from a train operating company may wish its franchise to be terminated early. However, the point of this Bill is not simply to take over the worst franchises, but to recognise that the private operation of the passenger rail service has delivered a poorer service for passengers in general, and that the remedy is to return all passenger franchises to public ownership and closer control.

I say to Conservative Members that the British public spoke on this issue at the last election. If we look at any of the research and analysis on the passenger rail service, it is abundantly clear that not only do the vast majority of the British public want to take our railways back into public ownership and control, but the majority of Conservative supporters want the same thing. Perhaps that tells us a great deal about why the party opposite is the party opposite—why Conservative Members no longer sit on the Government Benches.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) made many references to ideology. I do not know how many times he mentioned the word, but I ask him to cast his mind back to the Railways Act 1993: if ever there was an act of ideology, that was it. John Major took a step that even she whose portrait must be removed was not prepared to take—she recognised that it was a ridiculous step to take. I suspect that the mover of the motion in the other place was seeking a device to disrupt the orderly transfer of passenger rail back into public ownership, which is best achieved with the least cost to the taxpayer by doing so as each franchise contract expires.

I am heartened to hear Conservative Members be so evangelical about the issues of performance and punctuality. Where were they for the past 14 years? Why were they not doing anything about those issues?

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Andy McDonald: I will certainly give way. I look forward to it.

Mr Snowden: The hon. Member has mentioned removing franchises based on performance and passenger satisfaction, but c2c—which operates with a 94% passenger approval rating—will be one of the first franchises to be removed. I actually think that Lords amendment 2 is quite sensible, in that it looks at how we prioritise. Some franchise operators operate very well-recommended and well-approved services.

Andy McDonald: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to tell us where he thinks the dividends go when they ship out of the system. The Conservative party was quite content to see massive dividends paid out to Abellio, Nederlandse Spoorwegen, Deutsche Bahn, and every other nation state on the planet that could subsidise its own transport system because of the ridiculous system imposed on this country's railways by the Conservative party. Rather than serving passengers and performance, what we got was money shipping out of our system for decades, subsidising other nation states' transport systems—if that is not a good example of barmy ideology, I do not know what is. We are correcting that, and rightly so.

The Minister in the Lords, my noble Friend Lord Hendy, said that

“the Government do not believe that we should either pay compensation for termination or keep paying fees to owning groups of train operating companies when we do not need to.”

He also clarified that some contracts may end early if their performance requires it:

“if we have the opportunity to put passengers out of their misery by ending a failing operator's contract early and bringing their services into public ownership, we will do just that.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 November 2024; Vol. 840, c. 1519.]

The Government are clear that they are moving ahead with restoring passenger rail to public ownership. They have a clear plan to do so, but Lords amendment 2 creates obstacles to doing that. It is not in the interests of passengers, and I hope the House will throw it out when we vote later.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Our current railway system is simply not fit for purpose, and I know I speak for everyone in this Chamber when I say that has to change. If we are serious about growth, we have to get serious about rail. After years of Tory neglect, we must get our network back on track and put the passenger first. Across the world, there are examples of both publicly and privately owned train companies that do exactly that. Because of that, we need not be ideological about ownership; rather, we can take a pragmatic approach. That is why the Lib Dems have been, and remain, agnostic about the ownership model adopted.

As the Government have themselves admitted, nationalisation is not a silver bullet. It will not automatically deliver cheaper fares, a more reliable and frequent service, or a better passenger experience. While nationalisation might offer economies of scale, it comes with new dangers—those of us in this Chamber old enough to remember the travails of travelling on British Rail are unlikely to become misty-eyed at the prospect of going back to that future, although we might well shed a tear.

In short, nationalisation alone will not fix the mess that the Government inherited from the Conservatives. The devil, as so often, is in the detail, and I eagerly await

publication of the forthcoming rail reform Bill, which we will scrutinise keenly to ensure that it does not succumb to the same demons that held back rail in this country for decades, whether it was in public or private hands.

2.30 pm

Turning to Lords amendment 1, throughout my party's scrutiny of this Bill, we have been asking one simple question: will it improve passenger outcomes? As the Secretary of State has often argued, that is what nationalisation is meant to do, and it is why she rightly describes herself as passenger-in-chief. The amendment is consequently important. It makes it clear that the primary purpose—but not the only purpose—of the Bill is to improve passenger railway services, and it requires the Secretary of State to have regard to that purpose when making any decision using the powers under the Act, so I do not understand why the passenger-in-chief does not want this commitment enshrined in the legislation.

A statement of the Bill's primary purpose would not add any significant costs, place extra demands on the Secretary of State, or impose any new burdens on Great British Railways. It would, however, provide a foundation on which her decisions might build, and act as a guiding principle whenever she uses powers under the Act. As my noble Friend in the other place argued, a requirement on the Secretary of State to improve passenger standards at every turn should not be controversial, and is surely not something with which she disagrees, so I am surprised that she seeks to excise the statement from the Bill, and I urge Members from across the House to vote against the Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 2 requires the Secretary of State to rank franchise agreements by performance, and to nationalise franchises in that order, starting with the worst, but in each case only if the Secretary of State is satisfied that it will result in performance being improved. There is some logic to that approach; if we went simply by when franchises were due to end, some of the best-performing franchises would be nationalised first and some of the worst last, which is why we originally proposed this amendment. That same amendment, in its entirety, has now been put forward by the Conservatives. Imitation is of course the sincerest form of flattery, and I am duly touched by their actions. I only wish that they had taken the same approach to Brexit. However, following discussions with and reassurances from the Minister in the other place, we now believe that the wording is too inflexible, and that the costs of implementing the amendment are too high, so we are unable to support it. We do, however, share some of our Conservative colleagues' concerns, and we ask the Secretary of State to consider using the powers in the Bill to extend franchises that are performing well, where appropriate, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden). If a franchise is doing well, the Government should not rush to fix something that is not broken; they should prioritise nationalising franchises that are performing poorly.

Lords amendment 3 would make the public sector equality duty apply to a publicly owned railway provider. That is very welcome, and I am pleased that the Government have brought forward this amendment, after pressure from Lib Dem colleagues and others in the other place. We were all shocked by Baroness Grey-Thompson's

account of being forced to crawl off a train this summer. Nobody should be compelled to do that in 2024, and it is appalling that it is a constant reality for many. Only one in four mainline railway stations has step-free access, and about 40% of them have no tactile paving. This makes our public transport difficult, if not impossible, to use for many living with a disability. That is simply not good enough. Public transport should be accessible to all, and everyone in society should benefit from the improvements to services that we all hope to see.

Ensuring that the public sector equality duty applies to nationalised rail services is a step in the right direction. I do, of course, appreciate that the Government were working under the assumption that it would; however, enshrining that in the Bill will help to strengthen that commitment. I consequently welcome the commitments that the Minister in the other place made, and I hope to see further proposals for making transport accessible in the upcoming rail reform Bill, as much more still needs to be done.

I have seen at first hand in my constituency how hard it is for local communities to receive funding and support to make train stations more accessible. Local Lib Dems in Wimbledon campaigned for a decade to achieve step-free access at Motspur Park, and I am delighted that I will soon be attending its unfurling. However, this should not have taken a decade to achieve. We have likewise been waiting for many years for Raynes Park and Haydons Road to be made step free, and we continue our campaign. I know that the Secretary of State takes this issue seriously, and I look forward to hearing her plans to revive the Access for All programme—plans on which she and her Department are working.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I rise to support the Government motion to disagree with the Lords amendment. Britain's railways are not working as they should, and nowhere is this clearer than in my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter. Communities such as ours have faced delays, cancellations and limited services. In Uttoxeter, Sunday trains do not run until 3 pm, leaving passengers stranded or having to resort to driving to their destination. In Burton, high fares and overcrowded trains are a daily frustration. On some services, it is so difficult to get a seat that it is a bit like being a Labour MP at Prime Minister's questions. We can and must do better.

This is not an isolated issue; it is the direct result of decades of privatisation—a model that promised efficiency, but delivered fragmentation and sky-high costs. It has left passengers paying some of the highest fares in Europe, all while billions of pounds flow into the pockets of private shareholders, instead of being reinvested in better services. Our commitment to bringing rail franchises into public ownership is the first step towards reversing this failure. Public ownership will allow us to reinvest £1.5 billion a year back into the system. That money will improve services, reduce fares and modernise our ageing infrastructure. That is about not just the system but the people it serves. Public ownership means that passengers will have a real say. An accountable passenger standards authority will give local people a voice in how their railways are run. My constituents want more frequent services and affordable tickets, and they want to know that when they wait for a train, it will actually turn up. Public ownership gives us the chance to listen to concerns and act on them.

Cutting fares and investing back in the railways is not just about convenience; it is about connecting people to jobs, education and opportunity. For every £1 spent on the railways, the economy gains £2.50. That money goes straight into creating jobs, supporting local businesses and boosting regional economies. Fixing Britain's railways is about more than just trains and timetables. It is about building a system that works for people, not profit. This Government's plan for public ownership puts us on the right track. Now we must go further by investing in infrastructure, lowering fares and ensuring that communities such as mine are no longer left waiting on the platform.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind colleagues that their contributions should relate to the Lords amendments.

Mr Snowden: I want to speak to Lords amendment 2. I will briefly make a few points first, but I fully understand that I should not go through the debate we have already had on this Bill. That debate was about Conservative Members' belief that we will drive improvement in the railways by putting the passenger at the heart of things, and by ensuring greater competition and private sector investment, while the Labour party argued through its manifesto that it can do that through the nationalisation of rail. We have had that debate, but Lords amendment 2 is about pragmatic ways in which the proposals can be better implemented, with the passenger at the heart of them. I fully accept that we are not having the debate over again; in fact, it is quite refreshing to see the Labour party not breaking one of its manifesto promises, but instead actually pushing on with the Bill.

As I said in my intervention, c2c has a 94% passenger satisfaction rate, but it is one of the first franchises that would lose its licence. Labour's Lord Snape said on 6 November that it would make no sense to remove a franchise such as the Greater Anglia one, which has great public support for the way in which it operates its services. In response, the Minister said that amendment 1 would not make sense, because we could simply play the game of targets. However, the Government can play the game of targets whether or not the amendment is made. It does not really matter whether the Government can stack targets or cut data a certain way. We need to call things out, and put passengers and improved services at the heart of the Bill. Lords amendments 2 and 1 are pragmatic steps to take. We accept that the Labour party is implementing a manifesto promise, but the Lords have made reasonable recommendations on how things could be done better, and how we can put the passenger at the heart of the Bill. The amendments look at where passengers already get good services, and stage changes in a way that will not be disruptive to passengers who already get a good service on the railway network.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I wish to associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State for Transport. Having heard what she said about some of the amendments from the other place, I can say that she is a far more generous person than I am. I have not been in this place long, but I can certainly tell mischief when I see it—mischief from the other place and, I am afraid, from the Opposition—because the intention here is not to put the passenger at the heart of the Bill. If Conservative Members, when in government, had genuinely wanted to put passengers at

[Mark Ferguson]

the heart of the railways, they might have acted differently over 14 years of abject failure. I spend a lot of time on the railways, as do many Members across the House when travelling between Westminster and their constituency. I see that failure daily, as I have done most of my adult life, at times when, regrettably, the Conservative party has been in government. Conservative Members cannot even explain how much the amendments would cost.

As I said, rail privatisation has been a failure. The Lords amendments do not seek to overturn the decision of this House—of course not—but they would cause considerable delay. However, rail changes made by this Government will be meaningful, unlike those made by the previous Government. Does anyone remember Great British Railways, which the former Member for Welwyn Hatfield was incredibly proud of? Except there was a problem: the railways were not great, and quite often they were not owned by British companies, although I suppose we do at least have to give him the fact that they were railways. Under this Government, there will be great British railways, with one single train operator, and we will deliver a fundamentally better service.

I come from a part of the country that is proud of our railway tradition. George Stephenson, the father of the railways, came from not too far from my constituency, and each week I walk over a high level bridge designed by his son, Robert Stephenson, which still carries trains to this day. The Stephensons would be appalled to see the state of the British railway system today. We transported railways around the world, yet those travelling across Europe or Asia today will see rail systems that are far beyond what we have in the home of railways. That is a national embarrassment.

Finally, Lords amendment 3 on the public sector equality duty is excellent, and I will support it. The point was well made earlier today, during debate on the ten-minute rule Bill, about the indignities that disabled people too often face on the railways. I thank Members from the other place for tabling that amendment, and the Secretary of State for indicating the Government's support. Ultimately, the public sector equality duty is a high bar, as it should be, and as this Labour Government bring other services back in house, I would like that public sector equality duty to be applied to them.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): Let me say how grateful I am that the Government have accepted Lords amendment 3. The accessibility of public transport is crucial for all those who wish to use rail services and are currently unable to do so because of their disability needs. All village stations in my constituency lack step-free access, and it is deeply frustrating for train users that they have to schlep into Guildford. Wonderful as Guildford town station is, they should not have to travel that far; they should be able to get on the train and head where they want to go. Accessibility is not just for those with disability concerns, as it improves the service for all users—I think of mums and dads with buggies, and cyclists. Step-free access makes trains more accessible, meaning that more people use them. That improves the level of traffic on our roads, which leads to the goals that we all share to reach net zero and create a greener future. I endorse Lords amendment 3 and will support it. I look forward to

seeing the detail of the Government's accessibility road map, and a step change in the speed of delivery under the Access for All programme.

2.45 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose*—

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Graham Leadbitter.

Graham Leadbitter: The SNP supports the Bill and the Government's position on the Lords amendments, mainly because the SNP Government in Scotland have already driven forward with public ownership. Sadly, without full and normal powers of independence—those will come in due course—the Bill is the current means to support and underpin those actions by the Scottish Government.

I accept the Secretary of State's position on Lords amendment 1. To take an example from my constituency, Inverness Airport station was opened relatively recently, and that adds time to the journey between Inverness and Aberdeen. Kintore station in Aberdeenshire was also opened, adding time to the overall length of the journey, but I do not think anybody would dispute that those are good improvements to the railway. They open up the railway to far more people, meaning that more people are using the line, spending money on rail services, and taking cars off the road, even if the overall journey time has not been reduced. Therefore the definition of an improvement in performance is really important, and the amendment gives no indication of how that will be dealt with. For that reason, the SNP does not support it.

We agree that Lords amendment 2 could result in further loss to the public purse and the paying of excessive fees over an extended period. We want that money to come back to the public purse so that it can be reinvested in the railway and increase the usage of our trains. This is not the 1980s. There is a lot of talk about going back to how things were prior to privatisation, but governance and scrutiny are now in a very different place from 40 years ago, and we should acknowledge that. A railway that is publicly owned might bring about a real and sustained age of the train, which we might recall from our youth, with real infrastructure investment like that seen in Scotland. We want to continue to do more of that. That will drag people back on to the railways and move them off the roads, which will contribute to our efforts on climate change and gently improve people's lives. That is why we support the Government's position on the Lords amendments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Member for Derby North would have been called sooner if she had been consistent with her bobbing, but I know she has been here throughout the debate, so I call Catherine Atkinson.

Catherine Atkinson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to speak in favour of Lords amendment 3 and the public sector equality duty. I welcome the Government's plans for an accessible road map, and the fact that they will work with disabled communities to ensure that the

Bill properly meets the needs of people with disabilities who travel on our trains. In the other place the Minister for Rail noted that although some changes can happen quickly, such as the map, others take longer due to the longevity of rolling stock.

I encourage the Government to work with rolling stock manufacturers to formulate a plan as to what changes need to be made to our trains, so that they can be modernised to ensure that future generations of stock serve the disabled community. Given the direction on accessibility, sustainability and affordability, I know that not only the east midlands rail cluster that my constituency is in but the whole industry will be inspired to be the first, so that other countries will want to follow. I hope that Lords amendment 3 will encourage all those who are championing improvements for our disabled communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Secretary of State to wind up.

Louise Haigh: I thank all Members for their important contributions. Let me start by echoing my hon. Friends' frustration with the Opposition's position. I sat for two and half years in the place of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), begging his predecessors who sat in my current seat to take action on performance on behalf of passengers, so forgive me, but I will not be lectured by the party that gave Avanti West Coast a nine-year extension. I will certainly not be lectured about putting ideology before the interests of passengers. This Bill is one step towards the biggest reform of our railways in decades. It will put passengers first, and I look forward to debating with all Members of this House as the railways Bill is introduced and passes through the House.

I appreciate the constructive way in which the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) approached the debate. As I set out in my opening remarks, I am concerned about potentially perverse incentives. We have already published our six objectives for the railway in our "Getting Britain Moving" White Paper, which cover reliability, affordability, efficiency, quality, accessibility and safety. I hope that he and other Members will accept that those objectives adequately and comprehensively support the objective of putting passengers first.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) for his passionate defence of the Government's position and his comments on the ideological position that the Conservatives have pursued. He exposed the huge flaws in their argument as they attempt to frustrate the Government's progress on this important reform.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) gave a passionate account of the impact of the poor performance of the railways that we have inherited. It cuts entire communities off, and he outlined the importance of having an accountable railway system, which these reforms will deliver by having a single point of access to Great British Railways, through which Members across this House and, crucially, local people through their local leaders can hold the railways to account.

There were powerful contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) and the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) on Lords amendment 3, which will be

transformative in ensuring that the railways are accountable under the public sector equality duty, that we lift our ambition and aspiration for our railways, and that passengers, particularly those with accessibility needs, are at the heart of this reform.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter), who spoke for the Scottish National party. I agree wholeheartedly that we are not going back to the '80s or to British Rail—I am obviously far too young to remember it anyway. This is not Network Rail 2.0 or British Rail rebooted; this is an enormous once-in-a-generation opportunity for a new organisation with a new culture and a new ethos, bringing a genuinely new era for our railways. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) for her consistent passion and contribution on behalf of the wider supply chain. I can happily commit that we will work with rolling stock manufacturers as part of our accessibility road map.

On that note, I ask the House to support the Government's position by rejecting Lords amendments 1 and 2 and accepting Lords amendment 3.

Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 344, Noes 172.

Division No. 44]

[2.53 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	Blackman, Kirsty
Adam, Shockat	Blake, Olivia
Akehurst, Luke	Blake, Rachel
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Bloore, Chris
Aldridge, Dan	Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Bonavia, Kevin
Alexander, Heidi	Botterill, Jade
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Ali, Rushanara	Brash, Mr Jonathan
Ali, Tahir	Brickell, Phil
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Bryant, Chris
Anderson, Callum	Burgon, Richard
Anderson, Fleur	Burke, Maureen
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Burton-Sampson, David
Arthur, Dr Scott	Butler, Dawn
Asser, James	Byrne, Ian
Athwal, Jas	Byrne, rh Liam
Atkinson, Catherine	Cadbury, Ruth
Atkinson, Lewis	Caliskan, Nesil
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Bailey, Olivia	Campbell, Juliet
Baines, David	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Baker, Alex	Carden, Dan
Baker, Richard	Carling, Sam
Ballinger, Alex	Charalambous, Bambos
Bance, Antonia	Charters, Mr Luke
Barker, Paula	Chowns, Ellie
Barron, Lee	Clark, Feryal
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Coleman, Ben
Baxter, Johanna	Collier, Jacob
Beales, Danny	Collinge, Lizzi
Beavers, Lorraine	Conlon, Liam
Begum, Apsana	Coombes, Sarah
Bell, Torsten	Cooper, Andrew
Benn, rh Hilary	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Berry, Siân	Costigan, Deirdre
Betts, Mr Clive	Cox, Pam
Billington, Ms Polly	Coyle, Neil
Bishop, Matt	

Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Downie, Graeme
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gethins, Stephen
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Lamb, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadbitter, Graham
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Logan, Seamus
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran

Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Scrogg, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Wishart, Pete
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Mr Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh

Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdoch, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake

Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John

Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
 Jerome Mayhew and
 Alicia Kearns

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Clause 1

PROHIBITION ON FRANCHISE EXTENSIONS AND NEW FRANCHISES

Motion made, and Question put, (That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2.—(Louise Haigh.)

The House divided: Ayes 350, Noes 108.

Division No. 45]

[3.6 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris

Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun

De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Downie, Graeme
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gethins, Stephen
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadbitter, Graham
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Logan, Seamus
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Medi, Llinos
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris

Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, Emma
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scroggham, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Wishart, Pete
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib

Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Mims
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian

Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 McMurdock, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:

Jerome Mayhew and
 Alicia Kearns

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 3 agreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendments 1 and 2;

That Louise Haigh, Kate Dearden, Julie Minns, Liam Conlon, Mark Ferguson, Gareth Bacon and Zöe Franklin be members of the Committee;

That Louise Haigh be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(Christian Wakeford.)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Infected Blood Inquiry

3.21 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Infected Blood Inquiry.

I am grateful for this opportunity to come before the House to update it on this vital issue and discuss the findings of the infected blood inquiry's final report. We are now almost six months on from the publication of that report. I am pleased to have the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne) with me on the Government Front Bench today. He will lead on the elements of the inquiry report that are matters for the Department of Health and Social Care. We are as one in our determination to drive forward this vital work and deliver action on the findings of the infected blood inquiry's report. That is the very least that the infected and affected victims of this appalling injustice deserve.

As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, I have made a number of statements to this House regarding the progress the Government have made on the compensation scheme. Today is an opportunity to go beyond that and cover the wider issues raised in Sir Brian Langstaff's report. I am grateful to colleagues across the House for their engagement on this matter. I know that we are united as a House in seeking to deliver justice, in so far as it is possible, for this terrible scandal. We will not shy away from the appalling findings of the inquiry's report and the horrors that have been inflicted on the infected blood community. I reiterate my thanks today to Sir Brian Langstaff and his team for that comprehensive report. Crucially, I thank the community themselves. I recognise the anger and the mistrust that many, quite understandably, hold towards public institutions that have let so many people down so badly.

When the infected blood inquiry reported in May, the now Prime Minister and I were clear that an apology is meaningful only if it is accompanied by action. It is action that we are taking. That is why I was so determined to move quickly to establish the infected blood compensation scheme and why I expect to see payments begin by the end of this year. The Prime Minister committed to delivering the Hillsborough law to help address the institutional defensiveness so powerfully exposed by Sir Brian's report.

Today, I want to update the House on the work we are driving forward across the other key findings of the report to do everything possible to ensure that an injustice such as this is never allowed to happen again. I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor provided, for the very first time, specific funding for the compensation fund: £11.8 billion in the Budget. That makes clear the scale of this Government's commitment to justice, and I am proud that we are driving that work forward. Compensation delayed for generations will be delivered.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): My right hon. Friend rightly pays tribute to Sir Brian Langstaff. Everyone should be grateful to him for what he has done. In recommendation 14 of his second interim report, he was quite clear that the compensation body should be at arm's length from Government and

[Clive Efford]

chaired by a completely independent judge with sole decision-making powers. Do the Government accept the core of that recommendation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Infected Blood Compensation Authority has operational independence. The Government have stewardship over the amount of money allocated. As my hon. Friend will appreciate, the £11.8 billion is a huge and substantial commitment. I do not pretend for a moment that any amount of money can actually provide recompense for the scale of the injustice, but at the same time it is an indication of the commitment—from the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and across the Government—to deliver justice.

In saying that, I should say that I am grateful for the work and co-operation of hon. Members across the House. In particular, I once again thank my predecessor as Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), for his efforts in government. As I indicated in the debate last week, I look forward to continuing to work in that spirit with the new shadow Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), on this hugely important issue. I also thank my ministerial colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), and the former Member for Worthing West. Their tireless campaigning and representation of the community's interests over so many years has been invaluable.

Much progress has been made in responding to Sir Brian's report, but much more remains to be done. I will set out the Government's fuller response to the recommendations to the House in line with the timetable Sir Brian set out, but I hope in the course of this debate to assure right hon. and hon. Members, and most importantly those in the community, that we have listened, we have learned and we are taking long overdue action.

The inquiry's report is persistent in uncovering the truth, unshakeable in its honesty and damning, frankly, in its criticisms. It is absolutely clear that fundamental responsibilities of patient safety in healthcare were repeatedly ignored, and that

"what happened would not have happened if safety of the patient had been paramount throughout."

The culture of wilful ignorance runs through the report, and continued to proliferate as the scandal developed. It speaks to Governments across decades and a state more focused on discharging its functions, whatever the risk and whatever the cost. The report chronicles suffering of almost unimaginable scale: thousands of people died prematurely and continue to die every week; lives completely shattered; evidence destroyed; victims undermined; families devastated; and children used as objects of research.

It is a truly horrifying injustice.

However, Sir Brian's report goes much further. He lays bare the institutional defensiveness that existed within the Government, and indeed the civil service, which led to the truth being hidden for so long, compounding the pain and the injustice. Sir Brian highlights

"the consequences of civil servants and ministers adopting lines to take without sufficient reflection, when they were inaccurate, partial when they should have been qualified, had no proper evidential foundation...or made unrealistic claims that treatment had been the best it could be."

These actions are the very antithesis of public service, and that is why I know there is such collective determination to learn the right lessons and to act on them.

There is so much that can be said about the volumes of evidence that Sir Brian has uncovered, and I know that during this debate many Members will raise vital issues, but let me be absolutely clear: the report details utterly unacceptable failings on a chilling scale, and this Government will do everything in their power to address them. Through acting on these lessons, we must ensure that all those who have suffered, and those who have campaigned, have not done so in vain.

Let me now turn to the 12 recommendations that the inquiry made in its report. First, I will touch briefly on the progress that has already been made. I know that Members on both sides of the House are keen to hear the details of what the Government intend to do in response. The recommendations are wide-ranging, and are being given full consideration. As I have said, I will provide an update to Parliament by the end of the year against each and every one of those recommendations.

I will begin with compensation. I have already updated the House on a number of occasions on the progress that is being made. I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to the debate on the regulations that we have made to establish the Infected Blood Compensation Authority and the core route for compensation for infected people, but I am also grateful, crucially, for the support there has been throughout the House to ensure that the delivery of compensation is not delayed in any way by Parliament.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): What assurances can be offered that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has sufficient staffing and resources at its disposal to meet expectations of the swift payments promised by the Government?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I can assure the hon. Lady that the Government will ensure that the authority has the support it needs. I expect it to be making the first payments to infected people by the end of the year, and to start making payments to affected people next year. Further regulations will be required for people who are affected, but that will not disturb the timetable that I have set out. I intend the second set of regulations to be in force by 31 March next year. More than £1 billion has already been paid out in interim compensation, and the Government have opened applications for interim payments of £100,000 to the estates of deceased people who were infected with contaminated blood or blood products and have not yet been recognised.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): Last week a constituent came to my office whose mother had died 50 years ago, eight months after a blood transfusion she had received when giving birth to her fourth son. When the family went back to collect the medical records, they found that they had all been destroyed. When we talk about a cover-up, they rightly make that link. Is there anything the Government can say to reassure my constituent that her case will be heard?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Infected Blood Compensation Authority will obviously take—and I know this because of the discussions I have had with Sir Robert Francis—a sympathetic view of the level of evidence that will be required. Sometimes the problem is that the issues complained

of date from so long ago, but another chilling aspect of this scandal is, in some cases, the wilful destruction of documents. That is something that we have to take into account when it comes to securing justice for people. I have had the privilege of meeting several members of the community, and I am grateful to them for continuing to campaign on this issue. Let me also openly express my gratitude to Sir Robert Francis and David Foley of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority for continuing to work with the community to drive that delivery of compensation forward.

Ending the defensive culture in the civil service and Government is a cultural change that should unite all of us throughout public life. That is why work is under way across Government to strengthen responsibilities relating to candour and transparency for public servants. In the King's Speech that opened this Parliament, the Government set out their commitment to legislation to introduce a duty of candour for public authorities and public servants, and the Prime Minister confirmed at the party conference that such legislation would be delivered. He said:

"It's a law for the sub-postmasters in the Horizon scandal. The victims of infected blood. Windrush. Grenfell Tower. And all the countless injustices over the years, suffered by working people at the hands of those who were supposed to serve them."

He also said that the Hillsborough law would be introduced to Parliament before the anniversary of that event, on 15 April next year.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): One of my constituents contacted me recently to talk about the death of her husband, who contracted hepatitis C as a result of infected blood. The impact on her and her family has been massive, even with the interim payment that she and they have received. Can the Minister confirm that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has been established and is undertaking the necessary work to deliver payments to victims of this injustice as soon as possible?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I can indeed confirm that. The authority is working in a way that will allow it to scale up as quickly as it possibly can. The need for speed in delivering compensation payments is paramount.

Memorialisation will be really important in how we remember the victims of this scandal. Sir Brian Langstaff makes a compelling case about the need to recognise what happened to people, and for it to be recognised by future generations. Officials have begun the necessary work to respond to Sir Brian's recommendations on memorialisation, and we recognise that this is an incredibly sensitive issue that we need to get right.

Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations call for fundamental changes to the way that politics and Government operate, and for one of the largest compensation schemes in UK history. That is entirely in line with the scale of the injustice that he has uncovered. Given the scale of the recommendations, I am committed to updating formally on them within the 12-month timeframe set out by Sir Brian Langstaff, but I assure Members of this House, and, indeed, the infected blood community, that we will drive forward this vital work. We will deliver the changes that are needed, which will stand as a testament to the bravery and determination of people who have been so badly failed.

I pay tribute to all those who fought so hard to bring us to this moment. Their efforts are monumental, and we commit again today to ensuring that they have not been in vain. I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the shadow Minister, I wish to make a short statement about the House's sub judice resolution. I understand that several legal cases relating to contaminated blood products have not yet concluded. However, given the public interest in this issue, Mr Speaker has exercised his discretion to allow reference to specific proceedings where necessary, as they concern issues of national importance.

I call the shadow Minister.

3.40 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The infected blood scandal is one of the most painful and shameful chapters in the history of the British state. For decades, hundreds of individuals with bleeding disorders and other conditions were infected with HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C due to the use of contaminated blood products such as factor VIII and factor IX, which were often imported from overseas. Not only were those infections preventable, but warnings from the medical community were ignored by successive Governments and the national health service.

The victims and their families have endured unimaginable suffering, including the loss of loved ones and social stigma, and, tragically, many have even been blamed for their own illnesses. The health service that was supposed to treat them, heal them and look after them, and the parts of the state that were supposed to protect them, betrayed them. The institutions of this country failed the victims and their families at such a scale that it is almost beyond comprehension.

I am pleased that this subject has been brought forward to be debated today, because a subject as important as this deserves to be thoroughly discussed in the House. As this is my first debate as shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office, I want to put on the record that although there will be much that the right hon. Gentleman and I disagree on, this issue is not one of them. He can be sure of our support as he works to put right a historical wrong, which continues to have a devastating impact on families across the country. This issue is simply beyond party politics. I thank the Paymaster General for updating the House today, and for the tone and tenor that he has already struck in this place since the general election.

The infected blood inquiry, established in 2017 by the former Prime Minister Theresa May, was only started because of the tireless efforts of victims and their families, but it has shed a horrifying light on the true scale of the tragedy. I echo the Paymaster General's thanks to Sir Brian and his team for the great service that they have given in conducting the inquiry. It stands as a testament to the power of the victims' voices and to the need for transparency, justice and accountability at all levels.

Although I am here today on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, I want to reiterate the words of the previous Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who apologised on behalf of not only the previous Government, but Governments stretching back to the 1970s. I know

[Mike Wood]

that this sentiment is shared by the current Leader of the Opposition and the whole of our party. We are truly sorry that successive Governments and the NHS failed to listen to medical experts, victims and their families, and the inquiry reveals a decades-long moral failure at the heart of our national life. A great many of its victims and loved ones sadly died before they ever saw the truth being acknowledged. I am pleased that this Government and the previous Government have publicly recognised the scale of the damage and acknowledged the mistakes, and, most importantly, are now taking steps to try to make amends and provide support and compensation for the many victims.

We on this side of the House will continue to support the Government's ambition to make the first payments before the end of this year. It is important that the Government are pushing ahead with the compensation scheme, which is of the size and scale that is rightfully deserved by the victims, including those who are sadly now deceased, and their families, and that it will take into account all the medical, financial and emotional suffering. As I have said, the Minister will have our full support on this side of the House. An apology is, as he has said, meaningless without not just redress but redress at speed.

In addition, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be working further with the Health Secretary to help implement stronger medical screening protocols, as well as safety measures to ensure that the UK's blood supply continues to be safe and free from contamination. A scandal like this cannot be allowed to happen again, so the Government must continue to ensure that the global standards for blood safety are met and regularly updated. This includes improving regulations, where appropriate, around the sourcing of blood products, and constantly updating, where possible, the methods for virus detection.

It is also important that we further enhance training and education for our healthcare professionals regarding ethical practices, patient consent and the safe use of medical products. I know that a lot has changed in the national health service in the nearly 50 years since the start of the scandal, but a key aspect of this total failure was the lack of informed consent and the failure of healthcare professionals to adequately communicate the risks associated with treatment.

As the inquiry has shown, there were numerous cases of disrespectful attitudes towards infected patients, which is completely unacceptable. Patients were often blamed for their condition or treated as though they were a burden. As the inquiry has recommended, training must include the ethics procedures as well as patient-centred care. This scandal, sadly, is a painful case study on what happens when this is not the case. Medical staff in the NHS should always approach patients with dignity and empathy, as we know they almost all do on a daily basis. They should ensure that all risks and benefits are clearly communicated and that the rights of patients are upheld.

Adding to this point, and perhaps more broadly as a society, we must continue the great work of recent years on destigmatising those with conditions such as HIV and hepatitis—I note the exceptional work of the Terrence Higgins Trust on the former in particular. As has been said, the victims of the infected blood scandal were

victims not only of the NHS and the many Governments' failings, but of social stigma and discrimination. As the inquiry found, they faced vilification despite the fact that many had received contaminated blood products through the same NHS that was blaming them through no fault of their own. I encourage the Government to continue with public education campaigns to combat the stigma surrounding blood-borne viruses and HIV, as well as implementing better protections in the workplace and public life, so that we can be sure that those infected are not subject to the pain of further discrimination.

I would like to put on record my own thanks to the brave victims and their families. As I said at the start of my speech, we would not be here today if it was not for them and for their campaigning; their hard work; their faith to keep going when nothing seemed to be changing; and, when the message simply did not seem to be getting through, their relentless will to fight, knowing that a great injustice had been done; and their love for their friends and family members, many of whom are sadly no longer with us today, who are all impacted by this terrible situation. Their courage is truly awe-inspiring, and no amount of compensation will ever undo the great tragedy, so great is the pain and suffering they have been through.

I sincerely hope that they will have some peace one day; peace in the knowledge that their Government and their health service have listened, and that all their hard years of campaigning, and the abuse and vile vitriol that many have faced, were not for nothing. In the end, after far too long, they have indeed been heard, and because of all their combined efforts and sacrifices, we can now come together to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

They have moved the nation and this Parliament with their deeply personal stories, and we are all deeply sorry for everything they have been through and for everything and everyone they have lost. I thank them all for their extraordinary bravery.

3.50 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): In the past three years alone, I have spoken in this House at least 10 times about the delays that the victims of contaminated blood have faced in obtaining the justice and compensation they deserve. Progress has been painfully slow and, as my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General said, there is much anger, frustration and mistrust for us to deal with, as it has not gone away. It has not been diluted by the general election, and those seeking compensation are rightly angry and mistrustful.

In May 2024, the inquiry found that more than 3,000 people had sadly died as a result of this scandal. Roughly one victim dies every two days, many without receiving compensation. I would not like to calculate how many people have died since I first spoke about contaminated blood in the House. My right hon. Friend mentioned further legislation and, between now and then, more people will sadly pass on as a result of this scandal.

I appreciate that my right hon. Friend has had only a few months to try to rectify the consequences of the previous Government's slow response to Sir Brian Langstaff's demands. Again, I urge my right hon. Friend to do everything in his power to ensure that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority hires the staff needed

to address the challenges and to design the procedures required with the utmost urgency. I am sure that my right hon. Friend has got the message.

I have spoken in the House many times of my constituent Sean Cavens, who was one of the youngest people in the country to be infected with hepatitis C as a result of being given contaminated blood. He has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of fellow victims of the scandal. Many people have died waiting for justice.

At the current rate of settling claims, which is another huge issue, victims and others are concerned that many more people will die without seeing a ha'penny of compensation for themselves or their families. They question whether the Government are acting quickly enough, with only 270 claims expected to be dealt with by the end of the financial year and more than 4,500 claims in limbo. I share their concerns; I am not sure if that is good enough.

Sean is now 43 years of age. He was infected with hepatitis C and other viruses in 1983. He wonders where he fits in the selection process. He will not be alone in wondering whether he must simply hang on and hope to survive long enough to see justice done for him and his family.

While the scheme currently has no effect on payments made through the infected blood support schemes, that will cease to be the case in the new financial year. I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister will review that approach and extend the deadline, so that people who receive payments after 31 March 2025 do not see that deducted from compensation through the new scheme. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister consider that point?

Fundamentally, Sean and others are concerned that those currently on the infected blood support schemes are not automatically being offered the core route payment. They wonder why they cannot be offered a lump sum payment equivalent to payments up to the average life expectancy of 86. They are also concerned that the rates of compensation to be offered are rumoured—I emphasise the word “rumoured”—to be only 20% of current annual payments. I am sure that will be outlined by my right hon. Friend in his winding-up speech.

The uncertainty about the compensation scheme's date of infection criteria is causing concern for victims. The burden of proof for those who were infected after screening for relevant viruses began is deemed by the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to be “higher”, but without any clarification on what that actually means in practice. Will the Minister provide such clarification? Screening began for HIV in November 1985 and for hepatitis C in September 1991, but for hepatitis B it was as early as December 1972. As I mentioned, Sean was infected with hepatitis B in 1983. He needs to know how that will affect his final compensation. For instance, will the IBCA take into account that the screening test for hepatitis B in 1983 is estimated to have been only 43% effective? Will the IBCA recognise that victims were treated for hepatitis C with the retroviral drug Interferon, which has well known serious side effects on patients' mental health? Will that be reflected in their compensation?

Will the Minister confirm that Sir Brian Langstaff's recent guidance, contained in his letter dated 13 November 2024, regarding the siblings of victims who deserve compensation, will be accepted by the IBCA and reflected in any compensation scheme that it designs? Will, as

Sir Brian has recommended, any family member whose relationship was “so close” to the victim that damage to their own mental or physical health caused by witnessing their sibling's suffering was “reasonably” foreseeable receive full compensation, if they were so damaged? It has been reported that the IBCA will only compensate siblings of victims if they lived with the victim in the family unit for a full two years. Will the Minister ensure that that arbitrary restriction is not contained in any IBCA compensation scheme?

Will the Minister confirm that the family of any victim who dies before his or her application to the IBCA has been completed will receive full compensation? There are indications that the IBCA interpreted the inquiry's final report as saying the contrary—that it intends to pay only those who live long enough to receive a final reward. That cannot, in any way, shape or form, be correct. It is not fair and it is not just.

Will the Minister ensure that those who, as children, were purposefully infected with contaminated blood in the name of medical research are awarded enhanced punitive levels of compensation, to reflect the country's abhorrence at such horrific criminal behaviour, carried out by medical professionals who had sworn to dedicate themselves to healing the sick? That is one thing I just cannot understand. The whole tragic scandal is an absolute disgrace, but it is really abhorrent that this great country of ours experimented on little children. Those children, many of whom have not survived, deserve the compensation. How much they should be awarded is obviously to be determined, as has been stated, but bearing in mind the abhorrent nature of what we have done as a nation, I ask the Minister to ensure it is enough.

The infected and contaminated blood scandal is just one of far too many injustices in the UK in recent decades, in which powerful people have treated institutional reputations, career prospects and, in a number of cases, profits as being more important than working-class lives. Hillsborough, Orgreave, the postal service Horizon scandal and Grenfell all share this shameful characteristic: each one sent out a message that ordinary working-class lives do not matter. The Minister can take this opportunity to show that this Labour Government think that the lives of ordinary people matter by ensuring that the victims of contaminated blood products receive just and meaningful compensation without any further unconscionable delay.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.2 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this incredibly important debate. I begin by paying tribute to all those who had their life destroyed by the infected blood scandal, and everyone who has campaigned for justice. They include my constituent Gary Webster. For those who are not familiar with his story, Gary was born with haemophilia, and at the age of nine he was sent to Treloar's college, a specialist boarding school in Hampshire. His parents hoped that the school's on-site medical facilities would enable Gary to lead as normal and happy a childhood as possible. All the boys at the school and their parents trusted the doctors who saw them implicitly, but in fact, the boys were being given contaminated factor VIII blood products imported from the US. Gary was in his final

[Liz Jarvis]

year at school when he was told that he had been infected with HIV/AIDS and hepatitis, and that there was no guarantee that he would be alive in six to 12 months. Of the 122 haemophiliac boys who attended Treloar's between 1973 and 1986, 80 have since died.

The infected blood inquiry report by Sir Brian Langstaff found that

"deaths, illness and suffering were caused needlessly to people with bleeding disorders by...Treating children at Treloar's with multiple, riskier, commercial concentrates, prophylactically and as objects for research"

and

"Treating children unnecessarily with concentrates (especially commercial ones) rather than choosing safer treatments."

One can only imagine the pain of the survivors and all the families, and it beggars belief that it has taken so long for them to get justice.

The thousands of victims of the infected blood scandal and their families from across the UK have been waiting far too long for justice, accountability and compensation. The Liberal Democrats welcome the introduction of the infected blood compensation scheme. We are glad that it will bring the victims of this gross miscarriage of justice, including those who were infected and those who have been affected, closer to the justice that they deserve. It is crucial that this compensation scheme is implemented as quickly and effectively as possible. We are also backing calls by the survivors for a duty of candour on all public officials.

The infected blood scandal campaign organisation Factor 8 has highlighted that the guidance on the Infected Blood Compensation Authority website states:

"Should an eligible affected person die during the application process to the Scheme, their compensation award will not be paid. This is in line with the Inquiry's recommendation."

However, Factor 8 has examined the inquiry's second interim report, and in the summary of conclusions, on page 14, at conclusion t), Sir Brian Langstaff says:

"Where an affected person who has not made a claim dies, the sums that they might have received if they had claimed should not become part of their estate."

The key wording is

"who has not made a claim".

Will the Government update their policy and ensure that all affected persons who make an eligible claim have their claim honoured? That is important for those affected who are elderly or ill, and are concerned that they may not live to see the end result of the claim process. I hope the Minister will look at that as a matter of urgency.

The infected blood scandal has highlighted the importance of robust blood safety measures and tools. Will the Government look into the merits of pathogen inactivation technology to ensure that no one else unnecessarily suffers from infected blood, and that we have a safe, reliable supply of blood products?

I spoke with Gary Webster on Friday, and as he put it,

"the whole process needs speeding up".

After so many years of secrecy, deceit and delay, the Government must ensure full transparency about the progress of the scheme, and open, ongoing communication

with all those affected. As for the families who have been impacted by this appalling scandal, please give them a national memorial, and reassurance that measures will be put in place to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Michael Payne to make his maiden speech.

4.6 pm

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): It is the honour of my life to speak for the first time in this House as the Member of Parliament for my home town of Gedling. To be given the opportunity to represent my neighbours and the place I am proud to call home in the greatest democratic Chamber in the world is a tremendous privilege and responsibility. To the people of Gedling who sent me here to speak up for them, thank you. I am eternally grateful for their support and trust. In my time in this House, I shall work tirelessly to repay that trust, representing each and every one of them to the very best of my ability.

My immediate predecessor was Tom Randall. He and I had our differences, but the fact that two young boys who grew up in Arnold and attended Redhill comprehensive school went on to represent their home town in Parliament says so much about the power of education and the value of our democracy, both of which must be cherished and protected. In particular, I thank Tom for his work in standing up for Hongkongers in Gedling and across the United Kingdom. At the count on election night, I promised that I would continue that important work, and I am pleased to be able to restate that promise on the Floor of the House today.

In 1997, Gedling elected its first Labour MP, my friend Vernon Coaker, now Lord Coaker. For 22 years, Vernon served the people of Gedling with distinction. He was widely respected across this House, just as he is now in the other place. As a kid growing up in Gedling, I was inspired by Vernon visiting my school, so I would like to place on record my thanks to Vernon and his wife Jackie for their service to Gedling.

Since the general election, as I have listened to inspiring contributions from Members across the House, I have been constantly reminded that the privilege of being elected to this House brings with it a duty to speak up for those who feel voiceless, powerless and ignored—people like my auntie, Tara Payne, whose first husband, Thomas Muir, died on 1 August 2013 at just 55 years of age, a victim of the infected blood scandal. Thomas and tens of thousands of others lost their life because their country failed them. It is only because of the courage, perseverance and resilience of those affected and their families that this Government finally committed to compensating them for this horrifying injustice. The victims of the infected blood scandal learned through heartbreaking experience that the words of Martin Luther King are as true today as when he first spoke them:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Thirty-six years ago, if you had told the young working-class boy growing up in a terraced house in Arnold, just outside of Nottingham, that he would one day be representing the place he owes everything to in the United Kingdom Parliament, he would never have believed it, and I still do not today. The values that our great

country and this Parliament stand for, and the parliamentarians and trailblazers who have gone before us, mean that kids from backgrounds like mine can achieve their dreams and ambitions, irrespective of their birthright. During my time in this House, I promise to do all I can to ensure that children in Gedling and across our country have the best possible start in life and are given the support and education to realise their dreams and their full potential, because if we are not here in this House to leave a better society for future generations, what are we here for at all?

I am only able to stand here and speak from these Benches today for three reasons: a loving family, an excellent education and a wonderful community. Let me begin with the community that I am proud to call home. Gedling is a constituency that may not be known by its name, but it certainly should be known by its nature: a beautiful collection of towns and villages to the north-east of the city of Nottingham and bordering the banks of the River Trent. It is surrounded by the historical footprint of the ancient Sherwood forest and the rural beauty of Nottinghamshire county.

My home town of Arnold is a market town with a proud history of hosiery. It was the centre of the framework knitting industry in the 19th century, and the site of the first frame-breaking incident of the luddite riots in March 1811—not that I agree with the rioters' view on technology in the workplace, but their cause, increased pay and conditions and improved living standards, is just as important today as it was then. That is why I am proud to serve as part of a Government who are introducing the biggest advance in workers' rights for a generation.

The town of Carlton was once home to a thriving textile industry, and is famous for its brickworks, as well as being home to the late, great actor Richard Beckinsale. It is now primarily residential, as is the smaller railway town of Netherfield, the beautiful village of Colwick and the bustling high-street community of Mapperley and Porchester. Gedling is also home to several picturesque villages that form part of rural Nottinghamshire: Burton Joyce, Stoke Bardolph, Lambley, Woodborough and the former mining village of Bestwood, where the original 1876 Victorian winding engine house still stands in its full glory, thanks to the work of the winding engine house volunteer group and Friends of Bestwood Country Park.

At the heart of the constituency is the historical village from which the constituency took its name: Gedling. It is home to All Hallows church, whose beautiful spire was an inspiration to one of the architects of this Palace, Augustus Pugin. All Hallows stands proudly in the landscape of its surroundings and at the foot of the former Gedling colliery. Gedling colliery was one of the most important collieries in Nottinghamshire, and was known as the pit of nations in honour of its diverse workforce, including from the Windrush generation. It was there that my grandad served as a coal miner. I still remember the tear in his eye when, on the 25th anniversary of the colliery's closure, I accompanied him and his fellow former coal miners on a visit to Gedling country park, which now stands in the place of the colliery, and which I was proud to play a part in creating as deputy leader of Gedling borough council. The miners of our past powered this country's future. We owe them an

eternal debt of gratitude. That is why I am so proud to be part of a Government who are finally ending the miners' pension injustice.

My family have lived in Gedling for generations. They mean everything to me. I grew up in a home where hard work, respect, playing by the rules and honesty meant everything. Those are values that matter to most families, and they are the values that will guide me during my time in this place. Growing up as the son of a mechanic, watching my dad work hard at three jobs just to keep a roof over my head and pay the bills, I learned the meaning of hard work and the true meaning of family. Growing up watching my grandad and nana spend many years raising much-needed funds for Derrymount school—a school for children with special educational needs and disabilities—I learned the meaning of compassion and never looking down on anyone. Growing up as the son of a mum who went without so that I could be the first in my family to go to university, I learned the meaning of true love and selflessness.

My politics and beliefs are important to me, but, like millions of other people across this country, nothing is more important to me than my family. It is for that reason that making this maiden speech has not been easy. There are two people I desperately wish were watching from the Public Gallery today: John Herbert Waplington and Joan Edna Waplington—my grandad and my nana. Their love and compassion, and the values that they and my parents taught me, are the reason I am who I am today. They are the reason I believe in helping others. My nana and grandad were so proud to see me elected to serve my home community on Gedling borough council in May 2011, and they would have been even prouder to see me elected to this place to serve our home community. It is true that love really is the greatest gift that one generation can leave to another, and I am forever blessed to have been loved by them both.

Gedling is full of people with compassion and a desire to serve others. I have had the privilege of meeting so many of them over the years. Helen Lloyd and the volunteers at Arnold food bank; Tina Simpson and the team at Netherfield St George's Centre; Nathan Kenney and Mapperley All Stars; Joel Baldry and the team at the Ark in Gedling; the Friends of Gedling Country Park; Daybrook bowls club, which is celebrating its centenary this year; the wonderful musicians of Burton Joyce community brass, and many more extraordinary people and groups, make Gedling such a wonderful community. Gedling is also home to brilliant schools with inspirational teachers and staff. I spent many happy years at Richard Bonington primary school and Redhill comprehensive school. Like so many others across the country, I owe so much to my teachers for their encouragement, support and inspiration.

Being elected to serve my home town in this place was the second greatest moment of my life. The first was marrying my husband, Kyle Robinson-Payne, on 1 July 2022. I am delighted that he is in the Public Gallery today, just as he has been with me on every step of my journey to this place. We live in a world where far too many people continue to be persecuted for who they are and who they love. For as long as I am in this place, I will use this platform to speak up for them and their rights. As our much-missed and beautiful friend Jo Cox taught us, whatever our differences, we always have so much more in common than that which divides us.

4.18 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): May I first commend the hon. Member for Gedling (Michael Payne) for his maiden speech? I think we can all agree that it was very moving, and that he does great credit to his family and constituents. I apologise for not having been here for the first few minutes; I was running over from Portcullis House.

I had the privilege of being the Minister with responsibility for the infected blood compensation scheme. On 21 May, I brought the scheme to the Floor of the House, speaking from the Government Dispatch Box. In the six months prior, I had been determined—not knowing when the election would be called—to do everything I could to bring that compensation scheme to life after so much delay. That delay has been, as the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) rightly said, totally unacceptable for too long.

In my remarks to the House, I will pay tribute to the victims, explain some of my experiences as a Minister, and make some observations on what lessons and next steps may need to take place. First, I acknowledge the work of my successor as Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds). He has done virtually everything that I would have done, had the electorate overall given us a different outcome. Though I will always be available to members of the public to ask questions in this House, as is my responsibility as an Opposition Back-Bench MP, I believe that he is doing everything he can to move the scheme forward as quickly as possible, and I will come on to the mechanics of that in a moment.

During the month of May, I participated in 18 meetings. I met representatives of 40 groups in London, Leeds, Birmingham, Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh. Each meeting was a profoundly emotional and moving moment for me and the officials who accompanied me. I met people who had gone through unimaginable suffering and uncertainty for not just a matter of months, but, in some cases, a number of decades. Some had been infected through their marriage. Some had been born as haemophiliacs and had been treated in ways that had the consequences we have spoken about today. Some had transfusions when giving birth to their children. Some received blood transfusions from imports that proved to be defective. Some had hepatitis C or hepatitis B. Some had HIV. Many had a combination of different conditions. Some had been family members of those who had been infected. It was a humbling but tragic set of moments. In those conversations, I looked those individuals in the eye and said, “I am deeply sorry on behalf of the British state.” It was a great privilege to be asked to do that on behalf of His Majesty’s Government, but we must learn lessons collectively from the enduring failure to come to terms with what has happened over the course of so many Governments and so many decades.

Many of the individuals I met had campaigned relentlessly, and I pay tribute to them today. I will not draw on individual names, because there are just so many people, and it would be unfair to all those whom I met. It was right that we brought forward a second interim payment, and it was right that we recognised the affected communities as well as the infected communities. It was tragic to see that there were sometimes disputes and divisions among many of the communities, because

so much time had passed and so much fear existed around who would be looked after first, and about whether there would therefore be constraints on the money available.

I will step back to last year. After the Remembrance weekend in 2023, I was asked to move from my long tenure in different roles in the Treasury to the Cabinet Office to become Paymaster General. The year before, I had had some exposure to the challenge of making provision for compensation, and my immediate predecessor, the former Member for Horsham, had done a lot to try to ascertain what had been done collectively in government. The truth is that there was a very wide envelope: it may have been between £2 billion and £20 billion, and it had moved around according to what analysis could be done. That was because the parameters were fundamentally going to be based on how much compensation we would pay the different groups who were infected and affected. My predecessor started that process, and I pay tribute to him for what he did.

I also pay tribute to the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), who said to me when I left the Treasury, “You have one duty in that job. That is a moral duty to resolve the compensation scheme.” I honestly believe that he was critical in ensuring that we got to where we did on 21 May. I pay tribute, too, to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), who did so much. At every question session, she sat just behind where I stand now, challenging me on what I was or was not doing. As the Paymaster General knows too well, there are always constraints; his officials will say, “I wouldn’t say that at this point.” We are always trying to say more, but I was acutely aware of how frustrated all the communities were, and that unless what I said was crystal clear, it would set off another storm of speculation on social media.

On the advice of my officials, I appointed Sir Jonathan Montgomery, who in the early months of 2024 assembled a small group of technical experts to advise on how to translate the compensation study of Sir Robert Francis into a full compensation scheme. We asked how, across the five heads of loss—injury impact, social impact, autonomy, the care award and the financial loss award—we could put a number on the relative suffering across all the different conditions. How could we put a number on the loss of a normal life, the loss of the ability to work, the loss of a sense of respect from the community in which people lived, and the stigma that other Members have referred to?

It was suggested to me at the time that I had done it the wrong way round—that I should have engaged with the community. I took the view that we were not going to get this resolved if we had done it that way round, but I knew it was critically important for all the communities to be engaged with, and I always had that expectation and intention. That is why, when I announced the scheme to the House on 21 May, I established a series of engagements where Sir Robert Francis met representatives of the infected and affected communities to go through the scheme and establish where changes needed to be made. Those engagements happened in June. I pay tribute to my successor, the Paymaster General, who engaged with the output of that work and—as per the timetable that had been agreed—made virtually all of the changes that were requested.

Today, understandably, I hear speed being urged across the House—that this should happen quicker to get the payments made. I totally understand that, and to some extent, I agree with it. However, I want to reassure the House that David Foley, who is now setting up and, I think, heading up the Infected Blood Compensation Authority as an arm's length body of Government, is a superbly experienced civil servant. Neither I nor the Minister could have written the cheques ourselves to set up the processes and systems for evaluating entitlement and getting money out as quickly as possible. For those infected individuals who are alive—around 4,000—speed is obviously an imperative. The reason I took the decision on the £210,000 second interim payment, alongside the £100,000 from October 2022, was that I received advice, and I pressed and challenged my officials to get to a number that was the maximum that everyone would receive.

However, it is of course wholly necessary not just to get a first tranche fully paid out, but to get everyone else paid out. I acknowledge that there are questions about how to verify the date of infection, but despite all the bad things that have happened, obviously we must reconcile speed and effective decision making with ensuring that we pay the people who are entitled to the payments.

In Sir Brian Langstaff's seven-volume report, of which I went to see the publication on Monday 20 May, he made a number of recommendations, and the Minister has indicated the Government's willingness to honour those—the national memorial, and biannual meetings with those who have suffered in order to get to grips with the duty of candour. I want us as a House to be clear and honest about what we are really asking for, because the report spanned decades and different generations of Ministers, civil servants and orthodoxies in the medical profession. We need to encourage curiosity among individuals who see things going wrong but are held back from being truly candid because there tends to be group-think which prevents a thorough interrogation of what should be done.

Distortions happen, recollections have varied and medical professionals would make different judgments now from those they would have made at different points in the past. We need to be wise about what the duty of candour will look like, but we need to grasp the core argument that Brian Langstaff makes: we have to change the culture across Government and public service and in politics. I hope the Minister does not move on, but if he does, I hope he moves up. If he stays in his position, however, he can have an impact over time. When Ministers move, they have a received wisdom from their officials of a previous iteration, and we sometimes need to encourage the infusion of new Ministers to ask challenging questions and allow progress to be made.

I have profound concerns about public inquiries. A lot has been said in recent months about the multiple public inquiries that have occurred—how we can make them more systematic and aligned; the secretariats and the processes they run can obviously be streamlined. They are presented as the only cathartic method for the British state to come to terms with something that has gone wrong, and they are often not constrained in any way. They are typically led by retired High Court judges, and I have nothing against them, but we sometimes need to broaden the expertise such as by having economists and other people involved in looking at these things.

I pay tribute to Brian Langstaff, because the inquiry was a massive undertaking, but seven years is an enormous amount of time. I am not an expert on this, but let us think about the read-across to the covid inquiry. Many people have expectations of what that will deliver, but in other countries such analyses have brought forward recommendations and changes much more quickly. We have to get the balance right—not to cover up anything, but because we end up putting things into the long grass for so long. We as a Parliament need to come to terms with that.

I have probably spoken for too long, but I hope I can be forgiven for doing so given the role I had. I want to pay tribute to the work that has been done by those responsible for bringing us to this point. I pay tribute to all the victims and campaigners who have been so determined despite numerous knock-backs from Governments over the years. My own Government absolutely have to take their full share of the blame. Interim arrangements were made and ad hoc compensation schemes were set up, but responsibility was not taken by the British state, and it is absolutely right that we have done so now.

I do not think that social media is very helpful in trying to come to terms with the trauma of all this, or in giving clarity to those who need it. I wish David Foley and the IBCA well. I think there will be a series of letters about how to interpret individual recommendations, but he is setting up an efficient mechanism which, once it starts delivering, will deliver more and more rapidly—I am convinced of that. For some it cannot come soon enough, but I hope that very soon we can draw the right enduring lessons from this national scandal, and I hope it will never happen again.

4.35 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Michael Payne) for his maiden speech. It is clearly special for him to represent the area in which he grew up. He has so much personal experience and memories, and he spoke passionately about his family. I am sure they are very proud of him today, and that he will be an excellent representative for Gedling. I remember his Labour predecessor well. We were both elected on the same day, and perhaps I can challenge my hon. Friend a little and say that he has big boots to fill as his predecessor was an excellent Member of Parliament.

It is worth reminding ourselves of how we got to this stage. In spite of everything we have heard about the excellent progress being made in response to Sir Brian Langstaff's report, there is still an enormous amount of frustration out there among victims and their families. In the 1970s and 1980s, as many as 6,000 people with haemophilia and other bleeding disorders were treated with factor concentrates contaminated with HIV and hepatitis viruses. Almost all of them were infected with hepatitis C, and around 1,250 people, including 380 children, were also infected with HIV. Some of those unintentionally infected their partners or other family members. More than three quarters of those infected with HIV have since died, as have around one third of those infected with hepatitis C. Of those still alive, many are in poor health due to liver damage, or from living with long-term HIV. Additionally, around 26,800 people were given blood transfusions that were infected with hepatitis C. All that was avoidable.

[Clive Efford]

By the 1970s, blood and blood products were already known to transfer viruses. It was known that the use of pooled blood products significantly increased the risk of infections. Those risks were ignored by leading clinicians, Ministers and civil servants, and they failed to take appropriate action to end the use of those products and ensure the use of safer products. Pharmaceutical companies and leading clinicians did not share appropriate information about risks with patients and patient groups. They failed in their duty of candour. It is no wonder that the victims of those crimes mistrust the state—the state that should be there for them, to protect them and be on their side.

We are here because, despite many dying along the way, and with one victim dying every four days, the surviving victims refused to give up. They refused to be defeated. They won their battle, and over and above that they won the right to be included in the decisions, as Sir Brian Langstaff made clear in his report. All along, the victims have been lied to, refused access to information, their records have mysteriously gone missing, and more recently they have found themselves repeatedly let down by the Government, it has to be said, in the form of the Cabinet Office.

The Cabinet Office controls the decisions of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. I hear what the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office said to me earlier about operational independence, but ultimately the Cabinet Office is making the decisions and victims are not included in the way that Sir Brian recommended. Victims feel that decisions are being made without their involvement. Those suffering with hepatitis C feel particularly excluded and do not feel that their suffering has been fully recognised in the compensation scheme.

In his interim report, Sir Brian Langstaff said that there should be an arm's length body. I will not read the whole recommendation, but he said:

"I recommend that an Arms Length Body...should be set up to administer the compensation scheme, with guaranteed independence of judgement, chaired by a judge of High Court or Court of Session status as sole decision maker".

The report goes on to state that the body should

"involve potentially eligible persons and their representatives amongst those in a small advisory panel, and in the review and improvement of the scheme; and...permit the hearing of applicants in person."

None of that is part of the compensation process, yet it is clearly there in the report, and it was Sir Brian Langstaff's intention that the victims should be involved much more.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In terms of listening to the victims, there was an extensive consultation exercise during the general election campaign. My predecessor set that up, and it continued under the aegis of civil servants in that period. Afterwards, 74 recommendations were made, having listened to the community about changing the scheme. The Government accepted the implementation of 69 of those 74 recommendations. I suggest to my hon. Friend that that shows listening to the concerns about the scheme's original formation. In respect of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, I strongly recommend that he, as chair of the APPG,

meets Sir Robert Francis and David Foley. He can speak to them about precisely the involvement of the infected blood community, which is hugely important.

Clive Efford: I am fully aware of the consultation that took place, but what Sir Brian Langstaff describes is the ongoing involvement of the victims in the process, by their being part of an advisory panel and continuing to advise the compensation board.

I know that David Foley was at the conference at the weekend for the organisation that represents people with hepatitis. That organisation was pleased with the discussions it had with him, but none the less and in spite of that, people who were at that conference have since made clear to me that they feel frustrated and that, ultimately, the Cabinet Office is in control of the decision-making process. My right hon. Friend may take issue with that, but he should take note of the fact that that belief is out there, and we need to deal with it.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is right to labour the point. All that we are hearing from the representative groups—those who make sure that they represent all those in the infected or affected communities—is that they want consultation with Government. They just want to be listened to and properly consulted as all these regulations are designed going forward. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not understand the Minister's sensitivity around all this. He has to be aware—I am pretty certain that he is—that there is this sensitivity when it comes to the community.

Clive Efford: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I am trying to make my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General aware of the strength of feeling out there that needs to be addressed. We will not satisfy people about the process unless we address those concerns.

One thing driving that concern is that the current process is not what was described in Sir Brian's report, and it is not what was expected at the time he published his reports. The victims and their representatives feel excluded. On top of that, they feel enfeebled because of the lack of resources for advice and advocacy. There is further to go, if the victims are to have complete faith in the process. There is frustration that the people they have been battling against have been put in charge of the reparations. Surely my right hon. Friend can see their concerns. The death rate is now one every three days, and the increase in the rate is largely due to the fact that those with hepatitis have been suffering with long-term chronic liver disease. The Red Book for the Budget sets out that compensation will be paid over five years. At that rate, another 600 people will die without getting justice. The Treasury must not become another reason for justice for victims being delayed. Will my right hon. Friend guarantee that that will not be the case?

I am aware that Sir Brian Langstaff has written to my right hon. Friend about the rule on siblings of 18 years of age at the time the sibling passed away. Will he explain to the House—or write to me on this—exactly where that ruling came from? It does not seem to appear in any of the recommendations or in Sir Brian's report.

I have spoken before about the £15,000 offered to former pupils of Treloar school, which they consider derisory. It is another example of what happens when victims are excluded from the process.

I also draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the report of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, which is an excoriating criticism of the Cabinet Office. It exposes what it describes as a lack of clear and understandable information in the explanatory memorandum and a lack of preparedness for delivering the compensation scheme. The Committee doubts that the Cabinet Office will be able to pay compensation by the end of the year. Is he confident that the Committee is wrong and that payments will be made by the end of the year?

Lastly, large amounts of money were made by pharmaceutical companies and others while victims were being exploited and, in some cases, even being experimented on. That did not come about because of mistakes; they were deliberate actions, which in many instances were criminal. The British taxpayer must not pay the full cost alone. Those who made money from this appalling scandal should be required to make a significant contribution. In spite of what my right hon. Friend may consider a negative speech, I welcome the progress that we have made, but there is much further to go to deliver the justice that Sir Brian Langstaff set out in his report.

4.46 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is always difficult to follow somebody who has said almost exactly what I had intended to say in my speech. What I will try to do for you, Madam Deputy Speaker, is rephrase it in a way that will hopefully be helpful and useful to the House. I am grateful to follow the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), who raised a number of really important issues about which those on the Government Front Bench should listen carefully.

I noticed the Paymaster General's reaction to the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst; he has got to relax a little. We are trying to help and to be the voice of the community, who are telling us these things. They want to be engaged and properly consulted with. They want to be part of the process. That is what they are telling the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, and that is what we are hearing from all the representative groups right across the United Kingdom. Perhaps the Paymaster General should just take on board some of the things that we are trying to put forward about the feelings and opinions of a lot of the community and what they are saying to us directly as a consequence of what is happening.

I congratulate the Government on honouring their commitment to have a debate. It is a pity that we did not get the full day, but one thing I have noticed is that it is getting a bit quieter in the Chamber when we have these debates and statements. I hope that there will not be fatigue when it comes to discussing important issues relating to the infected blood scandal, as we as a House will need a detailed approach to the ongoing compensation schemes.

I really hope that we will not get to a stage where the Government see this as "job done" and another box to be ticked, thinking, "There we go: infected blood is dealt with and we can now move on." It is incumbent on

all of us who were involved in the campaign to ensure that we continue to press the Government, ensuring that we talk up on behalf of our constituents and those impacted and affected.

I really hope that we start to see some newer Labour Members, in particular, taking a bigger interest—we used to have really involved, detailed debates where people turned up and played their part—as I am sure that many of them represent people who are impacted and affected. It would be good to see a few of them turn up.

John Glen: I think it is a good sign that there are fewer Members of Parliament in the Chamber, because it shows that there has been meaningful progress. I do not see tetchiness from the Minister; what I see is somebody who has listened carefully to the representations of the community and acted on them. I accept and acknowledge that there are outstanding matters, but actually, when infrastructure has been set up—in some cases for 20 years—to campaign, it can be quite difficult to adjust to delivery mode.

Pete Wishart: There is no one in the House more experienced than the right hon. Gentleman. I pay tribute to what he did in government and how he brought this issue forward. He is right; we must be a bit careful, but all of us involved are just trying to take the debate forward. He is possibly right that there may be satisfaction that things have moved on and we are at a different stage in the campaign, but it is still important that we continue to ask questions of Government. That is what we are all trying to do in this debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I will, so long as the hon. Member does not poke me in the back, as he did the other evening.

Jim Shannon: My constituent has mentioned an outstanding issue that must be addressed. Current proposals only include siblings who were under the age 18 and lived in the same household as an infected person for at least two years after the onset of the infection. The requirement for siblings to have lived in the same house should be removed. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the loss and suffering of a sibling who did not live in the same household for two years is no less than that of a sibling who did?

Pete Wishart: I do, and I am happy that my speech has provided the hon. Gentleman with another opportunity to make one of his interventions, as he does in practically every debate that he attends. He makes a good point, which the House has now heard.

I want to reinforce the point about IBCA's arm's length process. The hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst is right that it is abundantly clear, in both the interim and the full report, that there is a general expectation that IBCA will be truly at arm's length, divorced and separate from the Government. We cannot get into the head of Sir Brian Langstaff when he designed the scheme, but I think that he expected there to be a proper arm's length body that would be responsible to Parliament, not Government. What we have is the other way around,

[Pete Wishart]

and that will probably be okay, but for extra security, those of us who are interested would like to make sure that it is properly independent, according to Sir Brian Langstaff's original intention.

As long as there is a sense that this is a Government-influenced body, there will be continuing suspicions—from a community that has been let down so badly for decades by decision makers and Government—that this is the same old approach that we have seen in the past. I ask the Minister to find a way to ensure that we get that proper judge-led, arm's length body that is responsible to us as the representatives of the people of the United Kingdom, and not just exclusively to Government. I have no issue with all the tributes that people have made to David Foley and all the other people involved, because they have been fantastic, but we are already beginning to see Cabinet Office-based appointments coming through for IBCA. Again, we are not really seeing consultation with those at the sharp end of all this. We need some more of that.

Sir Brian Langstaff said that two expert panels—one representing the legal parts of the issues, and the other the health parts—would work almost simultaneously and in concert with each other, to feed back to the chair of the board. It would be good to see that starting to emerge. He also said—not as clearly, but it was intended—that an expert panel would comprise those representing the community, both the infected and the affected. They would have a similar role to feed into the chair of IBCA. I hope that some of that will happen.

There is widespread support for what this Government have done, and £11.8 billion is a significant sum that everyone is confident will go most of the way towards meeting the compensation expectations, but there are issues. Members have touched on some of them. I will rattle through them—I do not want to detain the House and I have raised them before—but I just want to make sure that we do touch on them.

The hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst is absolutely right that the £15,000 for those caught up in unethical research is far too low. This is coming back to all of us again, so I really hope we are able to revisit that. Then there are those who were treated with interferon as a matter of course. They have not been properly and fully included in the compensation scheme, so again I hope the Government are able to look at that. There is concern that hepatitis C payment bandings do not match and reflect the suffering caused. That is what I have been hearing from constituents involved in the campaign, so I hope the Government will be able to look at that.

There is the issue about bereaved parents and children, who will receive very low compensation payments if they are not the beneficiary of the estate of bereaved family members. I think that could be addressed. No compensation has been paid to siblings for their loss and suffering if they were over 18. Compensation for lack of earnings should consider future career progression that was prevented from occurring, rather than simply existing careers that were cut short. Lastly on my list, which is not long but is substantial, is the fact that the need for a date of infection is causing a great deal of anxiety and confusion among the community.

I believe that most of those issues could be properly addressed with the full involvement of community representatives if they have full and open access to Government Ministers and are able to play their part in designing any future schemes. The community should be involved to provide valuable information and advice on the most pressing issues that need to be addressed.

One issue that I want to turn to in the bulk of my remarks is the part of Sir Brian Langstaff's report that has probably received the least attention thus far: the "why" of all this. Why did this happen? Why were we misled for such a long time? We have had useful discussions about compensation and it is great to see that progress, but unless we explore and examine the reasons why it happened, we will not learn all that much as we go forward. The duty of candour Bill, which I will come on to, is a useful, positive and helpful development, but unless we have a proper examination of what went so badly wrong, then I am not entirely sure we will learn the full lessons of what happened over the past couple of decades.

The inquiry uncovered shocking revelations about the Government's handling of the issue, including failures to provide full information to those affected by contaminated blood and the delay in acknowledging the extent of the problem. Sir Brian's inquiry found that both Ministers and civil servants adopted lines to take, or strategies to avoid providing full and candid responses to the crisis. That lack of openness contributed to the suffering of those impacted, leaving many victims and their families feeling unheard and ignored for decades. Those of us in the House in the noughties who were raising these concerns and issues on behalf of constituents who presented in our surgeries remember being dismissed by "nothing-to-see-here" letters from successive Health Ministers. I would not say we were fobbed off exactly, but we were certainly told that there was nothing we should really be concerned about. With all the serious issues that were raised, there was a real sense that none of it was being taken seriously.

Sir Brian Langstaff recommended that Ministers and senior civil servants should be legally required to provide candour and completeness in their responses to public concerns. That brings us to the duty of candour Bill promised by the Government. I think all of us involved in this campaign were delighted to see it featured in the King's Speech. We look forward to the Government introducing it. Most of the Bill is predicated on the response to Hillsborough. Key lessons have been taken from the infected blood scandal, and from other scandals such as the Horizon Post Office scandal. All of us who have been involved in these campaigns will look forward to our opportunity to debate and design the Bill.

A statutory duty of candour for all public servants, including civil servants and Ministers, would hold public officials accountable for their actions and require them to be transparent in their dealings with the public. Such a law would compel civil servants and Ministers to act with integrity and fully disclose all relevant information, even when it might be uncomfortable or damaging to the Government's reputation.

In the course of the Langstaff inquiry, Andy Burnham pointed out that during the tainted blood scandal and even earlier, in various materials, the Government had frequently employed the phrase

"no wrongful practices were employed".

In our debates on this issue, I often refer to Andy Burnham's evidence to the inquiry, because it was particularly compelling and very helpful. I probably received more letters from him when he was Health Secretary than I did from any other Health Secretary. He talked about the letters that he used to send to Members of Parliament, and expressed his concern about the inaccurate lines provided by departmental officials. He believed that those lines perpetuated false narratives that failed to address the needs of those whose lives had been so devastatingly affected. He emphasised that the Government's response to the infected blood issue was driven primarily by a fear of financial exposure, and he believed that explained the comprehensive failure to address the concerns of the victims over five decades.

I have called for a further investigation or inquiry into why this was allowed to happen in a major Department of State, given that it clearly led to many of the difficulties that we are now addressing through various compensation schemes. Much of the debate has touched on the Langstaff inquiry, but a separate look at what went wrong would be useful and cathartic for the Government, and would help them to shape their duty of candour Bill. I am not here to criticise them, although it sometimes sounds as though I am; I think that they have made a good start with all this, and we are all grateful for the £11.8 billion for the compensation schemes.

I became involved with this issue when a couple of my constituents were caught up in it. I remember those early days when we did not know what was going on, and the letters from the Department of Health made the situation all the more confusing. Over the decades, I have come to know members of the community. Some have come down to the House of Commons, told their story, and asked us to question Ministers. I pay tribute to Haemophilia Scotland and the Scottish Infected Blood Forum, which have made excellent representations on their behalf. The fact that we are discussing the issue now and have been able to see a clear way forward is largely due to the case that they put, and the fact that they were able to confront Members of Parliament, the Government and Ministers, and we should give them due credit for what they have done to bring us here today.

5.3 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): I want to record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) and the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for their tireless efforts in seeking justice for the victims of the infected blood scandal. The issue has had an impact on countless families, and I welcome the Government's ongoing work to address it with the seriousness that it deserves.

Today I want to share the story of Jean Anziani, the mother of one of my constituents. Jean was a nurse who came home with a cut on her hand after a patient struggled during a blood draw, causing the glass syringe to break. Within just over a week, her health had declined so rapidly that she was rushed to hospital, where her children, 17-year-old Kenneth and 15-year-old Christine, had to wear full protective gear just to visit her. By then, Jean was unable to recognise her children. Only 13 days after receiving that cut, she passed away at the age of just 39. Christine shared that story with me; it was truly heartbreaking, and brought a tear to my eye.

Jean had contracted hepatitis B. The current support schemes focus only on those diagnosed with hepatitis C or HIV, leaving victims like Jean without the acknowledgment or the compensation that they deserve. The schemes were originally designed to address the most commonly identified infections, but they have unintentionally excluded people infected with hepatitis B. As a result, Jean's daughter Christine is unable to receive any compensation or recognition for her loss. I would be extremely grateful if the Paymaster General could look into this matter for me and have further discussions.

5.4 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): This truly has been one of our nation's worst ever scandals and injustices. Thousands of patients contracted HIV or hepatitis viruses, or both, from contaminated blood, and this was not an accident or something that could not be avoided. Nor was it down to pure negligence or people not being sufficiently attentive, although there was plenty of that. The report is clear about the "systematic, collective and individual failures"

in identifying and managing infection risk from blood products, and in the response of the health service and the Government.

This issue affects the constituents of very many MPs, but it has a particularly tragic depth of salience in my constituency. East Hampshire is home to Treloar's, a non-maintained special school and college that delivers outstanding education, nurture and care to children with some of the most profound disabilities. However, it was also the place where there was a terrible concentration of victims of this scandal. Because 40 to 50 haemophiliac patients were there at any one time, it came to be seen as a unique opportunity to study the disease, and a haemophilia centre was established at the nearby hospital in 1972. Towards the end of the 1970s, the hospital still catered to the needs of the wider community, but the haemophilia centre was relocated to the school grounds. The inquiry report dedicates an entire chapter to the experiences of pupils at Treloar's, and to how research objectives often outweighed the best interests of the children. The inquiry heard that of the 122 pupils with haemophilia who attended the school between 1970 and 1987, only around 30 remain alive.

I have spoken to a number of my infected or affected constituents over the years, including Adrian "Ade" Goodyear, a man who speaks with remarkable dignity and determination. I will quote briefly from his most recent message to me:

"The camaraderie and unity of we former pupils—well the handfuls of us that are left... We have stuck together to get to the truth due to the promises and pacts we made towards our lost when they were living, as well as for their families."

We have been waiting a very long time for the truth about a string of failures, omissions and wrongdoing, starting with the failure to achieve domestic self-sufficiency, and the decision to allow the importation of higher-risk factor VIII concentrates, which in many cases were procured via commercial arrangements that made infection more likely because the products came from high-risk groups, including prisoners and drug users. We were complacent about the risks of hepatitis C and slow to respond to the risks of AIDS, and we permitted research to be conducted on people without telling them—or, in the case of children, their parents—or informing

[*Damian Hinds*]

them of the risks. In some cases, we failed to tell people that they were infected, thus closing down the possibility of their managing the progression of their disease or its transmission to others. In other cases, people were told starkly and insensitively about a diagnosis of HIV. There was defensiveness, a lack of candour, the active destruction of evidence and, of course, the absence of a meaningful apology or redress for so many years.

In his statement on 21 May, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) rightly accepted Sir Brian Langstaff's recommended five categories of pay awards and confirmed additional interim compensation payments. There now needs to be clarity about the basis on which claims can be assessed, and the speed of those payments. Campaigners have raised concerns about the information sources available, and I hope that the Minister can provide assurance that steps will be taken to ensure that there is easily accessible information to support people making compensation claims.

I have been asked by former pupils at Treloar's to ask about the compensation amounts of £10,000 and £15,000, which have been mentioned by the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford). It would be helpful to have on the record, and in *Hansard*, an explanation of those sums of money.

We have talked about memorialisation and the national memorial. The inquiry also recommended that there be a memorial dedicated specifically to the children at Treloar's, and that it be provided at public expense. I hope that the Minister can provide an update on that, either in his closing remarks or in follow-up correspondence.

I hope that one of the positives that can come from this generation will be the instituting and institutionalising of a duty of candour, in both letter and spirit. The report recommends a review of the existing statutory duty of candour, which requires NHS organisations to be open and transparent about mistakes and harm in care, and requires leaders in health service organisations to be personally accountable for responding to concerns about safety. I think we all welcome the Bill appearing in the King's Speech. For this generation, we need to make the duty of candour an established principle across the whole of public service, which is something in which we are all involved, in our different ways, as parliamentarians and members of the Government.

Nothing can ever make up for all these failings, but we can at least ensure that the compensation scheme works as well as it can, and that we as a state face up to our failings and truly learn the lessons, so that we can have confidence when we say, "Never will this happen again."

5.11 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): We must always remember that at the heart of any public scandal, there are people. So many of my hon. Friends this afternoon have told tragic stories, but also stories of courage and humility. Alongside other brave, courageous victims and their families, Becca, Jess and their siblings have campaigned for justice for people infected and affected, in loving memory of their father, Joe. Like me, they welcome the decisiveness and commitment from this Government. With families like them in mind,

I would like to ask the Minister to outline when he expects the second set of regulations to be laid before Parliament, how victims and their families can continue to be involved and informed of progress, and how claims can be made.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

5.12 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I should probably start by paying tribute to my predecessor in this role, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who has also been Paymaster General. He has done so much on this issue, and I will touch on his comments a bit later. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) for opening for the Opposition today. I will just mention to the Paymaster General and other Ministers in the Department that they obviously continue to have our broad support.

We should never stop acknowledging the size and scale of this issue, which is almost unimaginable to Members from across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire said that we needed to see justice, and that is what all the victims would like. I thank all Members who have spoken in this debate, and agree that what happened to the victims of the infected blood scandal was profoundly wrong and should never be repeated.

The establishment of the inquiry in 2017 was the right first step towards doing what we can to repair the damage, inasmuch as that can ever be possible. I am pleased that the work started by the previous Government to adopt the recommendations put forward by the inquiry is being continued by this Government. I must point out, though, how important it is for the Government to stay on schedule and start delivering payments through the Infected Blood Compensation Authority by the end of the year, as the Paymaster General outlined. We will ensure that that happens. It is incumbent on us all in this House to do our part to restore trust in our state, because that has been damaged, as well as thousands of lives. Ensuring that those payments go out, as was committed to, is an important part of that. More broadly, I will reflect on the challenges ahead.

Before I do that, I will touch on a couple of remarks made by Members in this debate. The hon. Member for Gedling (Michael Payne) made his maiden speech, and he spoke kindly of his predecessor, who is a good friend of mine. He probably does not remember, but I campaigned against him back in 2014 when my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was a young by-election candidate. Today, the hon. Gentleman spoke very strongly of his personal story. He clearly has the clarity and volume of a town crier so, even if we do not always agree with him, we will certainly hear him from this side of the Chamber. I welcome him to his place.

The hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), who speaks for the APPG, and the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) talked about different aspects of this subject, but they each mentioned the children who were used for research. I am sure that the Minister will want to reflect on that in his closing comments.

All three hon. Gentlemen touched on the patient's voice. One recommendation is that the patient's voice should be improved with the routine collection of patient satisfaction data, and with funding for patient advocacy groups and charities. Perhaps that is one way that patients and those affected could continue to be involved.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) mentioned the obvious impact of the cases in his constituency, as well as the need for a memorial to those affected. I hope the Minister will touch on that, too.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury touched on broader issues not just for the Cabinet Office but for Ministers in all Departments. It is important that we encourage curiosity rather than group-think. We all have a duty of candour and, thinking of those who work for us, it can sometimes be difficult in a political environment. The Minister should also reflect on my right hon. Friend's point about public inquiries. It is obviously important to get to the truth, but the Cabinet Office might want to reflect on the speed at which we do that, as well as on who can achieve it and how.

We have heard about the need for stronger medical screening protocols and safety measures to ensure that such a scandal can never happen again. It is also important to acknowledge the need to continue interrogating our risk assessment and mitigation measures more broadly across our health services and the Government.

While I settle into my new role as shadow Paymaster General, I look forward to working with the Government to see what assistance I can offer, as well as fulfilling the Opposition's job of holding them to account. I will do so in the same spirit shown by Labour Members on this issue. I will hold the Government to account to ensure that we do all we can, across all areas of Government, to implement the strongest possible risk assessment, mitigation and response procedures. It is important to have considered communication with affected groups, too.

The inquiry acknowledged that there was a failure within the NHS to properly implement informed consent and to ensure that patients, at all stages of the healthcare system, understood how their personal care related to the larger risks. While I appreciate the good work being done to make progress on this issue, we must not take our eye off the ball on any aspect of the Government's work.

I am sure that there is still work to be done in the Department of Health and Social Care, in the Cabinet Office and across Government to ensure that informed consent and patient communication are working properly at all times, and to ensure that Government frameworks in our health and care system are being properly and continually evaluated so that the need for holistic informed consent does not fall victim to a complex and often disjointed system. That requires not only work on the health and care front, but on broader governance frameworks and improved cross-Government collaboration.

That speaks to the core issue raised today, with which I agree: the Government must continue to ensure that global standards for blood safety are met and regularly updated, as hon. Members have mentioned. I look forward to working in opposition, alongside hon. Friends in other shadow roles, and undertaking cross-party work to ensure that the regulations around the sourcing

of blood products and virus detection are strengthened. As with the other measures mentioned, I want to ensure that that is done robustly and ahead of time, and not as a reactive measure, as has sadly been the case in the past.

One of the most difficult elements of such an inquiry process is to acknowledge that, too often, we make the changes that are needed to prevent a problem only when the consequences of that problem have reached intolerable levels. We need to resist boxing the issues raised today into direct consequences for our health and care practices, when a much more fundamental interrogation of our governance and practice framework is needed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury noted.

As numerous speakers have said, the inquiry shed clear light on the continuous failure on the part of institutions to properly address the issue as it came up. In far too many cases, infected patients were distrusted, disbelieved and, at points, treated with outright disrespect. Although it is important to acknowledge the significant changes that have happened across our health systems to tackle that, we should never become complacent. We must remain vigilant about the need for medical staff in the NHS to approach patients with trust, dignity and empathy. We must ensure that our communications frameworks and staff training properly reflect those issues.

The inquiry made it clear that the victims of the scandal were victims not only of institutions, but of widespread stigmatisation and prejudice. Whatever our party affiliation, we can all agree that we should continue to progress the good work that has happened since that time and to support the fantastic organisations that continue to take on that important activism.

I put on record my thanks to the brave victims of this scandal and their families. They have stepped forward bravely and steadfastly to fight for their dignity, against the wrongs committed upon them and for proper recognition. I thank the former right hon. Member for Maidenhead for introducing the inquiry back in 2017. I also thank the inquiry leaders for the essential work they conducted, without which we would have made much less progress at an even slower pace.

No amount of compensation will ever make up for the wrongs committed and the tragedies suffered. Of course, many who have been affected are no longer around to see the small benefits of compensation. I offer a small amount of hope to those affected: I am confident that hon. Members in this House, from all parties, have heard them and trust them. We know the suffering that has been brought upon them. They have fought valiantly and relentlessly, and I hope that they can take some comfort from knowing that their fight led to the recognition of the scale of the scandal and to the action that Governments of both colours have taken to ensure such a scandal never happens again. I hope history will show that further such suffering is avoided because the victims of this scandal exposed the wrongs of the past.

In closing, I once again express my deep regret for the continuous failure of Governments over the years on this issue. I express my support for the cause of those who continue to fight. I assure the infected and affected who are still fighting, and Members of this House, that I and my colleagues on the Conservative Benches will do all we can to continue our cross-party work, which we know still has to be done.

[Mr Richard Holden]

In the relatively non-political spirit of this debate, I ask the Minister, as he continues to work with Opposition Members to address the outstanding issues for the victims and their families, to be open about making adaptations and changes to address those issues, and to ensure that in the process of undertaking compensation, we do not end up alienating segments of those involved and ignoring the suffering of those who have been affected.

I thank hon. Members who have spoken today, the victims and their families, and all those who have played their part by doing what they can to ensure that something like this never happens again.

5.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): I stand here as the Minister for Public Health and Prevention, humbled and with a large degree of humility. The Department of Health and Social Care is rightly hated and despised by the infected blood community. We let them down. For that, I am personally sorry and my Department collectively is sorry.

I say that in a heartfelt way because for the past decade and a half, both as shadow Public Health Minister and as a Back Bencher, I have raised the issue of the infected blood scandal on behalf of the campaigns and of my constituents who were infected and affected. Now that I stand here as a Minister in the Department responsible, I feel it is incumbent on me to give that heartfelt apology. It is too late coming for so many, but I hope that those who are still here and their families and loved ones will accept it in the spirit in which I give it: I am sorry. We let you down and we must make sure it never ever happens again.

I welcome the two new Opposition spokespeople, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) and the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood). I want to start in the way the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay finished, by assuring him that the Government will work collectively and constructively with Members from across the House, from whichever party they come and whichever part of the United Kingdom they represent. This is an issue that has stained the body politic of our country for too long, and it is incumbent on us to work together across parties and across artificial divisions to make sure that we get the best deal for our constituents and their families.

I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Michael Payne), who made an incredibly powerful maiden speech, setting out how he will be a champion for the people of Gedling in the years to come. The people of Arnold, John and Joan, and his husband Kyle are all rightly proud of him today, from wherever they were viewing the speech. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), who has played such a pivotal role in this campaign over a large number of years, as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Swindon North (Will Stone) and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin).

On the Opposition Benches, I thank the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who led on this matter in his former ministerial position. We thank him for his work. I know that sometimes I was frustrated with him, from just behind where he is sitting, but I appreciate the work he put in behind the scenes as well as at the Dispatch Box. The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) has similarly been a tireless campaigner, as has the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

The infected blood scandal is one of the most appalling in our nation's history. It was an institutional failure of the highest order, spanning decades. From the national health service to the civil service to Ministers across successive Governments, at every level, those the public trusted to protect them fell short in ways that were both tragic and catastrophic. They let down victims, their families and our country. In the course of this debate, we have heard the names: Sean, Gary, Thomas, Jean, Ade and Joe. They remind us of the real people—those who are deceased, those who were infected, and those who are affected. They are real people, not statistics, and it is important that we never forget that. Victims were denied the truth; many passed away before they saw justice. The state worked to protect itself, and those people paid the price.

I must echo the tributes that have been made to Sir Brian Langstaff and his team by Members from across the House. Their steadfast pursuit of the truth finally brought this decades-long scandal to light. Sir Brian and his team have set us on a path towards beginning to right the terrible wrongs that were committed. They uncovered a litany of collective and personal failures, as many hon. Members have highlighted by sharing stories from their communities and constituencies. Each one is significant in its own right and together they add up to a complete disaster.

Sir Brian found that this national scandal could have been prevented. It was already known that these treatments were contaminated, yet the warnings were disregarded time and again. People in positions of power and responsibility had multiple opportunities to halt the transmission of these infections, but, on each occasion, they chose not to act.

Many in this House have campaigned for justice for a long time, giving voice to those who had been repeatedly silenced. In particular, I wish to pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention and the Secretary of State for Wales. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I also thank the former Member for Worthing West, Peter Bottomley, and the now Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham. In this debate today, we have again heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Eltham and Chislehurst and for Blyth and Ashington, the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire, and the former Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury.

As a Government, we will do our utmost not to repeat the mistakes of the past. We were elected on a manifesto that committed to act on the inquiry's findings and to put right historical injustices. The public rightly expect nothing less of this Government than fulfilling our moral obligation to compensate victims, and we aim to do so without delay.

In October 2022, the previous Government spent £440 million on initial interim payments of £100,000 to the living infected. Following the publication of the inquiry's final report in May, a further £728 million was paid as a second interim payment of £210,000 to all UK-registered living infected victims. The Government have also committed, in legislation, to paying £100,000 to the estates of the deceased infected to recognise those who have not yet received a payment and to ensure that some of those affected—such as parents, children and siblings—are supported. That scheme opened on 24 October. We recognise that money can never make up for the heartbreak that victims and their families have experienced, and much of the inquiry's criticisms apply to the way that my Department—the Department of Health and Social Care—and its predecessors operated.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): My constituent Brendan lost his left leg while serving with the British Army in 1979. Decades later, he discovered that he had been infected with hepatitis C during the operation that saved his life. I know having talked to Brendan that, while he is pleased that the Government have committed to providing compensation, he is keen for us all to understand that, because of his community's lived experience, there is an inherent distrust of the state. His instinct on being told that the state will spit out a number is understandably not to trust the process. Will the Minister reassure Brendan that all compensation offers will include a detailed breakdown of the data and rates used to make the calculations?

Andrew Gwynne: I can give my hon. Friend and Brendan the commitment that we will do just that, to reassure those who rightly have lost all trust in public authorities, and particularly in my Department, because of the dreadful actions that led to their infection. She has my assurance that we will do what we can to reassure Brendan and many others like him who rightly have no trust left in us that we will rebuild that trust.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sorry not to have been here for the opening speeches. Does the Minister recognise the fundamental similarity between the way in which the victims of this scandal and those of the Post Office scandal, and no doubt other terrible scandals, were treated by the state? Does the Government have any plan, possibly on a cross-departmental basis, to try to educate the bureaucracy that when terribly difficult and potentially expensive things like this crop up, they should not follow this well-worn path of denial and cover-up?

Andrew Gwynne: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Indeed, it was acknowledged by my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office in his opening speech that this is just one of a number of scandals that follow a similar pattern—when the scandal has been uncovered, rather than trying to protect the victim, the state has tried to protect itself. It is absolutely crucial that the state learns not just from each individual scandal, but collectively; that it is the same mindset that has led us to all these different scandals with similar outcomes for victims. That level of learning has to be genuinely across Government, and I know my right hon. Friend will lead on that in the Cabinet Office.

The Government will set out our formal response before the end of the year, but given that there is absolutely no time to waste, I want to take this opportunity to update the House on the work already under way to address some of the inquiry's recommendations. To prevent future harm, the Department continues to explore options to enhance candour and openness across the national health service. To empower patient voices, the NHS is reviewing clinical audits related to haemophilia services to identify any gaps in patient involvement, alongside work on a new clinical service specification, which will set standards for services across England. To protect haemophiliacs, the NHS has convened an expert group to hear advice from the specialised blood disorders clinical reference group. A dedicated taskforce has been set up to consider its recommendations. The General Medical Council is working with NHS England and others to look at ways to ensure that lessons learned are reflected in training for doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals.

Let me be clear to the House: the Government do not see this scandal in isolation. Sadly, repeated patient safety failings have eroded public confidence in our health and social care system, so we are taking steps to fix the culture of the national health service. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been clear that we will not tolerate NHS managers who silence whistleblowers. Openness and honesty are vital to ensuring patient safety. NHS staff must have the confidence to speak out and come forward if they have concerns. There will be no more turning a blind eye to failure.

Our wider reforms to NHS performance will provide greater transparency for the public who pay for it. Measures will ensure that top talent is attracted to the most challenged areas, and persistently failing managers will be sacked. That is about ensuring that the right people are in post to lead our NHS with the resources they need to do their job. If we get that right, we will be able to look back on this moment as a turning point for patient safety and for leadership.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was in Committee at the start of the debate, but I did have my name down to speak. Some of my constituents were impacted by the scandal, and it has taken them this long to summon the courage to come forward. Obviously, I represent them and Northern Ireland. We have talked about the Hillsborough law and the need for a duty of candour. Does the Minister agree that it is important that that is rolled out not just in England and Wales, but right across the UK, so that, as he said, those families are never again impacted in that way?

Andrew Gwynne: I hope that I can reassure the hon. Lady that although health is devolved across the four nations, and I can speak only on behalf of the NHS in England on a number of the recommendations, both the Department of Health and Social Care and the Cabinet Office are working closely and collaboratively with Ministers in the devolved Administrations. Indeed, I and my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General recently had a meeting with Ministers from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales to talk about how to take forward the recommendations, on a four-nation basis where possible, and with mutual support across the four

[Andrew Gwynne]

nations where there are individual recommendations pertinent to the devolved parts of the United Kingdom. I hope that that reassures her that we are working together. Although I cannot comment on the changes that will be needed for health services in Northern Ireland, which are a matter for the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland, Mike Nesbitt, I am quite certain that those services will carefully and closely consider our work here in England, and the work in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We have waited too long for these actions. People have waited too long for compensation. Indeed, right hon. and hon. Members have waited too long for this debate. More than 3,000 people died before they saw justice; families and our country were let down. There was a level of suffering that is so difficult to comprehend, because questions were not asked at the time, institutions did not face up to the failings, and facts were covered up. Now we know the truth. As we reflect, we are making a concerted effort to improve, because that loss need not be in vain.

I will respond to some of the questions raised throughout the debate, and will refer to other questions directly in the relevant part of my contribution. Should I miss anything because of time constraints, I will write to Members. In opening for the official Opposition, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire talked about destigmatisation of HIV and hepatitis C. I hope that he understands that the Labour party made a clear manifesto commitment to ending HIV transmission in England by 2030. Officials at the Department of Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, NHS England and a broad range of system partners are now working together to develop a new HIV action plan, which we aim to publish by summer next year, and destigmatisation will be a key part of that plan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington asked about psychological support for family and friends. I reassure him that NHS England has established the infected blood psychological support service in England, which supported its first patients in late August. That includes supporting not just the infected, but the families and friends affected.

I want to turn to departmental failings. The report outlines a comprehensive condemnation of the organisation of blood services, licensing decisions, blood safety and patient safety, with harm compounded by the reaction and handling of Government. I again recognise humbly the criticism of the Department that I stand at this Dispatch Box to represent and its predecessors, and I am committed to ensuring that a tragedy such as the infected blood scandal can never happen again. This Government will prioritise patient safety to ensure that the NHS treats people with the high-quality, safe care they deserve.

Repeated inquiries and investigations have highlighted significant issues with patient safety, which has caused a deterioration in public confidence, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) in an earlier intervention. We must absolutely fix that. The Health Secretary has been clear that we will not tolerate NHS managers who silence whistleblowers. A culture of

openness and honesty is vital to ensure patient safety. We want NHS staff to have the confidence to speak out, and we will give them that.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) raised the question of the safety of blood products. While no medical treatment can be completely risk-free, current safety standards for blood donation and transfusion are rigorous, and England's blood supply is one of the safest in the world. Processes are in place throughout the blood donation journey to ensure the safety of blood and blood products, including the donation safety check form, testing for specific infections, donor deferrals, regulations and informed consent. According to Serious Hazards of Transfusion, the risk of serious harm because of blood transfusion in the United Kingdom is low, at one in 11,000 blood components issued.

Turning to timelines, so far more than £1 billion has been paid in interim compensation payments to victims of the infected blood scandal. As we heard earlier, applications opened on 24 October for interim payments of £100,000 to the estates of deceased people whose deaths have not been recognised. Parliament has now approved regulations that give the Infected Blood Compensation Authority the powers necessary to pay compensation through the core route to the infected, both living and deceased. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority has begun to process its first claimants under the infected blood compensation scheme.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention on the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), I asked about the siblings who qualify. One sibling seems to be worth more than another sibling, and that seems absolutely wrong. I understand that there has been no reply to that in the Minister's summing up. Maybe he is coming on to it—if he is, I apologise—but I would love to have a response, because my constituents have asked me to ask that question and ensure that we have a response.

Andrew Gwynne: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Minister for the Cabinet Office is carefully considering this matter. If the hon. Gentleman would like, the Minister for the Cabinet Office will write to him, but he is considering it.

We expect the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to begin making payments to people who are infected under the infected blood compensation scheme by the end of this year. Payments to the affected are expected to begin in 2025, following a second set of regulations.

Turning to a question raised by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire about the independence of IBCA, it is rightly operationally independent. Parliament would clearly expect the Government to have oversight of a scheme of this size and for there to be proper management, given the amount of public money going into the scheme. It is true that there are only two non-departmental public bodies that are independent of the Government: one is IBCA and the other is the National Audit Office. It is absolutely right for IBCA to have that independence.¹

Clive Efford: On that point, the National Audit Office is directly accountable to Parliament through the Public Accounts Commission. Is the intention to create a similar sort of arrangement, as envisaged by Sir Brian Langstaff, in which there is direct accountability to Parliament, rather than to the Department?

1.[Official Report, 21 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 5WC.] (Correction)

Andrew Gwynne: I should clarify for my hon. Friend that IBCA is operationally independent—that is important—but it is absolutely right that Members of this House are able to scrutinise its operations, its working and, indeed, its use of public money. We are talking about a great deal of public money, and IBCA has to be democratically accountable to this House, albeit operationally independent of Government Ministers in its day-to-day business.

Pete Wishart: This is a really important point—both myself and the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) have now raised it with the Minister. He has rightly identified the experiences of so many people caught up in this crisis, and the fact that they do not trust the Government or Government institutions. Would it not be more of a comfort to them to know that IBCA is like the National Audit Office: accountable to Parliament, rather than to Government?

Andrew Gwynne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is why IBCA is operationally independent—that is the crucial thing here. It does not have the fingerprints of Ministers all over it, because that is where the distrust comes from. It operates independently, but as a public body it is accountable to this House for how it spends that money and how it operates as an organisation. While IBCA is operationally independent to ensure a separation between Executive Ministers and the functioning of that body, it is accountable to this House. I think that is absolutely the right balance.

John Glen: I endorse what the Minister has said about the way in which IBCA has been set up. It seems to me an entirely sensible arrangement that respects the need to have some distance from Government, but clearly there cannot be a bespoke arrangement for every single entity that is set up. This was the point I was trying to make, respectfully, about Sir Brian Langstaff earlier: he did a brilliant job, but some aspects of this issue will need a slightly different judgment made by Ministers. I welcome the decision that the Minister and his colleagues have made.

Andrew Gwynne: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I hope that Members across the House can see why we have set IBCA up in the way we have. It is for precisely that reason: we have to have that operational separation from Ministers and the Executive, but there also has to be political oversight from all quarters of this Chamber, because this is a public body spending public money—and a great deal of public money at that.

As I have said, we are aiming for the second set of regulations to be in place by 31 March 2025. That will support our intention that payments to the affected begin next year. There are important details, especially in relation to Sir Robert Francis's recommendations, the majority of which the Government have accepted, that must be worked through ahead of the second set of regulations. This includes details such as the eligibility criteria for people who are affected, and how the Government should define the parameters of the definition of unethical testing.

Turning to payments, the selection of those who have been contacted for first payments was a decision for the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. The first group of people who are receiving invites to claim are: first, those who are known to be already eligible for compensation; secondly, those registered with support schemes, which means we are likely to have much of the necessary information

for these people already; thirdly, those from areas across the UK; and fourthly, those who represent a range of infection types and of severity within those infections.

Let me turn to some of the questions raised about this area. The hon. Member for Eastleigh mentioned people dying before compensation is awarded. I hope I can reassure her that when a person with an eligible infection has, tragically, died before receiving compensation, we will ensure that their personal representatives can claim compensation on behalf of the deceased's estate. I hope that clarifies the point for her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North talked about the exclusion of victims with hepatitis B from the compensation scheme. People with chronic hepatitis B and those who die in the acute period are eligible for compensation, as are their loved ones as affected. I suggest that my hon. Friend writes to the Minister for the Cabinet Office with his constituent's details, so that we can look more closely at his case. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst asked whether there will be payments by the end of the year. The answer is yes, and as I have said, there will be payments to the affected from next year, when we have the new regulations in place.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire asked about the steps taken to provide accessible information on compensation. I want to spell out to him that Sir Robert recommended that there should be a higher award of £15,000 for children subject to unethical research at the school in his constituency. That is why there is a difference, which I hope clarifies that point for him. As I have said, at the start of November the Infected Blood Compensation Authority invited the first cohort of people to make compensation claims.

Candour in the civil service and in Government was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst and the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire in their contributions. The King's Speech set out the commitment to bring forward legislation to introduce a duty of candour for public authorities and public servants. This legislation will be the catalyst for a changed culture in the public sector. The Prime Minister confirmed at the Labour party conference that legislation on the duty of candour would be delivered by this Government. He confirmed that the duty will apply to public authorities and public servants, and it will include criminal sanctions. The Bill will be introduced to Parliament before the next anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster in April 2025.

In closing, today I hope the House has heard how we are starting to deliver compensation and how we are starting to respond to the inquiry recommendations. Admittedly, they are still small steps, but they are steps in the right direction. This work is far from over. We owe it to the victims and their families to see it through, and we will of course regularly update the House as this progresses. I reiterate on behalf of the Government and the Department of Health and Social Care, and as a mere ordinary Member of Parliament for Gorton and Denton, representing some of the infected and affected, that we are truly sorry. We let you down. We will learn from these lessons, and we must never ever let anything like this happen again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Infected Blood Inquiry.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for raising a point of order out of sequence, and I will explain why I am doing so. It relates to the case of Mr Alaa Abd el-Fattah and a point of order that I raised over a week ago. Some Members may recall that he is a British citizen who was imprisoned for his human rights campaigning in Egypt. He has served his sentence of five years and should have been released in September, but was not. His mother, a well-known academic at Cairo University, has been on hunger strike for 50 days. Anyone who has had any experience of hunger strikes knows that this is a critical period.

A number of us wrote to the Foreign Secretary over 10 days ago about this case, urging him to make further representations to the Egyptian Administration to secure Mr el-Fattah's release. As of close of play today, we have not received a response. Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, could I urge the Foreign Secretary to respond and, more importantly, take action? I am now fearful for the life of Laila, Mr el-Fattah's mother, because as I said, the hunger strike has entered its 50th day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): The very serious matter raised by the right hon. Member is not one for the Chair, but he has placed his concerns on the record in the hearing of the Foreign Office.

Ryan Cornelius: Detention in UAE

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

6.1 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate on a matter of great importance, namely the arbitrary detention of a British citizen by a close ally and friend of the United Kingdom. This case is deliberately being raised as we approach the national day of the United Arab Emirates, 2 December, in the earnest hope that the authorities in Dubai will consider granting clemency and pardoning Ryan Cornelius as a gesture of friendship towards our country, building on our important alliance. As Members will know, this is not the first time that Ryan's case has been raised. His name has featured in the press, and the matter has been scrutinised by the United Nations and raised by our Foreign Affairs Committee, and now by the new all-party parliamentary group on arbitrary detention and hostage affairs, of which I am proud to be vice-chair. Before we start properly, I pay tribute to Ryan's wife Heather, and her family, Chris, Diane, Gilly and Sam, who are in the Gallery.

Before getting to the details of the case, I would like to reflect briefly on the important relationship between the UAE, particularly Dubai, and the United Kingdom. The relationship is built on a long history of friendship. Since its foundation in 1971, the United Arab Emirates, particularly Dubai, and the UK have been trusted friends. The country, and the emirate specifically, have been a source of stability, economic growth, and innovation in the region, and successive Governments in the UK have been a valued partner in its pursuits. Trade between our two countries covers a variety of areas, including energy, financial and professional services, education, healthcare, infrastructure, defence and aerospace.

In an era of global insecurity, the UK and UAE have a long-standing strategic defence partnership to preserve peace and stability in the Arabian gulf. The UAE is the UK's third-largest trading partner outside Europe, behind China and the United States. More than 5,000 British businesses operate in the Emirates, and around 240,000 British nationals live and work in the UAE. Total imports and exports between the UK and the UAE reached £24.2 billion in 2023. It is a valuable trading relationship. According to VisitBritain, in 2023 the UK welcomed 477,000 visitors from the Emirates. Going the other way, there are approximately 1.4 million visitors from the UK to the Emirates every year. Those statistics demonstrate the closeness of our nations on matters of tourism, business and defence. However, I am increasingly worried that the continued arbitrary detention of Ryan Cornelius will start sending the wrong message to tourists, expats and businesses, potentially threatening our valued and historic relationship.

Before his detention in Dubai, Ryan had worked in the middle east since at least the 1980s, specialising in property and construction. At the turn of the millennium, with cheap credit, a booming market and plentiful opportunities, we all know that the Gulf began to attract many entrepreneurs, Ryan among them. He became an investing partner in three very large projects in Dubai, Bahrain and Pakistan. In the wake of the global financial crisis, Ryan's lender, a German venture

capital group, found itself unable to fund Ryan's projects. Due to the dearth of alternative funding, he found himself drawn into restructuring negotiations between that group and their lender, the Dubai Islamic Bank. These negotiations resulted in a three-year repayment schedule, secured against Ryan's businesses and personal assets. Repayments were made on schedule. The collateral provided by Ryan and his partners was considered more than enough to cover the borrowing from the DIB. Indeed, the Pakistan project that I mentioned—the Indus refinery—received two separate valuations in excess of \$1 billion.

In 2008, when Ryan was returning from a trip to Karachi to find a potential buyer for the refinery so that he could clear his outstanding debt—which, as I say, he was servicing on time—he was arrested while transiting through Dubai. He was detained and placed in solitary confinement for six weeks, and the Dubai Islamic Bank commenced seizure of his personal assets and businesses, eventually including his London home. In 2010, Ryan was put on trial for fraud. The case was initially dismissed for lack of evidence. Following a retrial, Ryan was charged with theft from a public body and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He was ordered to repay the outstanding balance and handed a \$500 million fine. In May 2018, he was issued with a 20-year extension to his imprisonment, meaning that he will not be eligible for release until May 2038, when he will be 84 years old.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I spoke to him before it. I have always been a speaker for human rights, as he and the House know. Whenever I hear stories like the one he has outlined so well, it tells me that there is injustice. The friendship between the UK and UAE does not matter; this is about justice and doing right when somebody is discriminated against. Does he not agree that the inaction of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—I say that respectfully—in respect of one of our citizens is incredibly concerning? The fact that Mr Cornelius has served his sentence, only to have the goalposts moved, does not speak of international justice, but injustice. I believe that our Foreign Office has an absolute duty to advocate for this British citizen.

Tim Roca: The hon. Member makes an important point. I will return to the FCDO in a moment and perhaps address some of what he mentioned.

As I said, Ryan was issued with a 20-year extension to his sentence in 2018. The law sanctioning such extensions was not brought in until after Ryan's arrest. In April 2022, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention completed a detailed investigation that found that the UAE's treatment of him contravened eight articles of the universal declaration of human rights, to which the UAE is a signatory. The group ruled that Ryan has been held in conditions amounting to "torture", that he had not received a fair trial, and that his detention was "arbitrary". It called for his immediate release. As things stand, he has not been released. He remains an arbitrarily detained British national in the United Arab Emirates—a country that is an ally.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and pay tribute to him for his work, not just on behalf of Ryan Cornelius but on political prisoners and the

rule of law more generally. Does he agree that it seems we live in a world where increasingly autocratic countries will take citizens of other nations into arbitrary detention, and that when it comes to the toolkit that was normally available to countries such as ours, options such as having consular access that makes a difference, and making representations, have been eroded? Does he feel that we need a new toolkit for this different landscape?

Tim Roca: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. He has also been vocal in his support for British citizens who have been arbitrarily detained, and on wider human rights issues. I commend him for his work on that agenda. The FCDO point about the toolkit is really important. The difficult question that we have to ask ourselves is: how have we reached the situation where one of our citizens is languishing in the jail of a friendly country—a close ally—with all the potential damage to UK-UAE relations that that does?

I have huge admiration for the work of the FCDO and its staff, and I know from colleagues and friends around the globe how much its work is appreciated and respected on the world stage. We have many fine diplomats and public servants, but I have to say in all candour that it has been failing for many years in its handling of state hostage taking and arbitrary detention of British nationals abroad, Ryan Cornelius included.

In the last Parliament, the Foreign Affairs Committee published a significant report with a number of recommendations, not all of which were taken up. It criticised the FCDO for its "unnecessarily defensive culture" in this area, which "impedes scrutiny", harms victims and their families and undermines public trust. The report found that previous Governments of all stripes had failed to learn the lessons from responding to such situations, and had been slow or unwilling to call out guilty countries. Our Atlantic allies, the United States and Canada, have learned those lessons, and created official roles to co-ordinate the response to state hostage taking and arbitrary detention in order to get their people home, which is, of course, a priority for all of us. Indeed, the creation of such a role was one of the Committee's recommendations to the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary.

This time last year, when the Foreign Secretary was the shadow Foreign Secretary, he committed a Labour Government to creating a special envoy for arbitrary detention and state hostage taking. I warmly welcome the Minister of State to her role—I think I can still call her a new Minister a few months into the new Government—and I know that she takes these matters seriously. I ask her to reflect back to her colleagues and the Secretary of State that we should stick to that commitment. Let us follow in the footsteps of Canada and the United States, and let us not be advised out of that promise by officials.

As I conclude, I return to the heart of the debate with one simple request to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed. As a gesture of friendship, for the continued prosperity of our countries and for our mutual security, I hope that he will grant clemency to Ryan Cornelius. The UAE's national day, Eid al Etihad, is only around the corner on 2 December. I hope that on that day of great celebration, the Dubai Government will find the good will to extend a pardon to Ryan and allow him to return home to the United Kingdom and his family.

6.14 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) for securing a debate on this difficult case. He referred to the fact that I am a new Minister—that is correct—but he is also a new Member, who clearly is doing his utmost to represent his constituents as powerfully as he can. He spoke eloquently about the case of Mr Cornelius, which I will come to in a moment. He also talked about the close relationship between the UK and the Emirates in business, tourism and defence. I agree that it is an important relationship. As he did, I recognise the many other parliamentarians who have been active on these issues, working on behalf of Mr Cornelius and his family both in this Chamber and in the other place.

The Minister for the Middle East—the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer)—is unable to take part in this debate because he is travelling on ministerial duties, so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I want to begin by recognising the awful toll that the past 16 years will have taken on Mr Cornelius, his wife and children, and the rest of his family and friends. I was humbled to hear from my hon. Friend that we are joined by some of them here this evening. I appreciate their presence.

Supporting British nationals overseas is at the heart of the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Our consular staff endeavour to give appropriate and tailored support to them and their families 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The new Government are reviewing how to strengthen our support for British nationals overseas, which includes the appointment of an envoy. We will ensure that we do as much as we can to learn lessons from what has worked and what may not have worked in the past. It is important that we draw on that evidence moving forward.

On this particular case, let me assure the House that since his detention in 2008, FCDO consular staff in the UAE have visited Mr Cornelius on a regular basis, most recently at the end of October. Consular staff here in the UK are in regular contact with his family. Let me also reassure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is so active on these issues, for which we are very grateful, that there has been ministerial activity as well as consular activity, which I will go on to explain.

On 23 October, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met members of Mr Cornelius's family. It was clear to him that Mr Cornelius's detention has had a devastating impact on them. The family has demonstrated great strength and resilience over many years, under very difficult circumstances. The Minister wanted to listen to the family during his meeting, and he made it clear that Mr Cornelius's case remains a priority for the Government, and the FCDO will continue to provide consular support to him and his family. He also reassured them that the case will continue to be raised with the UAE authorities, senior officials and Ministers. Shortly after that meeting with the family, on 30 October the Minister wrote to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, to reaffirm the UK Government's interest in Mr Cornelius's case and welfare.

The House will understand that I will not share personal information relating to Mr Cornelius's case in this place. However, I will set out the factors that have guided the response. When a British national is detained in another country, our priority is to ensure that they have access to legal representation and that their welfare needs are met by the local authorities. The Vienna convention on consular relations requires that, in providing consular assistance, we do not interfere in the judicial affairs of another state. We therefore cannot get people out of prison or interfere in criminal or civil court proceedings. Consular staff are not trained lawyers and cannot offer legal advice, but they provide information on the local jurisdiction and lists of English-speaking lawyers to support British nationals.

If there are allegations of torture or mistreatment from any detained British national, we will always offer to raise them with local authorities, with the detainee's consent, and ask for them to be investigated. Where there are concerns that legal procedures may not be being followed correctly or do not meet internationally recognised standards, we will decide our approach on a case-by-case basis. In doing so, we will be guided by the appropriate experts, including human rights advisers. I want to provide that assurance, given the broader issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield. The best interests and welfare of the detainee are at the forefront of everything we do, and that has informed the approach to supporting Mr Cornelius and his family.

I will now turn to some of the legal aspects of the case. In 2022, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention published its opinion that Mr Cornelius is arbitrarily detained, and made several recommendations. It is for the UAE, as the state detaining Mr Cornelius, to respond to those recommendations and take any necessary action. We take the working group's findings extremely seriously. Where we have specific concerns about Mr Cornelius's case, with his consent, we raise them with the UAE authorities. Mr Cornelius has local lawyers representing him in his challenge to his ongoing detention. FCDO consular staff have regularly attended hearings as observers. We are determined to continue to demonstrate the UK's close interest in this case.

Let me reassure the House that this case remains a priority for the FCDO. Our officials and Ministers will continue to support Mr Cornelius and his family as best we can. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield for initiating the debate, and others who have intervened during it.

If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, another consular case was mentioned a couple of moments before the beginning of this debate—that of Mr Alaa Abd el-Fattah. I would like to reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) that the case has been raised at the highest level, including on 14 November directly with the Foreign Minister of Egypt by our Foreign Secretary. I will of course write to my right hon. Friend, but I wanted to provide that update given that the case was mentioned a couple of moments ago.

Question put and agreed to.

6.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 19 November 2024

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

Food Banks

9.30 am

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of foodbanks.

I thank the Minister for attending, and it is a great privilege to introduce this debate on food banks under your chairpersonship, Ms Vaz. I am delighted to see such a good turnout. Food banks and the alleviation of poverty in the UK are very important personally to me, and I will champion them strongly during my time in Parliament. Food banks are, sadly, an essential service for so many up and down the UK. It is sobering to remember that this is the 21st century, yet we seem to be labouring under Victorian values at times. One in five people using food banks are in employment.

Anyone for any reason may find themselves needing to use a food bank. Unemployment, a sudden reduction in benefits, or an unexpected bill when household budgets are already stretched thin are some reasons why people need help from their local food bank. In my constituency, I pay tribute to the incredible work of Aberdeenshire North food bank and its incredible volunteers, who operate in Peterhead and Fraserburgh every week. It is part of the Trussell Trust network of food banks. Aberdeenshire North food bank opened in 2013 and distributed almost 10,000 parcels last year.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. He mentioned the Trussell Trust, which supports the largest network of food banks in the UK. The charity distributed 61,000 food parcels in 2010-11, but between April 2022 and April 2023, it distributed close to 3 million, almost a fiftyfold increase. I have food banks in my area, including the Bridging the Gap food bank operating in Glastonbury and Street, and the Milborne Port Foodshare project supplying sadly much-needed food parcels to people in my constituency. Does he agree that the necessity for such groups is a sad indictment of the levels of poverty that many people now face, and that this Government's responsibility is to ensure that their policies do not leave people hungry?

Seamus Logan: Yes, I completely agree—I suspect that the hon. Member might have seen a copy of my speech beforehand.

The Aberdeenshire North food bank also operates on the Peterhead community market garden—in partnership with Stella's Voice—which is a community food-growing space open for all to enjoy. It aims to provide healthy produce, to build confidence and to provide valuable training opportunities. It is incredible to see the grassroots enthusiasm for the project, which I am sure will go from strength to strength over the coming years. As many of my colleagues know, it is not just food that is provided at food banks, but a powerful sense of community and

much-needed support. I also pay tribute to other support services locally, notably the Food Larder in Fraserburgh, which is run under the auspices of the local community council.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In my constituency, food banks operate in every major town, including Moray Food Plus and the Badenoch & Strathspey Food Hub. Over and above that, we have community halls offering food hubs and a clothing bank for school clothing, and they provide cross-referral to the other organisations. There are many churches and other organisations all providing a basic food service to literally thousands of people in a single constituency, and this is replicated throughout the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is basically about choices? In Scotland, the Scottish Government have chosen to provide the child payment for every child, and that is a substantial amount of money every single week, but the choices that have been made here in Westminster include removing the winter fuel payment from so many people.

Seamus Logan: I agree with my hon. Friend. Poverty can be an incredibly isolating experience, with people becoming more and more withdrawn as money weighs heavily on their mind in all waking hours.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important and timely debate. I am sure he would agree that the recent damning data on poverty from the Social Metrics Commission is both unacceptable and unjustifiable. Ours is the sixth richest economy in the world but a quarter of the UK population—16 million people—live in poverty. The statistics are alarming but, according to the End Child Poverty coalition, the quickest and easiest way to relieve these increasing problems is to remove the two-child cap. Does he agree that the Government need to remove the cap sooner rather than later?

Seamus Logan: The hon. Member makes a powerful point; I completely agree, and I will refer to that later.

A quick chat with a volunteer can provide vital reassurance to those who need to use a food bank that they are not alone and that support is out there. I would like to share some brief testimony from those who have used the Aberdeenshire North food bank. One person said:

“The volunteers were fantastic, offering a chat and a shoulder to cry on. I suffer from depression as well and without the foodbank I don't think I would be here today”.

That was from a former police officer who suffered delays to his employment support allowance and incurred significant costs associated with his transport. A local single parent who was forced to reduce her working hours after her child fell ill said:

“The people at the foodbank were wonderful, they understood and saved us.”

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I represent Salisbury, where the Trussell Trust was founded. The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about the fact that the people who use food banks have many dimensions to their poverty. It is important that we address that, rather than believing that just by giving more food, we are doing people a true service in the long term. Ten years

[John Glen]

ago, the all-party parliamentary group on food banks looked at the deeper causes and how to build stronger foundations to stop people having to use food banks repeatedly. Does he agree that we should look at that now?

Seamus Logan: Yes, I agree, and I thank the right hon. Member, who is obviously well informed in these matters.

The generosity and kindness of food bank volunteers cannot be overstated. I impress on listeners to this debate that all the services and support from volunteers at food banks across the country are provided out of the kindness of their hearts and through the sacrifice of their free time. This hour and a half debate seems a small tribute in comparison with their efforts.

As demand surged for food poverty support during the covid pandemic, volunteers across the country answered the call. There was a massive increase in voluntary work and community spirit. Volunteers are a great credit not just to their local communities, but to the nation as a whole. I am taken aback by the volume of local organisations that work with and support the Aberdeenshire North food bank. Supermarkets, schools, businesses, medical practices and community groups, such as my local rotary club, come together all year round to support those who need it. That is truly inspiring. I also pay tribute to the referral organisations across the constituency. They often take a proactive and caring approach when they think that someone may be struggling. Although it is often a difficult conversation for both the referrer and the referee, it can lead to families being provided with much-needed food and invaluable support.

The scale of the operation involved, with so many nationwide and local charities working together to support the most vulnerable and provide nutritious food to families, is simply incredible. It is a massive volunteering operation from start to finish. Deliveries from volunteer drivers are received by volunteers at locations in community buildings, for example, that let out their premises to allow food banks to exist in a central location, where they sort donations and distribute parcels. Fundraising is also an important and year-long part of food banks' operation. The funds go directly to maintaining the excellent service provided by the food bank. When transport links, even where they are available, are often long and costly, it is heartening to know that home deliveries are also provided in some cases.

Last week, the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) kindly sponsored an event involving representatives from Sustainable Food Places, a network that brings together food partnerships from across the UK that support healthy and sustainable food. In my constituency, Sustainable Food Places partners with Fair Food Aberdeenshire. Their services are a great help to those in need. They provide a food directory, allowing members of the public to see organisations in their area and across Aberdeenshire that provide help and support. That can be in the form of referrals and community larders and by sharing details of food outlets that offer reduced prices for children, allowing parents to get free food for their children when out and about.

The transformative impact of support provided by such organisations across Scotland, in particular, cannot be understated. A recent survey of residents that utilise

support from the Good Food Scotland network of larders in Glasgow found that 61% are eating more fresh fruit and vegetables; 64% are able to cook more balanced meals at home; 35% have less need for food banks; and 63% describe higher levels of wellbeing. An average of £15 is saved per visit on groceries.

The timing of this debate as the months get colder—perhaps today is a good example—should be noted. Energy usage and associated costs will go up for families across the UK, and many will be worrying at home and at work right now about how to heat their home, afford food and give gifts to their friends and family this festive season.

I will now discuss food banks more generally in the UK and the measures that could be taken to reduce the need for them. Food banks have become a common feature across the UK—a stark symbol of the scale of food poverty across the country. The Trussell Trust, which operates the largest network of food banks in the UK, reported distributing 3.12 million emergency food parcels in 2023-24. That represents a 94% increase from just five years prior. That should give us all pause for concern and spur us into the actions that I will describe shortly.

However, it should be noted that although the Trussell Trust is the largest food bank in the UK, it does not encompass all food banks. Therefore, the figure of 3.12 million emergency food parcels being delivered is likely to be even higher when we factor in the work done by others. The escalating cost of living is a major driver in this worrying trend, with food prices experiencing a 19.1% surge in the year up to March 2023. That has undeniably fuelled the crisis. When food poverty is described as “household food insecurity”, 2022-23 figures show that the UK saw a startling 11% of its population—over 7.2 million individuals—in that category, grappling with food insecurity every day. That is a significant jump of 2.5 million from the previous year. Children bear a disproportionate burden, with 17% experiencing food insecurity, highlighting the vulnerability of our little ones.

Health issues, unemployment cuts and delays to benefits are issues that I have already mentioned. Food banks were intended as a temporary measure to provide emergency food aid, and they are a stopgap measure rather than a long-term solution. And here is the crunch: we need measures to reduce or even eliminate the need for food banks in the UK.

First, we need an essentials guarantee. Supported by the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, that would ensure that social security payments never fall below the amount needed to afford the essentials to live, including household bills, food and transportation.

Secondly, a robust social safety net is needed. That encompasses policy suggestions such as implementing a statutory living wage and dismantling austerity measures that have disproportionately impacted low-income households. Reforms to the benefits system, particularly addressing benefit delays, sanctions and the five-week waiting period for universal credit payments, are crucial elements.

Thirdly, the upcoming review into universal credit is a golden opportunity to realise important improvements that can be made, and I have mentioned those. The UK Government need to fully seize the opportunity

to deliver on their manifesto commitment to abolish the need for people to turn to emergency food to survive.

Fourthly, strengthening the nutritional safety net for children and young people is necessary. That includes proposals such as automatic enrolment of eligible children for free school meals, as well as expanding eligibility criteria for the programme. Holiday programmes ensuring children's access to food during school breaks are also in need of support. Ensuring that children get the healthy food they need, especially over holiday periods, is paramount.

Fifthly, we need to empower local communities. Another policy that could be explored is bolstering local safety nets through the development and expansion of dignified food aid models and moving beyond the traditional charity model. The models include affordable food clubs, social supermarkets and community kitchens offering choice and fostering a sense of community.

The Scottish Government have introduced many policies that have gone a long way to reducing food poverty in Scotland: the best start grant and best start foods, the Scottish child payment, which is described by charities as a game changer, child benefit, free school meals, free transport for under-22s, the school clothing grant, education maintenance allowance, child disability payment and adult disability payment.

Even policies that do not directly provide financial support for food provision can still indirectly reduce food poverty by giving households more breathing room and the ability to dedicate more money to buying healthy food. In Scotland we have the Scottish welfare fund, and I believe that in England there is a similar fund called the household support fund. The problem with the latter is that it does not have a strategic drive or intent; it is simply funding that is given to local councils, which are allowed to distribute it as they wish. Central Government strategy is vital. A future policy being discussed in Scotland is a social tariff for the most vulnerable, such as those on low incomes, the elderly and the disabled. Reduced energy costs for the most vulnerable in society could be transformative on poverty and would avoid people choosing between heating and eating.

I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks. I encourage all Members who are present but are not members of the group to consider joining. I thank hon. Members for attending the debate; I know that the continuing use of food banks troubles us all deeply and creates huge concern across the UK and in Government. I look forward to hearing contributions from Members and learning more about the incredible work done by food banks in their constituencies.

Finally, I echo an expression used by my party colleague Richard Thomson, the former Member for Gordon. He said that

"it is often in the worst of circumstances that we find the best of ourselves."—[*Official Report*, 2 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 215WH.]

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. As right hon. and hon. Members can see, quite a number of people want to speak. I do not really want to impose a formal time

limit, so I suggest an informal limit of one minute and a half. I will see how the first two speeches go and then take it from there, because I want all Members to get in.

9.47 am

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): This is an important debate, and I acknowledge the efforts made by the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan). The number of attendees is a testament to the importance of the debate. I just wonder whether the Government have taken account of some of the concerns about the expansion and continuation of poverty.

Even with the increase in benefits in the past few years, it appears that there has been a massive increase in poverty, particularly among families with children, as the hon. Member alluded to. It is not just that children have insufficient food to eat, but that even when they do get food it is unhealthy, and we have seen childhood obesity levels increase as a result. A series of factors has to be addressed to deal with this problem.

I draw attention to the work of faith-based groups. None of them acts out of any selfish interest; they simply put the gospel message into practice by trying to reach communities that otherwise would not be reached. We should all give them our support and commend them, as we do other groups. We look to the Government to cut through and to lessen the dependency on and need for people to access food banks. I very much hope—but doubt—that we will get to the point at which there is no need whatever for any food banks, but we need to minimise the dependency on them and the need for them in communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. To correct what I said, the limit is two and a half minutes, and then we will reduce it to two. I hope to call the Lib Dem spokesperson at 10.28 am.

9.49 am

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to contribute to this important debate under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing it.

As a few Members have highlighted, and as I continually hear on the doorsteps and during surgeries in my Derby South constituency, the use of food banks is unfortunately on the rise, which is a damning indictment of political choices that have failed to protect the most vulnerable in our communities. As we have heard, the Trussell Trust estimates that 3.12 million people in the UK used a food bank in 2023-24, compared with just under 26,000 in 2008-09.

Food bank teams make an extraordinary contribution to addressing the nation's food insecurity crisis, and those in Derby are no exception. Volunteers in charities such as the Derby Food 4 Thought Alliance work tirelessly to support those in need, in partnership with Community Action Derby and other organisations. In total, about 14 food or meal-based charities work in and around Derby, providing personalised support. Last year, they gave more than 20,000 food parcels to families across Derby.

[Baggy Shanker]

However, there is only so much work that those amazing organisations can do. Poverty and food insecurity are deeply intertwined, and there are clear links to austerity measures. Changes to the welfare system, including delays and reductions introduced during the Tory-led austerity era, marked the beginning of a dramatic rise in food bank reliance. That is not just my view: it is grounded in evidence. A systematic review by researchers at Imperial College London and the University of Liverpool directly ties austerity policies to food insecurity and the rise in food banks.

So what can be done? The scale of the problem is immense, but the Labour Government are already taking meaningful steps to addressing it. Children should not bear the brunt of a failed system. They should not go to school hungry. That is why I am proud to support the Government's commitment to invest more than £30 million in the roll-out of free breakfast clubs next year. That will make a considerable difference to those young children's lives and opportunities, but more can always be done. I welcome the Government's approach to ensuring that we have a level playing field, taking down barriers to opportunity and supporting young families.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for leading today's debate and giving us all an opportunity to discuss this issue. Christmas is the time of year when we think of those who are struggling and need support. I do not hesitate to say that, year after year, our food banks are pillars for such people in the local community, so it is really good to be here to discuss them.

I cannot continue without putting on the record my sincere thanks to the volunteers who go above and beyond to support people who are struggling across the United Kingdom. I have a fantastic relationship with the local food banks in my constituency of Strangford. The first Trussell Trust food bank in Northern Ireland was in Newtownards in my constituency—my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to it—and it has built up a marvellous relationship with the local churches. It brought all the churches together in the best ecumenical way. It fed into that process, and its volunteers have helped so many people.

If Members are free tomorrow between 9.30 am and 12 noon, Trussell Trust members will be in Parliament Square. There is another thing happening today that would have clashed with that event, so it will be put on tomorrow.

In my constituency of Strangford, 3,064 emergency food parcels were provided between April 2023 and March 2024—a 57% increase. That included 1,284 for children—a 52% increase. Some 79% of the UK public agree that poverty in this country is a massive problem and that it is the Government's responsibility to change that. We look to the Minister and the Government to bring about those changes. Whether we are in government or not, it is important that we do that.

Food banks bring out the best in people. I see that in the people working in food banks who participate, contribute and help along the way. By April 2023, food

inflation had risen by 19%, and it remained above 10% for much of the year. More than 200,000 people face hunger and hardship in Northern Ireland, including 130,000 working-age adults, 12,000 pensioners and 62,000 children. That gives an idea of what food banks do and how they reach out.

In Northern Ireland, 25% of families in part-time work face hunger and hardship, as do 39% of people and families across the UK on universal credit. I imagine that the figure of 12,000 pensioners facing hunger and hardship will only increase this year. There are pensioners out there who depend on the winter fuel payment to keep them warm through the winter. All we can do is hope that they do not face the decision whether to heat their homes or put food on the table.

Lastly, social security changes can bring help at the bedrock level by supporting those in most need, including by supporting those on the breadline with essentials. I hope that our Government and our Minister will do what they can to ensure that families do not struggle. I ask the Minister to consider meeting representatives from Northern Ireland to understand the full scale of the issue and see what more we can do to support those on the brink of poverty. If she is free tomorrow, I will see her at half 9 in the square.

9.55 am

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this important debate.

Most people assume that Cheltenham, the town I represent, is a well-heeled sort of place. The impression many people have is of grand Regency terraces, beautiful architecture and the prosperity that comes with excellent schools and a thriving cyber-security sector, but I regret to tell hon. Members that that is not the whole story.

Large sections of our population struggle. In swathes of Cheltenham, people live in poverty, providing demand for six food banks. I am told that every week in Cheltenham about 550 households access a food bank or food pantry. That is thousands of people. In 2023-24 there were 1,068 households accessing a food bank or food pantry for the first time ever. During that year, more than 8,000 people were, at one point or another, in receipt of a food parcel. That is in Cheltenham, a prosperous town.

In the current financial year, the local council has allocated £45,240 to support those food banks, supported by charitable donations made by generous Cheltenham people. When I visited the food pantries and spoke to staff and customers, the picture I found was one of people who simply want to get on in life. None of them wants to be at a food bank, but circumstances—nearly always beyond their control—have led them to that point. They are united in wanting nothing more than fairness.

There are some very practical steps that could be taken to achieve that fairness. First, lifting the two-child benefit cap would remove hundreds of thousands of children from poverty at a single stroke. If that were done alongside the expansion of free school meals to all children in poverty, the impact could be extremely powerful. We also need reform of universal credit. All those measures would mean fewer children turning up at

school hungry. They would mean fewer children arriving home from school hungry. They would mean fewer families desperately trying to make ends meet by using food banks, and fewer pensioners being forced to do the same.

This is all very achievable. All we need to do is work within the systems that already exist and show the kindness and compassion that lies within all of us. On the subject of kindness and compassion, I will finish by paying tribute to the brilliant local people in Cheltenham working at facilities that help people who cannot pay their bills. There are too many to name them all, but I will mention two: Faith Rooke-Matthews in Springbank and Alison Hutson at the Cornerstone centre. We thank them and their colleagues for all they do.

9.58 am

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this important debate.

Food bank use is on the rise across my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove. Local food banks and food pantries include the Kidsgrove Rotary food hub, the Hubb Foundation, the Community Grocery in Burslem, the Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme food banks and those offered by many faith groups and community groups. Collectively they work incredibly hard, but they have all seen a significant increase in demand.

I warmly welcome this Government's commitment to lifting families out of poverty. The roll-out of breakfast clubs in primary schools will help our youngest to have the best start in life. I was pleased to see in the Budget the increase in the national living wage, putting an extra £1,400 in the pocket of thousands of residents across my constituency. However, I worry about the immediate problem of the sustainability of our services, given the very high levels of demand. A recent review into food poverty by scrutiny members at Stoke-on-Trent city council has found that demand for emergency parcels of food in Stoke-on-Trent is nearly five times higher than typical levels across England. Last year, the Stoke-on-Trent food bank alone supported nearly 20,000 residents.

I ask the Minister to meet me and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) to discuss the increase in local demand for support and food. We are on the frontline of the cost of living crisis. While this Labour Government are starting to make life better for people, I want the Minister to understand the real difficulties that constituents face across Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove.

This debate is not only about food. It is about decency, respect and the kind of country that we want to live in. I am determined to do all I can as the Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove to make life better for the residents of my area.

10 am

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for his passionate and articulate contribution.

In Salford, we have some amazing and dedicated people running food banks and networks, but they should not need to exist. Charities and good people should not have to step in to provide for the most fundamental human need in one of the richest economies in the world. We know the cause of this crisis: 14 years of austerity-driven spending cuts, labour market casualisation and welfare reform, hammering the poorest and most vulnerable. Today, there are millions of children across our country who are going to bed hungry.

A previous Chancellor, Gordon Brown, who championed the eradication of child poverty, understood the policy-driven agenda of the previous Government. He said:

Since 2010, you've had the two-child rule. You've had the benefit cap. You've had Housing Benefit limits imposed. You've had this series of deductions which have become very widespread so that half of the people receiving benefits were having deductions. So, at every point, plus the freezing of benefits including child benefit, you've got people being made worse off.

During his time in government, ending child poverty was a key mission. He believed that it was possible in his lifetime, and frankly it still is. I welcome the Minister's hard work on this issue and I know she agrees wholeheartedly. The Government's child poverty taskforce is welcome and so too is the strengthening of workplace and trade union rights. These initiatives will take time, and there are immediate actions that charities are strongly encouraging the Government to take. That includes ending the two-child limit and developing a long-term scheme and funding settlement for local crisis support after the current household support fund ends. It also includes implementing an essentials guarantee that would introduce a protected minimum floor in universal credit, to ensure that families facing hardship do not go without essentials such as food and fuel. It includes extending free school meals to all primary-school children and setting out plans to address holiday hunger after the latest funding for the holiday activities and food programme ends. Ultimately, we need to recognise that regular daily access to affordable, safe and nutritious food should neither be a charitable act nor a luxury but a basic right.

10.3 am

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for introducing this critical debate.

I have no doubt that everyone in the Chamber agrees that it is scandalous that people are forced to go to food banks to ensure they do not go hungry. Two decades ago, it was almost unthinkable that we would see soaring levels of food insecurity and food poverty in our communities. However, as we have just heard, 14 years of austerity and economic chaos have pushed more people into hardship. In my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow, we have seen a 77% increase in reliance on food banks over the past five years. That means that stomachs rumble through school lessons and that children have increased vulnerability to illness and fatigue, coupled with inescapable stress about where the next meal is coming from. My thanks to West Lothian and Falkirk food banks and to West Lothian food network for the sterling work they do in providing empathetic and compassionate support to those in need.

[Kirsteen Sullivan]

Eliminating the need for food banks is about more than charity or words. It is about choices, decisions and actions—having the political will to tackle the drivers of inequality. The Labour Government have already got to work, with wage rises to ensure that the cost of living is incorporated into the lowest pay and the start of free breakfast clubs in England and Wales next year. I hope the First Minister will keep to that commitment in Scotland, so that children are ready to learn, free from the pangs of hunger.

It is a good start, but more has to be done and the Scottish Government have a key role to play. They have received £41 million as a result of the Labour Government's additional funding to the household support fund, and as yet, that has not been allocated to support those households most in need. Demand for the Scottish welfare fund has soared in recent years without any uplift to meet the increased need. The provision of free school meals for P6s and P7s has been kicked into the long grass again, although that would enable parents to have more money in their pockets. There is much more that has to be done: all Governments must work together and strive for a society in which people can live with dignity and free from the scourge of hunger, which should have no place in our society today.

10.5 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this important debate. The work that food banks do is invaluable. I would like to thank all the dedicated volunteers in my constituency of Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe who run food banks—they do tremendous work across our communities. There is PANTRY food bank in Pontardawe. There are food banks in Brecon, Knighton and Presteigne, Llandrindod Wells, Rhayader, Ystradgynlais, Ystalyfera and Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, all of which provide vital support to people in our communities and help those in need.

That need is growing across Wales. Food-bank parcel distribution has increased by 77% since 2018. An estimated 6% of households in Wales accessed food aid last year, and one in four households in Wales are either eating smaller meals or skipping meals altogether. In Wales, child poverty rates are significantly worse than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In my own region, a staggering one third of children in Neath Port Talbot council and 20% in Powys live in absolute poverty. These high child poverty rates have remained stubbornly high across Wales, moving barely at all since the early 2000s.

That can only represent a failure of policy and political will across successive Governments on both sides of the M4. Volunteers often say that, although the work they do is valuable, food banks should not need to exist at all. They exist due to our state's failure to address poverty within our communities, and are needed to support adequately those struggling to make ends meet.

Tackling food poverty requires a cross-sector approach. Rising energy and housing costs are pushing more and more people into poverty. The cost of energy itself makes producing food in this country even more expensive.

In Wales, we urgently need more investment and well-paying jobs should be brought back in deprived areas. Former mining communities, such as those in the south of my constituency, are still waiting for new industries to arrive. The new Government cannot afford to continue to make the mistakes of the past. We cannot end up in a situation in which the same number, or even more, children are relying on food banks in 10 years' time. We will continue to hold this Government, as well as those in the devolved Parliaments, to account to ensure that that is not the case.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to two minutes.

10.8 am

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): That is pressure, Ms Vaz; It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this debate.

Every Member wants to reduce the number of people relying on food banks and to tackle poverty effectively. I am surprised that the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East chose to reference so many devolved policy areas—he made clear in his point of order in the Chamber yesterday that he does not believe that such behaviour belongs in Parliament.

I shall begin by thanking the 200 volunteers who operate the Dunfermline food bank in my constituency. It has one site in Dunfermline itself and four satellite sites around the area. It is led by the fantastic Sandra, whom I was delighted to meet over the summer. I spoke to Sandra again this week and asked her for an update. She said that, in the year from April '23 to March '24, the Dunfermline food bank fed just under 9,000 people, approximately one third of whom were children.

The Government have already delivered a genuine living wage in Scotland, meaning a pay rise for more than 200,000 of the lowest-paid Scots and £3.4 billion of extra funding for Scotland. The question now for the SNP is: how will they spend that? There are no hiding places. Will they carry on as they have to date, scrapping the fuel insecurity fund from £30 million to zero, cutting and scrapping the parental transition fund, and driving more people towards food banks?

I genuinely hope that the SNP take action in their budget in December to tackle poverty, and I truly hope that they are successful, but the warning signs are not positive. Groups such as the Poverty and Inequality Commission and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have said that we are running out of ways to stress the need for rapid action from the Scottish Government.

Food banks and the Trussell Trust have told us that the cap on universal credit deductions is one of the main things pushing people towards food bank use. That is why I am delighted that the Budget last month reduced the cap from 25% to 15%. Is this the limit of what the Government and I want to achieve? Absolutely not, but the Budget set a clear direction and showed the priorities of the Labour Government. I will return to Sandra, who said to me:

"I am the only person who wants to see my job eliminated. I want to be out of a job, because it would mean we have successfully ended the need for food banks in this country."

10.10 am

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): May I say what an honour it is to speak under your stewardship, Ms Vaz? I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this vital debate. Echoing my fellow Members' sentiments, the need for food banks is unacceptable, but those who donate to them and run them provide testimony of our country's unity, compassion and kindness.

I will mention a few in my constituency: Goldhill adventure playground, Wesley Hall pantry, which is very close to the house I grew up in—the queue goes past my house now, unfortunately—the Eyre Monsell club for young people, and a Sikh community charity called Midland Langar Seva Society, which does incredible work in a church serving all members of the community regardless of faith. Their work, however, should not be needed. We are the sixth-richest nation in the world, and we have millions using our food banks. The situation will only get worse, according to the Trussell Trust, with a record 9.3 million people, including one in five children, facing hunger and hardship. That is 4 million more than five years ago.

I will briefly touch on a few points that we need to address. First, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), we must remove the myth that those using food banks are somehow deserving of it. Having employment is not a reliable route out of hardship, as 58% of people facing hunger and hardship live in families in which at least one person is working.

Secondly, food banks are used disproportionately by people with disabilities. Twenty-six per cent of the UK's population suffers from some form of disability, whether mental health or physical disability, but 69% of those referred to the Trussell Trust's food banks are disabled. Among the main reasons cited for that is a lack of information about entitlements; difficulties in claiming and sustaining benefits such as the personal independence payment; insufficient income from the benefits once people receive them; and further reductions due to sanctions cap deductions and debt.

Thirdly, there is the impact on children. One of the quickest ways we can bring children out of poverty is to scrap the two-child benefit cap instantly. Finally, I have some anecdotal evidence about the increased use of food banks from those where I have volunteered. They are being used by individuals and students who are being brought in by agencies from abroad. We need to address rogue people who are bringing people in.

10.13 am

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for securing this vital debate. Austerity is, of course, ideologically driven. It was, in the first instance, an assault on the most vulnerable and the poorest in society. As poverty grew, we saw a decade in which the wealthiest in society accelerated away from everyone else as they enjoyed tax cuts. Obviously, gross inequality followed. Areas such as my constituency have seen industry leave and low-wage insecure employment become the norm, with rising poverty and suicide rates, and decreasing life expectancy.

Austerity has ripped the soul out of Britain, and has naturally increased food bank usage. After this ideological assault on the poorest and most vulnerable, a new

target was needed. This was neatly labelled as the cost of living crisis, but really it was a continuation of the degradation of working-class people.

To show how things have changed, I am 42 and when I was at school, if there was a classmate who was poor, it was probably because mum and dad did not work. Nowadays, we have the creation of a new strand of society—the in-work poor. That is a situation where both mum and dad work full-time jobs but still do not have enough to put food on the table. The scale of the cost of living crisis cannot be denied—rocketing energy bills, increased food costs, wage suppression and stagnation and out-of-control inflation. Austerity and the cost of living crisis have been crises for the poorest, most vulnerable and most disadvantaged and for the working class. It is little wonder that food bank usage is what it is.

The Government cannot afford to tinker around the edges when it comes to what we do—we must transform society. The welfare system, as has been mentioned, needs to be changed. Universal credit is too low. People cannot afford the basic essentials needed merely to get by and to meet their basic needs for food, heating, toiletry and accommodation costs. The decline of local councils is well documented. It is local councils that provide vital public services. England has seen local councils declare bankruptcy, and that is a realistic possibility for Scottish local authorities. Bankruptcy is the result of councils eventually buckling under the strain of rising costs and funding cuts. Now is not the time for the Government to have limited ambition.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member must conclude.

10.16 am

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this crucial debate.

The alarming fact is that after 14 years of Tory Government, food bank use is a significant problem in every constituency in every corner of the country, as we have heard. We are lucky in Winsford, Northwich and Middlewich to have some truly dedicated volunteers keeping our food banks going. We also have charities, such as Changing Lives Together, that run no-food-waste projects which, in addition to reducing the amount of perfectly good food that is disposed of, offer people the dignity of choice while paying a small contribution towards their food.

At Mid Cheshire food bank, nearly 6,600 parcels of food were distributed in the last 12 months, with 38% of them having gone to children. These are not just troubling statistics: they reflect the struggles faced by countless individuals and families in the communities I represent. They may be struggling to cope with debts, changes in their benefit entitlement, ill health, domestic violence or family breakdown. Over recent years, the previous Tory Government's cost of living crisis has left more and more people grappling with the soaring prices of essential goods; skyrocketing energy bills have strained tight budgets; rising housing costs have burdened those who were already stretched thin, making it increasingly difficult to find safe, decent and affordable accommodation; and stagnating wages and the prevalence of insecure

[Andrew Cooper]

work have only compounded the challenges, leaving people in a perpetual state of uncertainty. This has got to change.

We now have a Government in place that will prioritise the wellbeing of individuals, families and entire communities; a Government that will address the root causes of poverty and food security; and a Government that will ensure that everybody has access to fair wages, affordable housing and secure employment opportunities, thereby raising living standards and lifting people out of poverty. We must continue to strive to create a society in which every individual has access to the basic necessities and no one is forced to rely on a food bank to survive.

10.18 am

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this important debate forward.

Food poverty—and poverty in general—is a growing crisis in the UK that demands urgent action. The increasing reliance on food banks is not only a humanitarian concern but a reflection of deeper systemic challenges that we as a society must address. We have heard the statistics from Members from all parties, and they are sobering. In 2023-24, the Trussell Trust had 1,699 food banks—a number that has only increased—and there are nearly 1,200 independent food banks across the country. I estimate that there are more than 3,000 food banks today, distributing 4 million to 5 million parcels every year.

The root causes have been identified, so I will not take up time repeating them, but they include the failure of wages to keep pace with the rising cost of living and inflation, with many workers trapped in low-paid and insecure jobs; benefit cuts; delays in universal credit payments; the two-child benefit cap; and now the compounding factor of the withdrawal of the winter fuel allowance. In my constituency, four out of 10 children live in poverty.

The reliance on food banks is a symptom of deeper issues. It is about not just food insecurity but income insecurity. The Government must act decisively to address the root causes. I welcome the raising of the minimum wage, but it must reflect the actual cost of living. Benefits must also reflect the cost of living. A single person allowance of £85 is £25 less than is required to cover the cost of a person's basic essentials, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The increasing use of food banks is not inevitable: it is a consequence of policy choices. The UK is the sixth-wealthiest nation in the world, and no one should go hungry in one of the world's largest economies.

10.21 am

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Ms Vaz, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this debate, which has been quite interesting so far. I welcome the debate, and make my contribution within the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Food poverty is a massive issue in the UK generally and in Scotland specifically. Like others, I want to start by thanking everyone in my constituency who is working to address food poverty. In the past few weeks, I have met people from Oxfams Neighbourhood Centre, Community for Food, Soul Food Oxfams, Space at the Broomhouse Hub, and the Open Heavens Edinburgh church in Wester Hailes. They are all doing great work to fill empty stomachs.

Members have spoken at length about the need to reform the welfare system, and I think we are in broad agreement about that issue. A key conclusion so far is about how groups in our communities, particularly faith groups, have rallied to the cause. We also have to think about the long-term causes that underlie poverty, and key to them is education. If we want to break the cycle of poverty that people inherit from their parents, we have to invest in education. Too many children, particularly in Scotland, are in an intractable situation. Education is key to improving their life chances, but poor nutrition is a barrier to their making the most of it.

On top of that, the education system in Scotland is holding people back, because it is just not a priority for the Scottish Government. This is shameful, because we know that education is key to ending the cycle of poverty. And it is not just about schools: our universities are underfunded as well. University places are capped, and although Scottish students do not pay fees, the fees that Scottish universities do receive are £2,000 below what universities receive in England, and we know how stressed the situation is in England.

Yes, increasing food bank use is shameful, but we have to be honest about the underlying causes of poverty. We have to accept that neither the UK Government nor the Scottish Government can be proud of their record over the last 10 or 15 years—I am disappointed that there are not more Conservative colleagues here to talk about their record—and we have to be honest about the factors that underpin poverty. We will succeed in creating a prosperous nation without poverty only if we create the conditions for good jobs, genuinely affordable housing, income security and meaningful opportunities that drive justice and give people hope.

10.23 am

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing this important debate.

Food banks have undoubtedly become a lifeline for countless families and children across the UK, including in my own constituency of Gloucester, and I am deeply grateful for the vital work that organisations such as Gloucester food bank do in providing immediate support to those in crisis. I also wish to highlight the work of all the other charities and organisations tackling food poverty in Gloucester, including Gloucester Feed the Hungry, the Redwell Centre, Barney's Pantry, the Community Kitchen, the Welcome Table café and Quedgeley Community Pantry, to name just a few.

Until 2010, food banks were something rare that only a few families ever had to rely on, perhaps in times of extreme need or emergency, but today that is no longer the case. Last year alone, more than 3.1 million emergency

food parcels were handed out. That is a disgrace. It is a disgrace that in a nation as wealthy as the UK, which has the world's sixth-largest economy, food poverty is no longer an isolated issue. It is a growing crisis, and one that worsens each year.

In 2023, 7.2 million people, including 17% of children, were living in food-insecure households. That is a tragedy and a failure of our social and economic system. There are plenty of examples of failure under the Conservative Government, but the rise in the use of food banks stands out as perhaps one of the most alarming. Austerity, benefit sanctions, the botched roll-out of universal credit, underpaid and insecure employment, and an NHS left to fail—these policies have contributed to an epidemic of food poverty and, as always, it has fallen to a Labour Government to fix the mess that the Conservatives left behind.

Food banks in Gloucester provide invaluable support, offering a lifeline in times of crisis. However, the work comes at a heavy cost: volunteers and organisers are under immense pressure, with many reaching the point of exhaustion to meet growing demand. I am pleased that the Government have started to take the action necessary to make work pay, improve workers' and renters' rights, build more social housing, and tackle child poverty head on.

10.25 am

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz.

Food bank use massively increased under the last Government, and has nearly doubled since 2018-9. Of the 3.12 million emergency food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust network in 2023-4, more than 1.14 million were for children. In June and July this year, 13.6% of households reported being food insecure, meaning that they ate less or went a day without eating because they could not access or afford food.

I want to highlight the Peterborough food partnership, which helps many of my constituents in North West Cambridgeshire. In October, the partnership received the Sustainable Food Places bronze award, in recognition of its work towards increasing access to healthy food, tackling diet-related ill health, and creating a vibrant and diverse sustainable food economy. The partnership includes over 100 organisations across the area, including from the local farming community, the public sector, Peterborough city council, local food businesses and, of course, Peterborough food bank.

Peterborough food bank served nearly 3,000 households in 2023, and saw a huge increase of 34% in parcels in 2023-24, compared with the previous financial year. The food bank partners with Peterborough citizens advice bureau, which has experienced an exponential increase in the number of people trying to access its services for income maximisation and debt advice, with up to 1,800 unique calls per month, of which it is able to answer only 15% to 20%, so there is a real issue there.

Through the partnership working, people who attend food banks in Peterborough—including the one at CSK Hampton church in my constituency—are able to receive wraparound support from the Citizens Advice and other organisations, so that they can start to tackle the root causes of their issues, which often include debt, which is in turn caused by general poverty. I am so grateful for

the work that Peterborough food bank does, alongside all the other organisations in the sustainable food partnership. I hope we can start to replicate that approach elsewhere.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I am so sorry, but Douglas McAllister has only 30 seconds. We will then move on to the wind-ups.

10.27 am

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on securing the debate.

In my constituency of West Dunbartonshire I have witnessed at first hand the devastating consequences of 14 years of Tory austerity and more than 17 years of SNP Government failure. Prior to both Governments taking office, we did not have any food banks, food trusts or food pantries in West Dunbartonshire, and it is heartbreaking that so many families there are now struggling to put food on the table.

We have had to step up in West Dunbartonshire, because the SNP Scottish Government abandoned their commitment to address holiday hunger and completely removed the funding from the Summer Shine programme. It is not inevitable that food banks across our country are to be a permanent, lasting feature of our communities. Under Labour, tackling child poverty and food poverty is back where it belongs—at the heart of Government—and by 2026 it will be at the heart of both Governments.

10.28 am

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for securing this incredibly important debate, as shown by the number of Members present.

I agree with Members, who have spoken so eloquently today, that the guiding principle of the UK welfare system must be to ensure that no one is unable to meet their children's basic needs for survival and participation in society. The social security system in this country is not working as it should, and it is driving people further into poverty and making families rely on food banks. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) mentioned, the Trussell Trust alone delivered 3 million food parcels this year. From speaking to food bank organisers across my constituency, it is clear that donations are down but demand is up. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) said, this is a failing in our country.

One of the major problems driving reliance on food banks is the increasing cost of living, which has not been helped by rising costs of energy. The churches in Corsham in my constituency organise a food bank, and as they say,

"There is no point having food if you do not have the energy to cook it."

That is why that food bank is now also offering fuel vouchers of up to £40 a month throughout winter for those on pay-as-you-go meters, but rising energy costs mean that those vouchers are being stretched further. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) mentioned, that is leading to child poverty.

[Sarah Gibson]

There is additional pressure on food banks during school holidays. While children are at school during the week, they are on the whole able to access free school meals, but in the school holidays, food banks are inundated with young families. On that basis, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I find it astonishing that the Government refuse to lift the two-child benefit cap, which would lift half a million children out of poverty, as has been mentioned by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. By removing the cap, we would transform the lives of struggling families and help to reduce dependency on food banks.

As hon. Members have said, how we treat the most vulnerable in our society says a lot about our values. Asylum seekers have not yet been mentioned. A Liberal Democrat councillor and food bank volunteer in Corsham told me this weekend that the Home Office is giving asylum seekers only £35 a week to cover food, toiletries and clothing, so many are relying on food banks to survive. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline what actions are being taken to support the most vulnerable, such as asylum seekers and children, and to alleviate their reliance on food banks.

10.32 am

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) on bringing this debate forward. I am grateful for hon. Members' helpful contributions, and I am happy to take interventions from hon. Members who were not able to speak if there is time.

Let me first acknowledge that I agree with hon. Members who have pointed out that the existence and extent of poverty in our country is shameful. It is a source of deep shame to our country that so many people are reliant on the charity of others for essentials. Briefly, I pay tribute to the food banks in my constituency and in my former constituency of Devizes, which do such good work. I also previously worked with the Hammersmith and Fulham food bank. I echo the points made by hon. Members about the valuable work of such organisations.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I have seen extraordinary work and inspiring volunteers at the DN7 food bank, the Isle of Axholme Foodshare Project, Hatfield's Pre-loved Uniform Bank and the Hygiene Bank Doncaster. Does the hon. Member agree that although their work is amazing, we do not want to see those banks grow on our high streets or even exist in the first place?

Danny Kruger: I am grateful for the intervention. I recognise those points and pay tribute to the hon. Member's food banks too.

Hon. Members have cited some of the facts. It is a fact that the number of parcels handed out by the Trussell Trust doubled in the last Parliament in the light of the covid crisis and the cost of living crisis, but I emphasise that we should not take food bank use as a perfect proxy for poverty, because that data is patchy and affected by the supply of food banks. There is also an important displacement effect. It is not necessarily the case that all the need identified by food banks is new

need; that need might formerly have been met by other sources, such as family and friends or other community organisations.

Nevertheless, the profile of food bank use tracks the state of the economy and the level of poverty in our country. We saw it spike during lockdowns, then decline and then spike again with the cost of living crisis. I am afraid that it has not really declined since: 1.4% of households have used a food bank in the last month and 3% in the last year, which are significant numbers.

So what is going on? I echo the point of my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) about the complexity of the causes of food bank use, but we recognise the obvious point that it is ultimately down to household income. The "Hunger in the UK" report points out that the main reasons for people having problems with their household income are difficulties with benefits, as many hon. Members have mentioned; the existence of in-work poverty; and the difficulty of gaining well-paid work, particularly for disabled people and carers.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): A number of constituents have written to me expressing their struggle to afford food, despite being in work, and that is not an isolated issue. In mid-2022, almost 90% of those referred to food banks in Wales were in work and had such low incomes that they were living in destitution. Does the hon. Member agree that the working poor, created by the last Government, are disgracefully reminiscent of Victorian times?

Danny Kruger: I do recognise the extent of the problem of in-work poverty and of people reliant on benefits to sustain their incomes and on additional support from the outside. I do not accept that that was a new phenomenon; in fact, I will come to the last Government's record in a moment.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): One of the last Government's best policies was the introduction of a £20 additional uplift to universal credit during the pandemic. It stopped poverty growing in its tracks and showed the impact of increasing access to money—not to be facile—on poverty. Does the hon. Member share my hope that the Government will bring forward their review of universal credit, as promised in the Labour manifesto?

Danny Kruger: Yes, indeed; I very much look forward to that review coming along soon.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the record of the last Government. I recognise the extent of low wage growth and in-work poverty that we have seen. If we look at absolute poverty, however, which is the measure that we should ultimately be looking at if we are thinking about the extent of destitution and food poverty, 1 million fewer people are in absolute poverty after housing costs in 2024 than in 2010. That includes 100,000 fewer children, 200,000 fewer pensioners, and 700,000 fewer working-age people, so the last Government made a real impact on absolute poverty. Overall, there are 1 million fewer workless households than in 2010.

Much of that impact was driven by the introduction of universal credit. Those of us who worked in the social sector before 2010 might remember the labyrinthine

complexity and the perverse incentives that were created by the mess of the benefit system that we inherited in 2010, which we rationalised and improved. It is also worth mentioning the enormous £100 billion cost of living package that the last Government put together in the light of the energy shock.

Let us turn to what this Government are doing. The most significant policy that they have announced so far on poverty is the withdrawal of the winter fuel payment. Some 10 million pensioners will be denied that essential benefit, including 70% of disabled pensioners. That is surely not a record that hon. Members are proud of.

Sam Carling: The shadow Minister has made a point about the Government's difficult decision to withdraw the winter fuel payment. If he feels so strongly about it, why did his party pledge to do it in 2017?

Danny Kruger: We did not pledge to do it and we did not do it. I think it is important to have universal entitlement to essential benefits, but if there does need to be some means testing, surely it should penalise, or withdraw the payment from, only the wealthiest pensioners, not 90% as is happening under this policy.

The other thing that the Government have done is impose a significant tax on employment through the national insurance rise, which they promised not to do in their manifesto. The cost of that will fall disproportionately on low-paid workers, who will see the impact of that tax in their wage packet.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which is no friend to my party, has pointed out that poverty is due to rise because of the Budget that the Chancellor has introduced. Every household type, except pensioners, will be poorer. Single-parent families will be £1,000 poorer. An average couple with children will be £1,760 poorer. Inequality will be higher. That is all the testament of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The Office for Budget Responsibility points out that real wages will fall and indeed, the Budget has caused the OBR to lower its real wage growth forecast by 0.5%. As the OBR says, the Budget shifts

“real resources out of private households' incomes in order to devote more resources to public service provision.”

That might indeed be the policy that the Government want to pursue, but the effect will be to reduce household income, as the OBR acknowledges.

Alex McIntyre: Will the shadow Minister acknowledge that the OBR actually said that 90% of households will be better off under this Budget, and it is only the wealthiest 10% of households that will feel the cost, making sure that we are spreading the cost on to those shoulders that can bear it most?

Danny Kruger: As I said, I do not think that withdrawing the winter fuel payment from 10 million pensioners reflects a transfer of the burden on to those who can bear it most—nor does imposing a taxation on low-paid jobs.

What shall we do about all this? I am sorry to say that I have not heard enough in the debate about what could and should be done, although I acknowledge that the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East made some suggestions—many of which I agree

with, particularly around the importance of having an adequate safety net. I, too, look forward to the universal credit review that the Government are bringing forward, and I strongly agree with the focus on nutrition and empowering communities.

I do not agree with the need for the essentials guarantee, although I respect that campaign. I do not think that transferring responsibility for setting benefit levels to an independent body—essentially, to an unaccountable quango—is the right way to go. The Government should be responsible for that policy, and accountable to Parliament, rather than an independent body.

If we look at the drivers of food bank use as reported in “Hunger in the UK”, we need to improve the benefits system and make it quicker and easier to use. I look forward to seeing how the Government are going to improve pension credit applications to improve winter fuel payment access. We need to drive up wages again; I deprecate the introduction of taxation on wages. We need to grow our jobs market and ensure that it is easier and better for employers to take workers on and promote them—which, I am afraid to say, the Employment Rights Bill that we are anticipating will not do, given that it imposes punitive obligations on employers from day one.

I am conscious that my time is almost up, so let me finish with this point. I praise the flexibility of food banks, and the human relationship that they imply: the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East talked about the powerful sense of community. A quiet revolution happened during the covid pandemic that momentarily offered a better social and economic model in which remarkable innovations, particularly around food and provision to the poorest among our neighbours, were enabled to flourish.

I agree that we want food banks to be redundant, but while we have hardship they can be an important part of the mix. I pay tribute to other innovations such as social supermarkets as well. Lastly, I do not agree with the hon. Member that we need a more central strategy and direction for the household support fund. Its great value is in the innovation that it enables, and the way that it empowers local communities, which he said that he believes in, to ensure that local authorities can take responsibility for supporting their communities. That is an important innovation that was brought in by the last Government, which I supported, and I hope that it will continue.

10.43 am

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) for bringing this important debate. It is testament to his judgment and to the importance of this issue that fully 20 Members of Parliament have chosen to speak; in fact, we could have gone on for hours, because of the importance of the issue.

I will deal briefly with a couple of questions that were put to me in the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, asked if I will meet him, which of course I will. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) also asked that I meet the Stoke Members of Parliament

[Alison McGovern]

to discuss the issue, which of course I will. The Lib Dems spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson), asked about asylum seekers and where they will fit in, and I will ask the Home Office Minister responsible for asylum seekers to write to her on that subject, because she raises an important point.

Labour's election-winning manifesto said:

"Good work will be the foundation of our approach to tackling poverty and inequality. We will create more good jobs, reform employment support, and make work pay so that many more people benefit from the dignity and purpose of work.

Labour is committed to reviewing Universal Credit so that it makes work pay and tackles poverty. We want to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels, which is a moral scar on our society."

And these are my words: no one in the United Kingdom should have to beg for food.

Our first Budget in 14 years was a down payment on our approach to tackling poverty. As hon. Members have mentioned, we extended the household support fund for a further year, to help people currently struggling with the cost of essentials, including food. We saw a pay rise for more than 3 million lower earners, with a 6.7% increase to the national living wage, making work pay. We introduced a fair repayment rate on deductions in universal credit—a point that is very important to me—which will help about 700,000 of the poorest families with children to keep more of their universal credit. As Members have also mentioned, the roll-out of breakfast clubs and improved access to childcare will help parents have more choice in order to get better jobs.

The manifesto commitment and what we saw in our first Budget explains our approach to the issue. These first steps will make a real difference to people's lives, but the scale of the challenge is huge.

Members have mentioned what has happened to emergency food help over the past five years. Ms Vaz, you and I have been around a while now, and you will remember that in 2010 the Trussell Trust distributed 61,000 emergency food parcels. Last year, it was 3.1 million. Either my maths is wrong, or that is a fiftyfold increase. I simply ask, what happened in those 14 years? I think Members have set out the case well—the combination of failed economic and social policies.

In Opposition, on the Back Benches and from the Front Bench, I travelled around the country speaking to people running food banks and supporting those who needed them, to try to understand what on earth was going on with this massive increase in the need for emergency food help. Before the pandemic, my experience was that families were experiencing really significant challenges in their budgets. Post pandemic, deteriorating health has made it 10 times worse.

In Government, I have spent time with many of our volunteers who are addressing the family incomes crisis that we are facing. From listening to them, I know this: not one of those volunteers wants emergency food help to go on being given in this way for ever; not one of them wants our fellow citizens to be so vulnerable; and every single food bank volunteer that I have met—a number of whom have volunteered because they needed help themselves at one stage—wants a country where people live never in destitution and always with dignity.

I want to talk about children. About 800,000 children live in households in the United Kingdom that have used a food bank in the last 12 months. That is a devastating statistic. That does not just harm children today; it has a lasting effect on their life chances—their long-term health, their education and their employment outcomes. They cannot fulfil their potential if they are going to school hungry or worrying about the family at home, and we will not fulfil our potential as a country if the next generation is held back.

Ensuring that every child is safe, well fed and has chances and choices in their life is not just a moral imperative, but an economic one too. It is a priority for myself and for the Secretary of State. That is why we have got the child poverty taskforce up and running, led by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions alongside the Education Secretary. We know that the causes of child poverty are wide-ranging and we are looking at all the levers we can pull to increase family incomes, reduce family costs and give our kids the best start in life.

Only yesterday, we met employers, trade unions and think-tanks to discuss options to increase incomes and family resilience in low-income households. We are hearing from a very wide range of people and organisations, including those who are experiencing poverty today. That approach will inform our strategy, which will be published in the spring, but despite the dreadful inheritance and the £22 billion hole in public finances, we have not waited until next spring to help people in desperate need of support.

The cost of living crisis does mean that pressure on household budgets is at an all-time high. We have seen inflation spikes, including in energy bills and the cost of shopping. Those are not luxuries that anyone can easily cut out; everyone needs a warm home and everyone needs the basics, which is why—as mentioned—within two months of taking office we announced a six-month extension to the household support fund. We have extended it again for a further year.

Members have mentioned the need to consider the future of the household support fund and of crisis support. I look forward to having those conversations with Members. We will invest £1 billion, including the Barnett impact, to extend the household support fund and to maintain the discretionary housing payment fund for a further year. I know that such support is a lifeline for many, and I am grateful to all the charities and local authorities who work hard to distribute it.

Douglas McAllister: On local charities, will the Minister join me in congratulating Old Kilpatrick Food Parcels, which last week was awarded the King's award for voluntary service for 2024? That accolade recognised its outstanding work in support of communities in West Dunbartonshire, providing food and comfort.

Alison McGovern: I send my congratulations to those receiving that wonderful award in West Dunbartonshire. Well done to them.

We will always need some form of crisis support. My worry is not just the consequences of day-to-day crisis, but the chronic challenge. People need an income that they can live on, and that is why in last month's Budget the Chancellor announced that we will introduce a fair repayment rate to help households on universal credit

who are having deductions made from their benefit keep more of their money to help them budget for essentials. More than 1.2 million households on universal credit will benefit from that—a reduction in the deductions cap from 25% to 15%, which is worth about £420 a year on average. As my dad used to say, “Out of debt, out of danger.”

That will make a big difference for some of the poorest people in our country, but we understand that more change will still be needed. That is why we are committed, as Members have mentioned, to reviewing universal credit. I know, and Beveridge wrote in his report, that social security can only work well when we have policies for full and fulfilling employment. We have to make work pay. It is ridiculous to have a queue at the food bank door when our businesses are crying out for staff. We have millions of people locked out of work, not getting the support they need to build a better life.

Alongside the reforms I have set out, therefore, we have set an ambitious long-term goal of an 80% employment rate, towards full employment. To achieve it, we have kick-started the biggest reforms to employment support for a generation. We will build a new jobs and careers service to give people proper, tailored support to help them get on in work. Our White Paper will bring forward a youth guarantee for our young people, to ensure that they are not left on the scrapheap. We will empower our local areas, towns and cities so that they can be in the lead with their work, health and skills plan. We will set out all that detail in our “Get Britain Working” White Paper shortly. I cannot wait to talk to Members and colleagues about it.

I want to make one more point about making work pay. It is not enough to get people into any job; it must be a good job. In 2022, 2.3 million people lived in a household that had used a food bank in the past year, and 40% of them were living in families where at least one adult worked. That is not acceptable to me. Too many people in our country are being denied the dignity of decent and fair work. Too many are stuck in insecure jobs with unpredictable working patterns. That is why we introduced our Employment Rights Bill.

I do not agree that we have to make a choice between high unemployment and poor-quality work. We will have the biggest upgrade to rights at work for a generation, including an end to exploitative zero-hours contracts, which often see people not just low-paid, but unsure about what pay they will get next week. That stress and instability tip people into destitution. As I said, we are also putting up the living wage, which will benefit 3 million workers and be worth £1,400 next year for the average full-time worker.

In conclusion, as I have set out—and as Members know from their experiences talking to people in their constituencies—the inheritance of this Government could hardly be worse. It is not really the 3.1 million bags of

shopping handed out to people in desperate need that is the problem, but the social and economic failure that that represents. We cannot accept it.

Tackling poverty and ending mass dependence on emergency food parcels is not just a manifesto commitment that we made to the British public; it is our priority every day. It is vital to all this Government’s missions to break down barriers to opportunity and to deliver economic growth, because you cannot grow a country on shaky foundations. The action we have already taken to support those most in need—to spread opportunity and make work pay—shows that we will take that challenge head-on. I look forward to working with all Members present to deliver that change.

10.56 am

Seamus Logan: I am greatly encouraged by the unanimity that has been shown today and want to thank everyone who contributed to the debate. Seeking and securing the debate, and coming here today for it, was not to criticise the legacy of the last Government, nor to attack the current Government; it was to encourage. I regret that some Members took the opportunity to make what are essentially parochial party political points. I am glad that my point of order last night did not fall on deaf ears.

I hear about the child poverty taskforce and about the £30 million invested in breakfast clubs, and that is wonderful. However, what we really need is a restoration of the winter fuel payment, an end to the two-child cap, and some learning from the excellent record of the Scottish Government in relation to things like the child payment. I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke about the role of Churches and religious groups. As Father Ted often said, this is “an ecumenical matter”.

Lastly, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation—a long-standing friend, I believe, of the Labour party, but perhaps not of the former Government—has spoken eloquently about the need for an essentials guarantee. If it is good enough for bodies like the NHS, police and armed forces, why can we not have an independent body that sets the level of payment to allow for folks’ essentials and dignity? The current level of universal credit is, I think, around £91 for a single person. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that this needs to be £120—a 30% increase. I know that will not be achieved in the first five months or first year of this Government, but I believe it is a laudable aim and I encourage the Minister to listen more closely to the essentials guarantee lobby from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

I conclude by thanking everyone for their participation today. I hope this is not the end of anything, but the beginning of a dialogue between hon. Members and the Government on this important topic.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the use of foodbanks.

Windsor Framework

11 am

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the Windsor framework.

When the Windsor framework was introduced, it was the original protocol by another name, because it made no substantive changes to the original text. It was portrayed, sold and packaged as a tremendous opportunity for Northern Ireland. Some time later, we even had the President of the United States, President Biden, talk extravagantly about \$6 billion of awaiting investment in Northern Ireland. We had acolytes of the Government talk about Northern Ireland becoming the Singapore of the western hemisphere, and it seemed that no boast was too large to make.

The reality is very different, however, and matters rather came down to earth with a bump just a couple of weeks ago, when Invest Northern Ireland representatives appeared before a Stormont Committee. Remember that the Windsor framework was supposed to unleash an avalanche of foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland because—we were told—our access to the single market of the European Union was the panacea for all things economic. The witness from Invest NI had to confess that there would be no uptake in foreign direct investment, and the framework was not producing the results that were claimed.

There is a very simple reason for that: the counterbalance to accessing the European single market is the fettering of our links to our GB supply market. In order to have that access to the foreign single market of the EU, we had to subject ourselves to EU law. Its customs code says that, with GB not being in the EU but Northern Ireland being treated as an EU territory, GB has to be regarded as a foreign country, hence the erection of the obnoxious border in the Irish sea for the bringing of goods from GB to Northern Ireland. The counterbalance to that alleged wonderful access to the EU single market was the building of a border to fetter trade from GB, and that is why the framework has not produced that magical foreign investment. Anyone looking at investing thinks about not just where they will sell their goods, but where they will get their raw materials from. If the raw material supply line is fettered by an international customs border governed by foreign law—and that is what it is—they are going to think twice about that, and obviously they have thought twice. All the proposals and packaging largely turned out to be insubstantial spin.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The boast was that Northern Ireland would have the best of both worlds—the European market and the UK market. Would the hon. and learned Member accept that all the evidence says that, even apart from just the undemocratic nature of laws being imposed on us, businesses are facing huge tax burdens, where they have to pay taxes and then claim them back? They have been shut off from their markets and cannot get supplies, and there are still many sectors of the economy that cannot get supplies from GB.

Jim Allister: It has infected every sector, and none more so than the farming sector, which is topical today. Northern Ireland's veterinary medicines are now under

the regime of the EU, and we are facing a cliff edge in that regard—there could be a cut-off of supply from our primary market of veterinary medicines very shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. and learned Member for securing the debate. He is right to mention farming. Does he agree that our farmers, who have been decimated by the inheritance tax proposals, will not be able to access state aid, while farmers on the mainland can apply for and get that aid? The Government must do the right thing: remove the protocol and return Northern Ireland to the UK in every way.

Jim Allister: I agree with that. Of course, the protocol contains an EU cap on the amount of funding that can be given to farming. All the things that the hon. Member says are correct.

All that flows out of one fundamental point: the protocol and Windsor framework mean that, in 300 areas of law, Northern Ireland is now subject to laws made not in this place or in Stormont, but in a foreign Parliament by foreign parliamentarians—the parliamentarians of the EU. That is such an assault on the enfranchisement of our constituents—it is, rather, their disenfranchisement—and on basic constitutional and democratic accountability. It is something, I would suggest, that no Member of this House would contemplate for one moment for their constituents, and yet those of us who represent Northern Ireland, as well as our constituents, are expected to accept that we should be impotent when it comes to making the laws that govern much of our economy.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. and learned Member for securing the debate. Does he agree that the Windsor framework is ethically flawed in its treatment of businesses and the people of Northern Ireland? In opposing it, Members should take inspiration from Gladstone's belief that it is never politically right to do that which is morally wrong.

Jim Allister: That is a model that I am more than familiar with. It has many applications, and one such fitting application is here.

Let me return to the issue of the 300 laws. Those are not incidental laws, but laws that shape and frame much of our economy: how we manufacture, package, sell and trade our goods, and much besides. Of particular political significance is the fact that those economic laws are now identical to those that prevail in the Irish Republic. Under the framework, a situation has evolved whereby Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic are governed by identical economic laws in those 300 areas. Of course, that is about building the stepping stone to an all-Ireland economic area, which was always the intent of the protocol. That gives it an added offensive political dimension.

The very concept that 300 areas of EU law—not our law—should be imposed on us, as if we are a colony—because that is what it is like—is offensive in the extreme. Of course, it is said, “Ah, but wasn't the Windsor framework about protecting the Belfast/Good Friday agreement?” The Windsor framework has driven a coach and horses through the Belfast agreement. The fundamental *modus operandi* of the Belfast agreement was that, because of Northern Ireland's divided past, any big or constitutional issues would have to be decided on a

cross-community vote—in other words, a majority of both nationalists and Unionists. That is in section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, in respect of the Windsor framework, that was expunged.

In a couple of weeks, we will have an astounding situation in which the Northern Ireland Assembly, which elects MLAs—Members of our Legislative Assembly—will be asked to disavow their power to legislate for Northern Ireland in these 300 areas. They were never asked in the first place, but they are now going to be asked, for the next four years or more, to disavow their ability on behalf of their constituents to make laws in those 300 areas and surrender that sovereignty and right to a foreign Parliament and foreign politicians. The laws have not even been dreamt up yet, because in the next four years who knows what the EU will decide is good for itself—and, coincidentally, for us? Democratically elected Assembly Members are meant to vote to sign away their democratic rights, on behalf of their constituents, and endorse whatever comes down the track. Never mind what it is; we are just going to accept it like colonial patsies, which we now are under the protocol.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. and learned Gentleman knows where I stand on this issue. I share his concerns about the Windsor framework, the protocol and the impact they are having on businesses, consumers and the constitutional future of Northern Ireland within this great United Kingdom. Does he agree that those parties who hold up the Belfast agreement as the be-all and end-all are the very same people who are now content to allow a majority vote? That has not happened in 50 years, and it runs absolutely contrary to the Belfast agreement, which the protocol is supposed to uphold.

Jim Allister: Yes; for the first time in over 50 years, we are going to have a majoritarian vote on a key issue, which, of course, has immense constitutional significance. That is why the Supreme Court of this land had to rule that the effect of the protocol was to put into suspension article VI of the Acts of Union, which is supposed to guarantee us all within this kingdom the same unfettered trade rights. Obviously, if we build a border that partitions and fetters trade, it cannot be said that there are the same constitutional and trading rights. Yet on that fundamental issue, we are going to have a majoritarian vote.

The message to Unionism—it is a very chilling message—is that cross-community votes were only ever about protecting nationalism; they were never about protecting Unionism. Unionists are just meant to suck it up, because this is the way forward. That is unacceptable. On behalf of those who sent me here believing that I was being sent here as a legislator, and sent Members to the Northern Ireland Assembly believing they were being sent there as legislators, I abhor and protest against the fact that in the next few weeks, we will have that obnoxious, obscene vote to remove from the people of Northern Ireland and their representatives the right to have a say in over 300 areas of law that govern them. There has never been a greater act of disenfranchisement of voters anywhere within this United Kingdom. It is wholly incompatible with the basic tenets of democracy.

People say, “How then do we handle the border?” Yes, there is a challenge in an interfacing border between EU and non-EU members, but the way to handle it is

not through this constitutional Union-dismantling monstrosity; it is to return to the basic elements that govern much of world trade. We should mutually respect the laws, requirements and trading demands of those with whom we are trading. We should mutually enforce, from one country to another, the standards and requirements of the country to which we are exporting. If we do that, we do not need the Irish sea border, or a border on the island of Ireland. It should be backed up with criminal sanction so that, if someone does trade in breach of the requirements of the recipient country, they face a penalty. That is how it should be done, but it was not done, simply because the EU saw an opportunity to make Northern Ireland the price of Brexit. We continue to pay that intolerable price.

In a couple of weeks, we will be debating my private Member’s Bill, which will address those very issues, and mutual enforcement will be at the heart of it, because that is the way for the Government. I know they inherited all this—maybe with some enthusiasm—but they can now fix it. If they do not, they are saying to my constituents, “You are some sort of second-class democrat. You are not entitled to elect those who make your laws. You must be a subservient rule-taker from politicians who make the laws for you in a foreign jurisdiction.” How insulting is that? Yet that is the essence of what the Windsor framework puts upon us.

11.15 am

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on securing the debate. It is good to see so many colleagues from Northern Ireland in the Chamber. All of us will agree on one thing: the importance of Northern Ireland to our Union.

The hon. and learned Member made with great passion a number of points that are familiar to me and others. In return, I say that the Government are committed to the implementation of the Windsor framework in good faith. We are also committed to protecting Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom and in the UK internal market. The arrangements made under the “Safeguarding the Union” Command Paper to further smooth the flow of goods are also intended to reaffirm in law Northern Ireland’s constitutional place in the UK internal market. The Government are clear that the Windsor framework arrangements, together with the steps taken under “Safeguarding the Union”, respect Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances and, crucially, they do so in a manner that is compatible with international law.

Let me say gently to the hon. and learned Gentleman that we have spent about nine years as a nation grappling with the problem—he referred to it as a challenge; I describe it as a problem—of how to protect the integrity of the UK’s internal market, avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, and respect the legitimate interests of our friends and neighbours in Brussels when it comes to the protection of the integrity of their single market. Those are the three things that had to be reconciled. Throughout that process, people have said, “There is another way you can do it. You can have mutual enforcement; you can have this, that and the other.” Those proposals were, during the height of the Brexit negotiations, referred to rather disobliging by others as “magical thinking”, but—

Jim Allister: The magical thinking originated within the European Commission. It was those in the European Commission who first postulated the idea of mutual enforcement, only to be shot down by an agenda from Dublin and the other European countries. The very genesis of it came because it was seen as a viable proposition—and why is it not a viable proposition to mutually enforce the requirements on trade going either way?

Hilary Benn: For my many and varied sins, I spent a number of years chairing the Brexit Select Committee. We looked at all of these things at great length, and I have to say to the hon. and learned Gentleman on the basis of that experience that nothing hove into view that would address the central question: how to maintain an open border—one of the very few things that everybody agreed on during Brexit was that there could not be checks or infrastructure at the border, for reasons that all of us in the Chamber well understand—while ensuring, as a good neighbour, that the European Union can be confident that goods arriving in Northern Ireland, which could then move freely into the EU by crossing the border into the Republic, comply with the rules of its single market.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State was elaborating on the problems we have to grapple with. Does he agree that there are just three ways of dealing with those problems? One is to ignore them in the hope that they will go away. The second is to keep complaining about them but not doing anything about them. The third is to actually work at resolving them, and that is what all of us, but principally His Majesty's Government, should be doing.

Hilary Benn: I hope it will not come as a surprise to the hon. Gentleman if I say that I agree with him. Complaining and ignoring does not get us very far. He anticipates what I am about to come on to: the progress we have seen as a result of the Windsor framework.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for getting to the point where he talks about progress, but I remind him, as he will have heard this morning, that every Ulster MP in Westminster Hall today rails against the fundamental impediment to our constitutional position and the overarching framework that has been imposed upon us against our will. But we worked on solutions and reached arrangements and agreements with the Government in "Safeguarding the Union" about ensuring the movement of goods within our UK internal market, which he supported when he was in opposition, and those agreements need to be honoured. While deadlines have slipped, there is a huge imperative for him and his Government to respond appropriately and earnestly implement the very things that saw a return to devolution in Northern Ireland.

Hilary Benn: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and he and I have had many discussions about progress on implementing the commitments made in "Safeguarding the Union". He can see the progress that has been made, and he and I have discussed issues where there is work in progress.

By the way, the original protocol, which had many flaws and difficulties, and the Windsor framework negotiated by the previous Government, which represents

a considerable improvement, were both approved democratically by this Parliament. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim argues that they were imposed from Brussels, but it was this Parliament that decided the way to reconcile the choices—impossible choices, in a way—that leaving the European Union created. Frankly, I would not have started from here, as I think he well understands, but this is a consequence of a decision taken by the British people, and Parliament decided to put these arrangements in place. To reject the idea that there is an issue that needs to be addressed is not the responsible thing to do, and therefore the Windsor framework represented a considerable step forward.

Sammy Wilson: The Secretary of State is making much of the fact that this Parliament imposed these arrangements on Northern Ireland, but he set out three objectives: to protect the EU market, to protect the Union and to protect the UK internal market. The European Union is happy with the arrangements, but the other two objectives have not been achieved. Whether this Parliament voted for it or not, the internal market is not operating. There are lots of examples of that, as the Secretary of State knows, because I am sure people complain to him every month, as they do to us. As has been pointed out, we are not part of the United Kingdom any longer when our laws cannot even be made in our own Parliament.

Hilary Benn: Northern Ireland is very much part of the United Kingdom. I was merely pointing out that the protocol and the Windsor framework were democratic decisions of this Parliament, of which Northern Ireland is a part. After much debate, consideration, argument and disputation, that is how this Parliament decided to move things forward. The Windsor framework, which I spoke in favour of and supported, was a considerable step forward on the arrangements originally negotiated in the Northern Ireland protocol, which were never going to work. For example, requiring an export health certificate for every one of the items on the back of the supermarket lorries that come across from Cairnryan to Larne and Belfast every single night was never a practical proposition. The Windsor framework has replaced potentially 1,000 or 2,000 certificates with one certificate. That is a step forward by anybody's definition.

Turning to the question of the consent vote, that is part of the provision that has been made to allow the Assembly to take a decision. I have triggered the consent process, as Members will be aware. It is for the Assembly to take that decision. If it approves the continued operation of the Windsor framework, it will last for another eight years if the approval is on a cross-community basis, or—I speak from memory—for another four years if not. It is for the Members of the Assembly to make that decision, but the framework really does bring a lot of benefits.

At the beginning of his contribution, the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim talked about the fettering of Northern Ireland businesses' access to GB, if I heard him correctly. There is no fettering of Northern Ireland businesses' access to GB.

Jim Allister: I referred specifically to access from GB to Northern Ireland—the supply chain—because our manufacturing businesses depend on raw materials from GB. That has been fettered, and that is what caused the Supreme Court to say that article 6 is in suspension.

Hilary Benn: I did listen very carefully. The record will show exactly what the hon. and learned Gentleman said, but I take his point. When it comes to access to materials and goods moving from GB to Northern Ireland, that does happen under the Windsor framework. There are certain things that businesses have to do, but the goods do flow, and it is important to recognise that in this debate. Indeed, 71% of respondents to last year's Northern Ireland annual trade survey said that dual market access was enabling their business to grow, so we should listen to what Northern Ireland businesses say. We have the Northern Ireland retail movement scheme, the internal market scheme and the Northern Ireland plant health label scheme, all of which help businesses to do business.

One of the gains as a result of the Windsor framework is that UK public health and safety standards apply on the basis that the goods will remain in Northern Ireland. That is a big step forward compared with what was previously the case. The framework has unlocked agreements with the EU on tariff rate quotas, enabling businesses from Northern Ireland to import steel and agrifood products under UK tariff rates. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) referred to the duty reimbursement scheme, but that is now operating. An agreement was reached on human medicines.

We will continue to work with the European Union to implement the Windsor framework in good faith, and to deal with some of the challenges. As hon. Members know, I spend quite a lot of my time dealing with some of the challenges that arise from the implementation of the arrangement. There has been a delay in the arrival of the parcels scheme, which has put back the new, much reduced customs and information requirements. Those will now come into effect next year. We have also reached an agreement with the EU on dental amalgam. Those are all examples of practical ways of making progress.

Alex Easton *rose*—

Hilary Benn: I am about to conclude, but I will give way one last time.

Alex Easton: There may have been some progress in certain areas of the Windsor framework, but there are still problems with pet passports for those travelling from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland, there are still barriers to trade—I recently wrote to the Secretary of State about lorries being turned away from ports—and there are still problems with medication, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder drugs. Some people are ordering those goods online, and others are not able to get them at all. There are still substantial issues, and there is still a border down the Irish sea. Does the Secretary of State understand how that makes us feel as Unionists who want to remain part of the United Kingdom?

Hilary Benn: I do understand, and I hear the strength of feeling. I have tried to explain why we are in this situation. It is our departure from the European Union that has created every single one of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has just identified. We have to find a practical way forward in honouring the decision that the British people made in the referendum.

Many of the issues that have been identified today could be resolved if we are able to negotiate a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement and a veterinary agreement with the European Union. This Government have come into office committed to trying to do that. The last Government were not committed to doing that. As every hon. Member in the Chamber knows, we will get such an agreement only if we honour the last agreement we signed with the European Union, because why would they give us an agreement if we prove ourselves to be unreliable?

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Occupied Palestinian Territories: Humanitarian Situation

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I do not intend to take up too much time in today's debate as I hope that as many colleagues as possible will have time to speak. The issue concerns us all, so it is right that we all have the opportunity to make a contribution.

As we know, it is just over 400 days since the horrific events of 7 October when over 1,200 people were killed in Hamas attacks in Israel. Over 30 of the hostages taken that day are believed to be still in Gaza. It is beyond time that they were released and returned to their lives and families. It was of course the events of 7 October that triggered Israel's attacks on Gaza and the humanitarian crisis we are debating here today. An official death toll of some 43,391 people, of which 16,500 are children, with 10,000 people missing and presumed dead, are shocking statistics, and 72% of those killed are women and children. *The Lancet* has recently published a report that suggests that the death toll may be closer to 186,000. It has almost got to the point where the numbers are so overwhelming that we are in danger of becoming inured to what they represent.

A few weeks ago, with other colleagues, I attended a presentation that brought home exactly what those numbers and statistics mean. The presentation was given by Professor Nizam Mamode, a volunteer surgeon working with Medical Aid for Palestinians. The event was organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed). Professor Mamode is a vascular surgeon of great experience who has worked in numerous war zones and has recently been in Palestine. I thought I had seen and heard it all: the death, disease and sheer brutality reported on our TV screens night after night. But then I went to Professor Mamode's presentation. He spoke calmly and slowly about his experiences in Palestine, using slides and a video diary, and demonstrated the symmetrical puncture wounds on a dead child's body—wounds in the region of the body's major arteries that were too precise to have been the work of a human sniper. They were the work of drones targeted at innocent civilians, and in this case a child.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The intolerable humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the west bank is precisely why we need an immediate ceasefire and a surge of aid. The recent reports of Israeli troops bombing and clearing northern Gaza and then not allowing Palestinians to return to their lands is surely tantamount to ethnic cleansing and is utterly deplorable. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is up to the international community, including our Government, to call out the Netanyahu regime so that it stops such actions?

Patricia Ferguson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The situation is of course getting worse rather than better as we watch the actions in northern Gaza unfold. The presentation that some of us observed from Professor Mamode was heart-rending in many ways. He also spoke about not having medicines or anaesthetics for people, including children having major surgery. The children were being operated on in hospital beds, the adults on the floor. He also spoke about the young intensive care doctor he knew who contracted hepatitis A and died because of the lack of a relatively straightforward medication. As a colleague said that night, the silence of the room at the end of Professor Mamode's presentation was powerful.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I would also like to thank Dr Mamode and his colleagues for the incredible bravery and compassion that they have shown to those living in desperate circumstances. They have not only shown immense care but worked tirelessly to shed light on the plight of those people, as we saw in his testimony to last week's meeting of the International Development Committee. Does my hon. Friend agree that the absolute horrors of treating children and adults without the medical basics, such as swab sanitisers or even anaesthetic, cannot continue and there must be safe routes for medical provisions to enter Gaza? Does she also agree that there must be a future with long-term physical and mental health support?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Interventions are interventions, not speeches. As the hon. Lady can see, there are quite a lot of Members who wish to participate in this debate. We cannot have speeches under the guise of interventions.

Patricia Ferguson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the heroism, frankly, of people like Dr Mamode. I recall that, when showing us a short video from his video diary, he pointed out that the noise in the background was the noise of drones. Medical staff are not exempt from these attacks, nor are civilian people who are there helping with the humanitarian effort. So, we do have to speak about that bravery.

To have someone like Dr Mamode, who has experienced that horror at first hand, who has given up his own time to try to help and who clearly despairs, was something that I do not think any of us who were present will ever forget. For me, it was the cold calculation of using machines to kill children, as though it was some kind of warped video game, that was the most disturbing aspect of Professor Mamode's presentation, and which made those statistics that I spoke about earlier mean a great deal.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. We also heard evidence from a Médecins Sans Frontières medic who reported similar atrocities being experienced. Last week, international lawyers said that this had gone beyond the realms of self-defence by Israel. On the unilateral move the Knesset has made to stop the United Nations Relief and Works Agency's activity in Gaza, how does my hon. Friend think we as a Government can respond to that?

Patricia Ferguson: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point that I was just about to come to, so it is very timely. I think our Government have to work very hard

with the international community to try to find a way—and hard it will be—to bypass the Israeli Government and ensure that we manage to get humanitarian assistance into Gaza. We already know that some of the aid convoys have been disrupted in recent times since the Knesset decision, and we have to find ways of getting that aid in. The aid is there, but it is being stopped, it is being looted and it is being prevented from getting to those who need it.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): We are all moved by these stories, and when we see the pain in the eyes of the children, we think: where has our compassion, our humanity, gone? There have also been some reports that aid has gone into schools, for instance, and those schools have then been bombed, so therefore there is no aid. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to be serious about ensuring that this crisis ends soon?

Patricia Ferguson: I agree with my hon. Friend that we have to redouble our efforts, and we have to do more than just talk about what is happening in Gaza; we have to act to ensure that this comes to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my good and hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate her on securing this very important debate. “Hopeless, Starving, and Besieged” is the title of a new report from Human Rights Watch, which refers to 1.9 million Palestinians being forcibly displaced. So, does she think that the International Criminal Court’s prosecutor should see this action as a crime against humanity and look at imposing targeted sanctions immediately, alongside the humanitarian aid going in?

Patricia Ferguson: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. With the news that the Israeli Government have banned UNRWA from working in Israel and occupied east Jerusalem, and that even conversations between UNRWA staff and Israeli officials will be banned, the 2 million people who are currently dependant on UNRWA aid are made even more vulnerable as winter approaches, especially because, as she said, most Palestinians have been displaced at least once, if not more often, and many are now living in makeshift tents. And when I say “tents”, I emphasise that they are not “tents” as we understand tents to be; they are collections of fabric, cardboard and anything that can be scrounged or scavenged, assembled to try to give some shelter to very vulnerable families.

So, it is incumbent upon us as a country to do everything we can to end this carnage and to help those most in need. I hope that today the Minister here in Westminster Hall might be able to tell us that the UK will vote to support a ceasefire when the resolution comes before the UN Security Council later today.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for securing this debate. I think we can all agree that the number of children involved in this conflict, particularly the 16,000 children who have been killed, is just absolutely horrific. The UK has suspended some arms licences to Israel, but in light of the violations of humanitarian principle and law that she has talked about, including the conditions in hospitals and so on, does she agree that a total suspension of arms to Israel is now called for?

Patricia Ferguson: I thank my friend for that intervention. The shocking aspect of the statistics is that the figure of 16,000 children who have been killed does not refer, of course, to those children who have been maimed. I would personally like to see more of those young people, or at least some of those young people, being able to come to Europe, including to Britain, to receive treatment, because their injuries are severe and often they have not received the treatment that they needed at the time of surgery. Their situation is dire, but we could help to make it less dire; indeed, we could make it easier for those young people to live good lives in the future and to be able to achieve everything they are capable of. So, I think we have to look at every opportunity and I hope that the Government keep under review the situation regarding the sale of arms to Israel, and that they will, when the time is right, make that decision.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is making a very powerful case and many of us share her deep concern for the children in Gaza. Does she recognise, as I do, that the time has probably now come for the UK to use its full range of diplomatic powers to express its concerns, particularly regarding the comments in the last 24 hours by Finance Minister Smotrich, who has called for Israel to permanently occupy Gaza as a means of getting the hostages home? The hostage families do not want that; Israeli communities oppose it. So, does she agree that it is time for us to stand with all those Israelis and Palestinians against that kind of extremist language, because it does not help the people of Gaza and it will not end this crisis?

Patricia Ferguson: I agree with my hon. Friend; that kind of language does not help the people of Gaza, or the hostages. That is the message that many of the hostage families have been trying to get across. There have been massive protests all through this horrible period. Indeed, at the weekend, despite the fact that demonstrations have apparently been restricted to 2,000 people at a time, there were demonstrations where exactly that kind of point was being made and where many Israeli people were criticising those members of their own Government in a way that perhaps has not been heard before.

I was about to say that it would be helpful if the Minister could give us an indication of when sanctions against Smotrich and Ben-Gvir would be introduced.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this very important debate. In particular, she is absolutely right to set out the horrific, indeed unimaginable, humanitarian situation facing the Palestinians. She is also right to point out the role of the Security Council; indeed, there is a vote on this situation today. However, she will be aware that the Security Council has passed a number of resolutions. We have had an interim ruling from the International Criminal Court and a number of rulings from the International Court of Justice, notably the most recent one, adopted by the General Assembly, which places our Government under an obligation. The reality is that all that is falling on deaf ears. Does the hon. Lady agree that the time for talking is over and that we need real action, starting with immediate sanctions?

Patricia Ferguson: I think the hon. Member will accept that I have said that there should be sanctions, particularly against Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, but I also

[Patricia Ferguson]

think that we have at this point—perhaps we should have done it sooner—to formally accept Palestinian statehood and argue for that.

The city of Glasgow, my home city, has for many years been twinned with Bethlehem. As we approach the season of advent, I recall the image of the Christmas crib created last year by the Evangelical Lutheran church in Bethlehem: instead of the traditional stable, images of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus were placed among the rubble. That was the reality for most Palestinians then, and of course the situation is so much worse now. In fact, Professor Mamode, whom I mentioned earlier, described the scenes in Gaza as he travelled down from Israel as looking like descriptions he had read of Hiroshima after the explosion of the atomic bomb.

We have to hope, pray, work hard and use everything in our power to try to end this seemingly endless cycle of violence, horror and despair, but it will end only if Governments stand together and advocate for a ceasefire and the release of hostages. A two-state solution, rooted in peace and respect, must follow, and we must also commit to assisting with the rebuilding of Palestine. I thank you, Sir Roger, and all those who are going to speak in the debate. I hope that we see a resolution before too long.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Could those who wish to speak in the debate remain standing for a quick headcount? [*Interruption.*] We are going to put a three-minute time limit on immediately, and that may have to be reduced. I am conscious of the fact that some people have intervened, and I am assuming that those who have intervened do not intend to speak. Priority will be given to those who have not intervened.

2.47 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this crucial debate.

As the Member outlined, the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is beyond dire, and I will not repeat the details of how awful the situation is. Suffice it to say that all we have to do is look at our phones to see Palestinian refugees being bombed, murdered and repeatedly displaced on a daily basis. I want to use my time to concentrate on what this Government are going to do. Their record to date has been abysmal. From the Prime Minister legitimising the right of Israel to impose a siege on the entire population to the Foreign Secretary appearing to be ignorant of the meaning of the word “genocide” and the Government refusing to impose any meaningful sanctions on either arms sales or illegal settlements, this Government’s failure to take action against ethnic cleansing and genocide has made them complicit in those acts.

I draw our Government’s attention to the actions of the Irish Government, and suggest they take a leaf out of their book. At the moment, the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill is making its way through the Irish parliamentary system, where it has received Government and cross-party support. The Bill is not new: it was first introduced in 2018, and there were concerns at the time that its measures might be in

breach of EU law. However, the Irish Attorney General has updated his legal advice to refer the Bill to the next stage of the Irish parliamentary process, following the ICJ’s ruling in its advisory opinion in July. As discussed previously in Parliament, the ruling found that Israeli settlements in the west bank and East Jerusalem were in breach of international law. It found that occupation of those territories amounts to long-term annexation, which has undermined the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, and that the occupation must be brought to an immediate end. Therefore, countries can no longer lawfully trade with those settlements.

When the Bill is passed, Ireland will become the first EU country to ban trade with those illegal settlements, which are the main impediment to Palestinian rights to self-determination. The response of successive UK Governments to the issue of illegal settlements is to say that the UK does not recognise them, and that goods originating from the settlements are not entitled to tariff or trade preferences, while at the same time refusing to actually suspend trade in goods and services between the UK and companies operating in the illegal settlements. While I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s introduction of new sanctions on three illegal settler outposts, and four organisations that have supported and sponsored violence against communities, his actions are ineffective and ambiguous. Why just impose sanctions on a handful of settlements? There are at least 144 settlements sanctioned by the Israeli Government, and another 196 outposts.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I must ask hon. Members to keep an eye on the clock.

2.51 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this important debate.

As we meet today, there is increasing evidence that what is being done to the Palestinians of Gaza will come to be understood as crimes of historic magnitude. Our response to them and our efforts to stop them should be of a gravity that is equal to the moment we are in.

The last time we spoke on the issue in the Chamber, I expressed grave concern that Israel was preventing aid from entering Gaza, and that it might even go as far as preventing the UN from carrying out its duties in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Since then, the Knesset has passed a Bill banning UNRWA from Israeli territory and occupied Palestinian territory, and it has even banned the UN Secretary-General.

I spoke about the situation in the north of Gaza, including at Kamal Adwan hospital, where the Israeli military’s actions were endangering the lives of children in paediatric intensive care. Some of those children were killed after the hospital was besieged and many medical workers were abducted. They must be released. How will the Government help to ensure those responsible are held accountable?

The denial of humanitarian assistance has been accompanied by what Human Rights Watch referred to last week as

“massive, deliberate forced displacement of Palestinian civilians in Gaza”.

Human Rights Watch made it clear that the Israeli authorities are responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said:

“We are facing what could amount to atrocity crimes, including potentially extending to crimes against humanity.”

One person who is similarly clear is the Israeli National Security Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir. In the summer, he said he wanted to “encourage emigration” from Gaza and replace the population with Israeli settlers. I remind the House that forced displacement constitutes a crime against humanity.

Finally, I share the words of my friend Moe, a doctor and aid worker in Gaza. He is Palestinian. Last night he said:

“I’ve started to feel like the world has forgotten about us. It’s been over a year now and it feels as though no one is paying attention anymore, as there is no change at any level. I’m still displaced here in Khanyounis...The situation is getting more dire. At times, it really starts to feel like this is the ‘new normal’ we’re going to have to endure for years to come. Death and destruction might never end. I have been once to the North, where my home is, and I think only that day I understood what this war is about—it is about the Land.”

Therefore, I ask the Minister what fresh action the Government are taking to pressure Israel into complying with the ICJ’s multiple binding orders? In light of Ben-Gvir’s many statements of intent, and as part of a wider package of measures, will the Government now announce sanctions against both Ben-Gvir and Smotrich?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. We must keep an eye on the clock. *[Interruption.]*

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

3.19 pm

On resuming—

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I want to make three brief points.

First, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) raised the issue of the children who have been seriously injured in Gaza and the west bank. I think this is the ninth occasion on which I have raised the same issue, either in debates or in correspondence. It would be helpful to have a response from the Minister, who has looked at the progress on developing the scheme we have been recommending, based on the Ukrainian scheme, to get children here for treatment. There has been a willingness from a number of clinicians in this country to facilitate that.

Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) may raise this point as well, but members of the Fire Brigades Union have raised funds and provided a fire and rescue vehicle for use in Palestine to enable people to be saved and rescued from the rubble of the bombings. The Israeli Government have prevented that vehicle from being delivered. I urge the Government to intervene to ensure that it is.

Thirdly, the world has changed with the election of Donald Trump. Certainly the direction of travel has changed with regard to Netanyahu and his colleagues in the Cabinet. They believe that they have permission to annex all of Palestine, and that they can act with complete impunity now that Donald Trump has been elected.

The onus therefore falls upon the shoulders of our Government to be the leaders seeking peace in the world. We also recognise that words have not been good enough to protect the Palestinian people or to move the situation towards a ceasefire. That is why I have come to the conclusion that our Government must lead on the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. We have the potential to unite a whole range of countries across the globe—in the global south as well as across Europe—in taking serious action on BDS. We will have a meeting on Saturday morning in my community, where we will look at how we can undertake sanctions locally. Our local shops did a boycott on Israeli goods last time this situation occurred, and that is what we will be developing.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): Last week, a United Nations special committee found that Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war, and that Israel’s methods of warfare in Gaza are consistent with genocide. Given that, to put an end to the humanitarian crisis, do we not need to see tough sanctions on Israel—on arms, trade and individuals—until Israel finally stops violating international law?

John McDonnell: I can see no other option now. We have tried everything else. We have tried dialogue. We have tried pressure. We have tried to form alliances and to support progressive forces within Israel itself. All of that has failed. I think someone mentioned that every night, we come home and we watch children dying in front of our eyes on television. I think there is nothing else, so I urge the Government to rethink their strategy and become the leaders in the BDS movement across Europe and the global south, because that is the only way we will be able to shift this Israeli Government away from murdering more of the people in Palestine.

3.22 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this vital and urgent debate.

I will start by telling the story of Mohammed, a new-born baby in northern Gaza. Just a few hours after Mohammed was born, he and his mother, Raghad, had to be transferred to a new hospital amid fears for their safety. On the way, their ambulance was hit by an Israeli missile. The paramedics survived and tried to save the mother and baby, but they were hit by a second missile. Twenty hours later, Mohammed was found as the only survivor. Sky News reported that he was cradled in his dead mother’s arms.

Sadly, Mohammed’s story is not a one-off. On 8 November, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published its report on verifiable deaths in Gaza—deaths with three independent sources to corroborate them. The UN found that close to 70% of the fatalities were children and women.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that the toll and the impact on children has been absolutely devastating? Over 16,000 have been killed in Gaza, but it has also been the deadliest year in the west bank with 171 deaths, which is the greatest number of children being killed at any one time since the Israeli army seized control of the area

[Harpreet Uppal]

in 1967. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must do more to meet our aims on international humanitarian law?

Paul Waugh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To back up her point, in residential housing, where the vast majority of people die in Gaza, 44% of deaths have been children and 26% have been women. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said on 8 November that

“this unprecedented level of killing, and injury of civilians is a direct consequence of the failure to comply with fundamental principles of international humanitarian law—namely, the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack.”

These deaths of children are not one-offs. They are not exceptions that prove the rule of Israeli safeguards in the theatre of conflict. The frequent, relentless loss of civilian life proves that rule of law—international law—is being wilfully ignored. The repeated restrictions on humanitarian aid to Gaza are further breaches of basic fundamental international legal obligations on an occupying power and, let us not forget, this is an occupying power.

Despite the US’s ultimatum prompting some opening of crossings recently, there is still a trickle of aid going into Gaza and winter is coming. The UN and the UK rightly condemned Hamas’s rampage of killing, barbarism and hostage-taking on 7 October 2023. The very act of taking and keeping hostages is itself a war crime and the anguish their families face must be unbearable. Nothing can ever justify or excuse the horror of 7 October, but nothing can ever justify or excuse the massive loss of civilian life that has followed day in, day out ever since.

Can I ask the Minister if she believes the UK is fulfilling its own obligations under international law as affects our trade and arms links with Israel, not just in Gaza but in the illegal settlements in the west bank? Given that ultimately the only route to peace for Israelis and Palestinians is a negotiated settlement, can I ask what progress the UK has made in working with other countries to recognise the state of Palestine as soon as possible?

3.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Members might be aware that I am a friend of Israel and I have visited Israel in a delegation to see at first hand the devastation that people are living through there this year. However, being a friend of Israel does not make me an enemy of the people of Gaza and I wish to make that very clear from the outset.

This is an issue that stirs deep emotions and concerns, and I commend my colleagues for their dedication to discussing these critical matters, especially as we consider the recent and devastating events of 7 October. The attack on Israel by Hamas, a recognised terrorist organisation, was a tragedy of immense proportions. Over 1,200 lives were taken, and acts of violence committed so horrific that they have left an indelible scar. We witnessed the murder of innocent civilians, the targeting of women and children, acts of brutality that defy comprehension. The trauma of that day will remain with us, and more importantly with the victims’ families, forever. It is right that we call out those atrocities for what they are—acts of terror designed to destroy the very fabric of peace.

Yet as we rightly condemn Hamas, we must also turn our attention to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza and the west bank. The Palestinian people, who have long endured hardship, find themselves caught in the crossfire of this conflict. They suffer from a lack of access to basic necessities, such as food, clean water and medical care. The destruction of infrastructure and the blockade have exacerbated that plight.

Let me be clear that recognising the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people does not and should not conflict with our unwavering support for Israel’s right to defend itself. The humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, especially in Gaza, has reached a critical level. Attacks have disproportionately affected vulnerable groups such as women, children and the elderly. The healthcare system has collapsed and humanitarian access remains severely restricted, with only a fraction of aid trucks permitted to enter Gaza daily.

The road to peace is complex, and part of that journey must include a mutual recognition of rights. Palestine must acknowledge Israel’s right to exist in every sense of the word—politically, socially, territorially—and with that recognition must come a clear and unequivocal renunciation of violence. Terrorist attacks launched from Palestine territories must cease, not only because they undermine peace but because they perpetuate a cycle of suffering for both Israelis and for Palestinians.

I am particularly pleased to see the Minister in her place. She knows that I am fond of her because she answers questions and has compassion and understanding. The justice that she promotes is well known and so I very much look forward to hearing how the Government plan to address this pressing issue with urgency and clarity.

Let us not forget that the humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories is a symptom of a deeper conflict. It is a conflict rooted in historical grievances, territorial disputes and mutual mistrust. Addressing humanitarian needs is essential but it must be accompanied by a robust effort to tackle those underlying issues. We must use all of our influence to encourage a return to meaningful negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. The ultimate goal must be a two-state solution in which both peoples can live side by side in peace and security.

3.29 pm

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I welcome this opportunity to discuss the ongoing atrocities in Gaza, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. I also thank my constituents who have made it here from Earley and Woodley. I know that this is a top issue of concern for them and for many of us across the country, and the amount of correspondence I receive on this issue far exceeds any other.

There is little more that I can add to what hon. Members have already said about the horrors we are seeing in Gaza. One of my constituents, who is a GP, described to me his trip to Gaza in 2015. He had been sent to inspect al-Ahli hospital, which had been bombed the previous year in 2014. That hospital was bombed once again over the last year, and through his contacts at the hospital, my constituent has told me that thankfully most of the staff there have survived. Against the odds, they amazingly continue to operate a very reduced service in that hospital.

Testimonies such as that of my constituent and his contacts are all the more rare because we are now seeing an effective blockade on information coming out of Gaza, and I want to touch on the issues facing journalists in the region. Many hon. Members have noted the horrific images and videos coming out of Gaza; however, we are seeing only a drop in the ocean of what is actually happening in the region. There are now almost no journalists left, and it has been one of the most deadly wars for journalists in history. Israeli forces have killed over 140 journalists according to Reporters Without Borders, 34 of whom were killed while working. I spoke to one journalist recently who described to me the following:

“Journalists have been targeted and it has been made difficult for them to leave. Their lives have been made miserable. In previous wars there were places possible to stay—but here the journalists can’t find anywhere. The inability to get images and reporting on the ground lessens the impact of reporting, and the inability of readers to understand what is happening there...Over time, the level of attention dissipates because readers are weary. The challenge for us is to find new ways of covering it.”

I know that a former colleague of mine made an extended and prolonged attempt to leave the region, and thankfully has done so, but there are many more journalists who have been unable to leave, despite being maimed and in severe difficulty. What can we do about that as an issue?

I thank the Government and the Minister for their existing attempts to get aid into the region, but the situation has now changed for the worse because of the blockage on UNRWA aid, as we heard from other Members. The UK needs to take leadership on this issue and I ask the Minister how the Government plan to vote tonight on the UN Security Council resolution on a ceasefire. Many of my colleagues have already brought up the issue of sanctions, and it is important that we proceed with sanctions, particularly against the Israeli Finance Minister and the Israeli National Security Minister, in accordance with our obligations on humanitarian issues and under international law. Will the Minister consider these representations?

3.32 pm

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. The situation for the Palestinian people at this moment is beyond desperate. The Israeli response to the atrocity of 7 October has been vast and ruthless, from large-scale indiscriminate bombing to snipers and drones targeting civilians as they gather water and even as they sleep. Israeli tanks have been used to attack unarmed civilians, and the images of people being burned alive in their tents just a few short weeks ago will surely be seared into all our minds. Gazans are routinely left to die in agony under rubble or destroyed buildings, with multiple generations of families being wiped out in an instant, as the crowded homes that they live in are razed to the ground. What were once hospitals and refugee camps are now cemeteries. That is the brutal and horrendous reality.

It is the assessment of the Red Cross that this conflict shows no sign of abating, and the humanitarian situation deteriorates by the hour. More than 43,000 people have died in occupied Gaza, as well as a further 730 in the west bank, and 72% of those killed are women and children. At least 101,000 people have been injured in Gaza, and a further 5,500 in the west bank. The healthcare system,

as has been touched on, is set to collapse imminently. Entire neighbourhoods have been destroyed, and shamefully, UNRWA aid has been legislated against by the Knesset.

Meanwhile, the UNRWA Commissioner-General, Philippe Lazzarini, has described Gaza as an “unrelenting dystopian horror”. He notes:

“Nearly the entire population has been displaced multiple times...Across Gaza, 660,000 children who should be in school are learning nothing more than how to survive.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) highlighted, many of those children are being targeted by drones. The global community recognises Israel’s right to self-defence, and it is imperative that the hostages, so cruelly held by Hamas, are released, but the violence, horror, suffering and injustice directed at innocent Palestinians must end immediately. Israel must comply with the instructions of the ICJ and the UN; there must be an immediate halt to this action and full accountability. This horror must end now and the full might of the British state must be brought to this matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Will Members stand again, please? One or two people who were standing are not now.

3.35 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. As we have heard from other hon. Members, the death and destruction meted out in Gaza has been horrendous: 43,000 people have been killed since 7 October last year, nearly three quarters of them women and children. A child is killed in Gaza every 10 minutes. A full 90% of the population, almost the entire Gaza strip, has been forced to leave their homes. Most have been displaced many times, with some families being forced to move seven, eight or nine times over the past 13 months.

Some might justify that as a sad but inevitable result of fighting a terrorist organisation in a densely populated area. Although Israel has every right to respond to the awful attacks by Hamas on 7 October, the disregard for civilian lives and the failure to ensure adequate humanitarian access during its response is completely unacceptable.

I feel I have some authority in this matter, having twice served with the Royal Marines in Afghanistan, where we were fighting a terrorist organisation in built-up areas with many civilians. It is indisputable that the Israel Defence Forces’ conduct in Gaza over the past 13 months has been massively disproportionate, and that the impact on civilians has breached international humanitarian law. Regularly dropping 2,000 lb bombs in built-up areas, destroying tens of thousands of homes, and the unavoidable civilian casualties in that area is completely unacceptable.

Again and again, they are targeting protected facilities such as schools and hospitals, including al-Aqsa hospital just last month, where civilians were burnt to death in a safe zone that they had been told to relocate to. As a result of fighting, now only two of Gaza’s 36 permanent hospitals still have full functioning capacity. Israel has also failed to protect aid workers, with more than 300 aid workers killed during the fighting, including three former British servicemen killed by an Israeli missile attack in April.

[Alex Ballinger]

As we have heard from others, Israel continues to block the access of essential humanitarian aid. Oxfam, Save the Children and Refugees International have all called for Israel to comply with demands for better humanitarian access. Rather than improving access, the Israeli Knesset has called for UNRWA to be banned from working in Israeli territories. UNRWA has said that the practical implications of the ban would make it almost impossible for its aid workers to operate in the country. That decision alone will be catastrophic for the 1.9 million Palestinians who are currently displaced in the area.

Although we are appalled at the 43,000 who have been killed so far, those of us who have worked in conflict zones know that hunger, disease, starvation and exposure will kill more people than the fighting. With the collapse of the health system, we are already seeing outbreaks of hepatitis A, polio and chicken pox. I ask the Minister to update the House on what steps the Government are taking to hold Israel to account for the protection of civilians in Gaza, aid workers and medical staff working in the few hospitals that remain intact.

3.39 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): The nightmare unfolding in Gaza is a deliberate, unparalleled human catastrophe. This is not merely a crisis; this is genocide and extermination. Those are not just my words but the conclusions of the UN commission of inquiry. In northern Gaza, more than 400,000 Palestinians are trapped under relentless Israeli bombardment. Families fleeing are gunned down and so-called safe zones are turned into death traps.

Children are killed on the streets, with five to nine-year-olds the most killed age group in Gaza. Families are burned alive by incendiary weapons. Hospitals, schools and refugee camps are obliterated. Since 1 October, essential aid has been blocked by Israel. Gaza is starving and its health system has collapsed. Diseases such as polio have returned, and the UN describes the situation as “apocalyptic”. The so-called humanitarian zones in southern Gaza offer no refuge.

Over 1 million people are crammed into unliveable conditions. They are not evacuations; they are forced transfers and war crimes under international law. Furthermore, escape routes are bombed. People are trapped with nowhere to go. Over 90% of Gaza’s infrastructure has been destroyed, making return impossible. That is ethnic cleansing. Israeli officials brazenly promised it and delivered it. The International Criminal Court and UN experts also confirm it. Targeting civilians, blocking aid and destroying survival infrastructure meet the legal criteria of genocide, despite what the Prime Minister says at Prime Minister’s questions.

So what has the UK done? Far from neutral, the UK is an active participant in genocide. British-made components are part of every single F-35 fighter jet raining down death on Gaza. Every single bomb dropped and every single life lost bears the stain of British support. Such complicity is undeniable. Yesterday, in a hearing at the royal courts of justice, the Government admitted two chilling facts. First, there is a clear risk that UK-made F-35 parts could be used in violations of

international humanitarian law. Secondly, the Government’s own assessment, made on 24 July 2024, concluded that Israel is not committed to complying with international humanitarian law. Those admissions trigger the UK’s legal obligation under criterion 2c of the strategic export licence criteria, which states that exports cannot be allowed if there is a clear risk of misuse.

Despite that, the Government have allowed exports to continue for five weeks, during which over 1,700 Palestinians were killed. The Defence Secretary has defended this carve-out for F-35s, prioritising “US confidence in the UK” over Palestinian lives. How disturbing. The UK Government have a duty to prevent and punish genocide. By refusing to act, they risk not only complicity, but criminal liability.

3.41 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing this debate. I know that all my hon. Friends look on in horror at the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I have long called for an immediate ceasefire from all sides to take the difficult journey to peace and achieve a two-state solution.

A week ago the International Development Committee heard from the Palestinian Red Crescent that the situation on the ground in Gaza, far from getting better, has deteriorated since it last gave evidence in January. On Thursday, Human Rights Watch published its report, “Hopeless, Starving and Besieged—Israel’s Forced Displacement of Palestinians in Gaza”, which makes it clear that there is nowhere safe in Gaza.

Under the Geneva convention, Israel as an occupying power has an obligation to ensure that civilians are not subjected to reprisals and that education and healthcare are available. Israel must provide protections to health services and is required to ensure that the provision of food and medical supplies are facilitated if need be. Article 49 of the Geneva convention should ensure that somewhere in Gaza is safe for ordinary Palestinians.

There is much debate on whether Israel has followed international humanitarian law in forcibly transferring people to southern Gaza. It appears that the generals’ plans are being implemented, with bombings seen in Jabalia and Beit Lahia. I would argue that the Israeli Government have not attempted to comply with article 49. Some 96% of Gaza’s population is relying on food aid. Nine out of 10 children are not receiving the nutrition they need for growth and development, and the already low level of food aid entering Gaza is at the lowest this year. That is all a clear breach of article 49.

The Israeli Government not only have a significant responsibility over the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but significant power. I am keen to hear from the Minister what action the UK Government are taking to ensure that more aid gets into Gaza, especially as we approach the colder months, including any pressure the Government are putting on the Israeli Government to allow more aid into Gaza. A July press release from the Foreign Office indicated that the Department would issue a response to the ICJ’s advisory opinion on Israel and the occupied territories. I am also keen to hear from the Minister when her Department will issue the final response.

3.44 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this vital debate.

The current humanitarian situation in Palestine needs to be analysed through a much wider historical lens, because the intense suffering being felt by Palestinians began many decades ago. The term “Nakba” translates from Arabic as “the catastrophe”, and it is a catastrophe that is felt by Palestinians as a collective trauma. The Nakba in 1948 led to approximately 750,000 people, half of Palestine’s predominantly Arab population, being expelled from their homes and having to flee their communities. Displacement is not a new occurrence for Palestinians. From the 1940s to the present day, ethnic cleansing has been continuous. It is part of the daily struggle of the colonised Palestinian people. Ilan Pappé, the Israeli historian, described it perfectly when he said, “Palestine’s blood never dried.”

The seizing of land and possessions, the violence, the refusal to recognise culture and basic human rights, the imprisonment, the apartheid and now the blocking of water, food, medicine and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) mentioned, even a fire engine donated by the Fire Brigades Union Scotland to the people of Gaza when they need it most—these are all examples of settler colonialism that sees removal of the local population through ethnic cleansing and a genocide.

The international community, and especially the UK and the US in their November and December United Nations Security Council presidencies, must do more, and a lot more than the timid condemnation of the Israeli Government’s belligerent and truculent actions, which have inflicted death and destruction. We must let the world see just how special a relationship we really have by stopping all arms sales to Israel, achieving the release of all hostages, brokering an end to the killing with a lasting ceasefire, making sure that lifesaving humanitarian aid reaches those people in dire need, and by ensuring a safe Israel alongside a rebuilt, prosperous and free Palestine. That means a free Palestine that is not an open-air prison shoehorned into a confined area, but a real nation with its people free of the relentless Nakba and persecution that they have been the victim of for generations.

3.47 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this debate.

There is no shying away from the fact that a heartbreaking humanitarian catastrophe is occurring in the west bank, in the Gaza Strip and more recently in Lebanon, with, of course, the threat of wider escalation. The depth of destruction is immense—over 40,000 Palestinians killed, 16,000 of them children. The scale of these numbers is unfathomable, so let me put it into context. Entire areas have been reduced to piles of rubble. Families have been forced to flee from their homes, in the process losing their loved ones, and many of them will never return home. These are real people, with real hopes, real aspirations and real dreams—lives and communities shattered; every last memory reduced to dust. The people I am talking about are not fighters, but ordinary civilians—families with children.

Among the death and destruction, Israel’s Knesset has passed Bills to restrict UNWRA aid from getting into the region. The Knesset has also moved to restrict basic necessities such as bread, shelter and emergency healthcare for those who have been wounded. The situation is intolerable, and we should not tolerate it. Now is the time for action. We must protect the delivery of aid in the region and as a bare minimum—as a start—there must be an immediate ceasefire, the immediate release of all hostages, the protection of civilians, unfettered access to aid in Gaza and a pathway towards a two-state solution. Will the Minister please commit to that as a bare minimum?

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the right to basic necessities—surgical swabs, vaccines and basic hygiene equipment—is the right of the Palestinian people and not the gift of any other country? Does he also agree that, as a critical friend of Israel, we perhaps need to feed back to Israel that elements of its own Government are now a threat not only to the peace and security of the region, but to the peace and security of Israel itself?

Jas Athwal: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is their right and they should be allowed it, without any question from anybody outside. We should use our influence around the world to ensure that we finally have deeds and not just words. We must turn those words into actions.

3.50 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): It is always a privilege to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this timely debate.

The attack on innocent Israelis on 7 October was horrific, and the hostages who were taken must be released unconditionally. Israel unquestionably has the right to defend itself against such an atrocity. However, more than a year on, the situation in Gaza is grave. I cannot add to the statistics and harrowing testimonies described by other hon. Members. It is indeed an “unrelenting dystopian horror”, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally) said.

I want to make a few remarks about the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion of July this year, which the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) described. As I understand it, the UK Government are formulating their response. One important element of the ICJ’s advisory opinion was the finding, in paragraph 279, that

“all the States parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention have the obligation, while respecting the Charter of the United Nations and international law, to ensure compliance by Israel with international humanitarian law as embodied in that Convention.”

The Court was therefore clear that ensuring that international humanitarian law is respected by Israel is a legal requirement on parties to the fourth Geneva convention, which include the UK.

As I understand it, the UK’s position is that it has no obligation to ensure respect by other states in conflicts to which the UK is not a party. In the light of the ICJ advisory opinion and in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, that notion is not, or is no longer, a legally sustainable position in international law, nor is it right

[Tony Vaughan]

more broadly. There are many reasons why that ought already to have been clear, but the ICJ advisory opinion puts the issue beyond reasonable dispute.

The UK should consider that we have an obligation to ensure compliance by Israel with international law. As a lawyer, I respectfully suggest that is the correct interpretation of the international rules and that, taking this approach, the UK would have to demand more of Israel to give effect to the advisory opinion, specifically with regard to the timing and details of Israel's withdrawal from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as in relation to recognition by the UK of a Palestinian state.

I therefore urge the UK Government to publish their response to the ICJ's advisory opinion as soon as possible, and ask the Minister to confirm the timing for that. I also urge them to adopt the internationally accepted approach to their obligations, which I have outlined, if they have not already done so.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I have been informed that three Members who have spoken in the debate wish to attend a meeting with the Foreign Secretary at 4 o'clock. Of course, the Divisions were not entirely foreseeable, and they have extended the debate, which will now end at 4.25 pm. I will permit this, but Members need to understand that, had there not been Divisions, the debate would have ended at 4 o'clock. Colleagues know that. Unless you are thinking of travelling by TARDIS, it is not possible to get from here to Committee Room 7 without a minute.

In future, when you plan your diaries, please make sure that if you intend to speak in a debate, you have the opportunity to do the Front-Bench spokespeople the courtesy of attending the wind-ups. With that proviso, Members who need to leave may leave at three minutes to 4.

3.53 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing a debate on this most pressing of topics, which a great number of our constituents are deeply concerned about. The hon. Member's compassion and concern for those affected by the conflict, particularly the children, are clear to see.

More than a year on from Hamas's 7 October terrorist attacks and the response that followed by Israel in Gaza, we now face a devastating situation. Gaza faces a humanitarian catastrophe: tens of thousands of Palestinians have died, and 90% of the population of Gaza has been internally displaced. Israel has now twice been hit by airstrikes from Iran, tens of thousands remain internally displaced and around 100 Israelis are still being held hostage by Hamas.

In the west bank, settler violence has continued to spike. As many Members have mentioned, in just the past few days we have seen comments from Finance Minister Smotrich and the Minister of Settlements, Orit Strook, about annexing the west bank. We also see the widening of the conflict across the region, not least in Lebanon, where over 1.2 million have been displaced. Refugees from Syria have elected to return rather than remaining in Lebanon.

The Liberal Democrats continue to reiterate our call for an immediate bilateral ceasefire in Gaza to put an end to the humanitarian devastation, get the hostages home and open the door to a two-state solution. We have called for that for more than a year. It is, frankly, a failure of the international community that, as we approach a year since the temporary pause in the conflict in late November 2023, that brief cessation is all we have managed. I met recently Ehab al-Sharief, whose family members have been killed and injured in Gaza. They are despairing that the situation will ever improve. How are the Government exerting influence on the parties to the conflict to bring about a ceasefire?

As other Members have noted, it is shocking to read the UN Human Rights Office report, which said that over a six-month period between November 2023 and April 2024 close to 70% of the victims in Gaza were women and children. I agree with the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) that those figures are horrific, and far higher than the proportions we would expect for conflict zones. They raise clear questions about breaches of international law that I urge the Minister to address.

I was not at the event mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow West, but I have read the testimony of Professor Nizam Mamode before the International Development Committee last week. He said that attacks on civilians were a "deliberate and persistent act", and that there was

"persistent targeting of civilians day after day."

Do the Government share Professor Mamode's assessment?

Reflecting on such testimony, I welcome the language of the Minister for Africa, who said at the UN Security Council last week that

"it is abundantly clear that a worst case scenario is now playing out in areas of northern Gaza, where starvation, malnutrition and deaths are believed to be rising fast. Colleagues, time has run out, and urgent solutions are required now, to prevent the very worst from unfolding."

In line with the remarks from her departmental colleague, will the Minister update us as to the UK's assessment of its obligation to prevent atrocities?

A particular cause for concern in both Gaza and Lebanon is the use of displacement orders by the IDF, as highlighted by the hon. Members for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert). Those instructions to the civilian population often include relocation to areas that are already overcrowded and have very limited facilities. What assessment have the Government made of whether displacement orders are a breach of Israel's obligations to civilians under international law? Following on from the point raised by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), what obligations does the Minister consider the UK to have as a result?

Tragically, the UN has reported that the aid reaching Gaza has recently been at its lowest level since the first month of the war, yet this has coincided with the US's 30-day period for the Israeli Government to boost aid into Gaza—a period following which the US has said Israel has taken further steps. Will the Minister address whether the UK Government share that assessment by the US?

It was reported yesterday that 97 UNRWA trucks had been stolen and the aid looted. What assessment have the Government made of the risk to aid delivery in Gaza, and the responsibility of all parties to enable the safe delivery of humanitarian aid? I reiterate the concern shared throughout the Chamber about the laws passed in the Israeli Knesset to ban UNRWA. The move, if enacted, would lead to the deaths of innocent Palestinian civilians. What steps are the UK Government taking with their international partners to make it clear to Israel that the ban must not go ahead? Instead, we should be supporting UNRWA to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, as well as ensuring that the Colonna report recommendations are implemented as soon as possible.

I turn to the plight of the hostages, following the comments from the hon. Members for Rochdale and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Over 100 hostages are still being held by Hamas in Gaza. We continue to call for their unconditional release. Our thoughts are with them and their families. I was pleased to sign the early-day motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), calling for the release of British citizen Emily Damari. Will the Minister update us on what conversations the Government have had with ministerial counterparts in other countries about getting the hostages home? We cannot discuss Hamas's atrocities without remembering the role of Iran, which has continued to arm terrorist proxies across the region. Will the Minister confirm whether the UK Government will finally proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation?

Many hon. Members have referred to the significant concerns about the situation in the west bank, where settler violence has spiked since 7 October 2023, and we now see the comments from Finance Minister Smotrich about annexation. The UK was right to condemn Smotrich's comments, but will the Government go further and expand our sanctions against the extremist settler movement to Smotrich and Ben-Gvir?

We urge the Government to uphold the ICJ advisory opinion on the illegality of the occupation, including by implementing legislation to cease the trade of settlement goods to the UK. The Government have said they accept the advisory opinion, so can the Minister set out whether it is, therefore, the UK's stance that the occupation is illegal, and will she update us as to what discussions have taken place about settlement goods?

Many of us have been deeply concerned to see Donald Trump nominate Mike Huckabee as the next US ambassador to Israel—a man who has called for a one-state solution and said he does not accept the term “Palestinian”. Does the Minister share my concern about someone with such extremist views being appointed to that critical position? Will the UK accordingly try to use whatever leverage it can with the Biden Administration, including at the UN, in the remaining weeks before the second Trump presidency?

The situation is challenging, but I urge the Government to take a firmer stance in key areas, and to show themselves to be more robust with all combatants in pressing for an end to violence and in upholding international law. We cannot stand idly by in the face of such death and suffering.

4.1 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing this important debate, and thank all Members who have contributed.

As the Conservative Government said throughout, an end to the conflict has to be a sustainable end. That starts with the release of the hostages, who remain in such cruel captivity more than a year since the appalling 7 October terrorist attacks, the deadliest in Israel's history. As we have said from the outset, Israel has the right to defend itself in accordance with international humanitarian law. The suffering of the hostages is utterly intolerable for Israel and should be intolerable for any person—and any Government—who cares about human dignity and human rights.

Let us be clear: Hamas could release the hostages now, immediately and unconditionally. I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on what recent contribution the UK Government have made to the international effort to help to secure the release of those poor hostages, who remain in such terrible jeopardy. Will she also update the House on her department's assessment of recent events in Qatar, and on what she believes the implications could be for the region?

Innocent civilians in Gaza are suffering and they are desperate. They continue to be used as human shields by Hamas, who have no regard for their safety and welfare. Calling for more aid access is right and important, but helping to make it a reality is a different thing. The Conservative Government helped to identify different ways that aid could get in, and we appointed a special representative for humanitarian affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, who was on the ground and had a remit to try to address the bottlenecks to the delivery of aid.

We came up with clear proposals and put them to the Government of Israel, including on aid delivery through Ashdod and Erez, as well as Kerem Shalom and the Jordan land corridor. Israel made a number of significant and welcome commitments on those points, as well as on approving more types of aid. I would appreciate an update from the Minister on what recent engagements she has had with Israeli counterparts on the fulfilment of those vital commitments in recent days and weeks, and confirmation of whether she has identified any additional routes for aid delivery since she came into office.

The previous Government also worked with the US and Cyprus to set up a temporary pier off Gaza for aid delivery, and conducted airdrops—solutions not without logistical challenges, but which were none the less viable. Delivery by land is clearly optimal, but have the Government explored any alternatives to help to bolster the UK's aid effort? Of course, the type of aid that is delivered is also crucial, and it is important that all bases are covered.

We supported UNICEF to assist more than 5,800 children with severe malnourishment and 853,000 children, adolescents and carers with wider emergency services. On sexual and reproductive healthcare, we gave £4.25 million to support the UN Population Fund's efforts to reach 110,000 women with up to 100 community midwives, 20,000 menstrual hygiene kits and 45,000 clean birth delivery kits. We also delivered 8,400 shelter coverage

[Wendy Morton]

kits and funded a field hospital, treating thousands of patients. We funded 2,000 tonnes of food for distribution by the UN World Food Programme.

As humanitarian need evolves in Gaza, how is the Minister proactively ensuring that the UK's aid offering evolves in kind, and what discussions is she having with our trusted aid partners to that end? Getting aid over the border in the first place is one thing; ensuring that the aid delivered matches need is another. There is also the question of safe distribution of aid in Gaza. Specifically on that point, can the Minister confirm that ensuring effective deconfliction is a top priority in her discussions with Israel about the humanitarian situation in Gaza?

I would like to touch on UNRWA, because we are following developments in the Knesset very carefully. We want more aid to reach innocent civilians in Gaza, because the humanitarian situation is severe, including, of course, in the north of Gaza. But we also recognise that UNRWA must rebuild trust and confidence following the appalling allegations that staff were involved in the horrific attacks on 7 October 2023, and the dismissal of nine UNRWA staff following the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services investigation into those allegations. It is critical that UN bodies ensure adequate vetting of personnel and activities, and UNRWA needs to work hard to prove that it is getting that right. Catherine Colonna's reforms need to be implemented in full. There has to be confidence that processes have changed, so that that never happens again and neutrality can be assured.

I am aware that the Government have put resource towards UNRWA reform, but that needs to deliver tangible and measurable results, so can the Minister update the House on what progress UNRWA has made on implementing the Colonna reforms, and specifically whether she believes that progress has been sufficient? More broadly, we need to ensure that we are working with every relevant UN agency and trusted partner—including the British Red Cross, UNICEF, the UN World Food Programme and others—to respond to critical food, fuel, water, health and shelter needs in Gaza.

The situation is certainly tense in the west bank. Although Israel must protect its vital security interests, we urge the Israeli authorities to do so in a way that minimises the risk of further instability or escalation. More broadly, in government we encouraged Israel to release frozen funds, to halt settlement expansion and to hold to account those responsible for extremist settler violence. We also strongly urged the Palestinian Authority to implement very much-needed reforms, including on education and welfare, and to set out a pathway to democratic progress.

To conclude, the Conservatives remain committed to peace and stability in the middle east. We ultimately want to be able to lift people's eyes to a brighter future and a regional peace.

4.8 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): It is a real pleasure to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this important debate, and for the many

contributions by Members from right across the House on this matter of grave importance. I will do my best to respond to the points raised, but this was a very broad-ranging debate, so I hope Members will contact me directly if there are any issues that I do not manage to cover. I will take the decision not to fully cover all the issues about regional developments in order to respond to those specific to this debate. I hope colleagues will accept that.

Gaza is clearly in the grip of a humanitarian catastrophe. On 12 November, the warning from the famine review committee marked a terrible new milestone: famine is now imminent in areas of northern Gaza. Starvation, malnutrition and related deaths in these areas are rising fast, as is the risk of disease. Hospitals and roads have been destroyed and, as the acting UN emergency relief co-ordinator Joyce Msuya put it, Gaza is now “unfit for human survival”.

The situation is appalling and man made, and Israel must act to address it immediately. I have heard directly just how dire conditions in Gaza have become from the staff of non-governmental organisations who risked their lives to get help in. The accounts they have relayed to me of the suffering they have sought to relieve are harrowing. We heard as much from a number of Members, although most clearly in the opening remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West and from the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

We know the disturbing statistics: more than 300 aid workers have been killed in the conflict—the highest number in any single crisis. Yet trucks, humanitarian workers and medics are at the border, ready to get life-saving support into Gaza as Israel continues to hold them back from making the last few miles of their vital journeys. We are increasingly concerned by reports that Palestinians are being prevented from returning to their communities as well. The situation in the west bank is also deteriorating.

As a number of Members have mentioned, Israeli incursions and settler violence have left hundreds of Palestinians dead this year and access to vital services, including healthcare, is being restricted for many others. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), who is no longer in his place, was correct in saying that healthcare is absolutely a right.

The Opposition asked for an update about activity around entry points. The UK has been working intensively with other countries in the region and beyond to identify new entry points, wherever possible; I saw that for myself in Jordan. However, we also have to recognise the reality that conditions continue to worsen in Gaza at the moment. Israel must take the urgent action needed to change that. First, it must protect the civilian population and infrastructure. It must protect healthcare workers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) mentioned, and humanitarians, as well as journalists, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang).

Zarah Sultana: Will the Minister give way?

Anneliese Dodds: I will push on, if my hon. Friend does not mind.

So many have spoken so powerfully, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), based on his personal experience of the need for access, particularly for healthcare workers. The Foreign Secretary has raised our grave concerns with Minister Dermer and Minister Katz. In response to the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), I should say that, as he would expect, we have repeatedly made representations bilaterally and multilaterally to countries in the region and to the US.

As hon. Members will be aware, on 2 September the Government announced the decision to suspend certain licences for UK exports to Israel in respect of items that could be used in the Gaza conflict, having concluded that there exists a clear risk that those might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law. On 5 November, the Minister with responsibility for the middle east spoke to the Israeli ambassador about the renewed strikes on Kamal Adwan hospital. Those mean that northern Gaza now has no fully functioning hospitals.

The sick and injured must be allowed to leave Gaza to receive care. Israel must rescind evacuation orders as soon as possible so that displaced families can return to their homes and communities and rebuild their lives. There must be no forced movement of people within or outside of Gaza; my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi) rightly raised that. The UK Government have been crystal clear that that is unacceptable.

Secondly, Israel must make good on its commitment to “flood Gaza with aid”. As I made clear in the Chamber on 29 October, the UN and its agencies must be able to fulfil their mandate. My hon. Friends the Members for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) and for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally) clearly stated that UNRWA’s mandate must be committed to. The UK Government have absolutely done that; I did it myself at the UN General Assembly. We are clear that there should not be attacks on UNRWA or attempts to undermine it.

I welcome the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the Opposition spokesperson, to her place; sorry, I should have said that earlier. She referred to the Colonna report. She is absolutely right that the UK Government have provided support to UNRWA so that it can be implemented. I have discussed it directly with the UNRWA leadership, who are taking those measures speedily into account, particularly around neutrality. Indeed, they had wished to act on that issue for a considerable time but did not have the funds to do so. Now they do and they are taking all allegations very seriously indeed.

A number of speakers have mentioned that winter is advancing. The flow of aid has now reached its lowest ebb since the conflict began. It is not matching need and so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale said, we must ensure that civilians can withstand winter conditions and that there is the required humanitarian provision.

A number of Members have raised the UN Security Council. Reference was made to Lord Collins, who chaired a meeting to underscore the risk of famine in northern Gaza. The Foreign Secretary reiterated the UK’s unequivocal position yesterday. We are working hard with partners, including those in the global south,

so that the Security Council can act on this catastrophic situation and push for a ceasefire, for hostage release and for a massive scale-up of aid. I hope that responds to the question laid by my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) on that specific issue. There is no excuse for Israeli restrictions on humanitarian aid. The restrictions must be lifted. There is no excuse for violations of international humanitarian law either. The UK Government’s position is that that must be respected by all sides.

On the International Court of Justice advisory opinion, the UK Government fully respect the independence of the ICJ. We continue to consider its advisory opinion carefully, with the rigour and seriousness that that deserves; I say that in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), who is no longer in his place.

I have previously set out details of the aid provided from the UK. I know I have run out of time, Sir Roger, so I will speedily mention to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) that we have provided support to the Egyptian Government and to the World Health Organisation for their care to Palestinians who have been medically evacuated from Gaza. I will write to him on that subject. That has been part of a much larger package of measures that we have instituted to support healthcare, as well as food, nutrition, education, psycho-social support and so forth.

We always keep sanctions under review, but we condemn those remarks that have sought to dehumanise Palestinians.

In conclusion, alongside our international partners we call on Israel to take immediate steps to address this catastrophic situation, protect civilians and let in the promised lifesaving surge of aid that is so desperately needed now.

4.17 pm

Patricia Ferguson: This has been a wide-ranging debate and it is fair to say that Members have covered all the issues pertinent to the situation in Gaza at the moment. I am sure the Minister was alive to the great deal of concern about the ongoing tragedy that is Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. Of course we all want to see the hostages released. I personally do not think that Israel’s leaders are helping the situation with regard to the hostages, but that is a matter that they have to justify to their own people.

As we approach winter, the situation is becoming dire. We are seeing outbreaks of diseases not previously experienced to any great extent in Gaza; the case of the 10-month-old child who recently contracted polio is one example. It is good to see that inoculation programmes have begun in the region so that, hopefully, we can prevent a further outbreak. That is about just one disease, however—so many more can be caused by malnutrition, by cold, by damp and by lack of shelter. We really must make sure that the aid that has been promised, bought and sent to the region finds a way through and that we find a way through for it. Otherwise, the catastrophe that is already unfolding will be that much greater. None of us wants that.

I am grateful that Members around the room and across the political spectrum feel so strongly about this situation. We need unequivocal support for UNRWA at this time and to make sure that it can fulfil its mission

[Patricia Ferguson]

by getting humanitarian aid into Gaza. It is the organisation that most other charitable and aid organisations rely upon to assist with that, so we really have to defend it.

There is a wider debate to be had—although this is perhaps not the occasion to have it—about the political situation that has pertained in the middle east for so many years. Any student of history will be able to tell that particular story. I have to say, the Conservative party's position that Israel should halve the number of illegal settlements in the area is a surprise to me, and I find that very concerning. Any illegal settlement is illegal by definition and therefore should not be there. It contributes to the overall distress, chaos and conflict in the area.

I do not want to say much more other than to thank you, Sir Roger, the Clerks and particularly the Minister, who responded in so much detail to matters raised by hon. Members. She did so with precision and compassion, and that is very much to be welcomed. I sincerely hope that we see progress and that our Government continue to spearhead the arguments at the UN and elsewhere to make sure that the situation in Gaza results in a permanent ceasefire, the establishment of two states that can live together in the area, and the flooding of the area in the short term with humanitarian aid, with a view to rebuilding Palestine.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Tourism: Bedfordshire

4.24 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tourism in Bedfordshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. Bedfordshire is a fantastic place to visit and spend time; it is just over 30 minutes outside London on the Bedford line and is served by the M1 motorway and a major international airport in Luton. But despite that easy access and the attractiveness of our county, too often Bedfordshire is a place that people pass through and not somewhere that they stay. Our international tourism economy is worth just £100 million, and our domestic tourism economy is worth just £250 million. In this place, I want to do all that I can to change that, and to grow our tourism economy and encourage visitors both domestic and international to come to see all that Bedfordshire has to offer, particularly the beautiful communities in Mid Bedfordshire. I would be happy to welcome to our constituency any colleagues who wish to see our beautiful county for themselves.

We are fortunate in Bedfordshire to have so many beautiful and interesting historic sites, including the Moot Hall in Elstow, Woburn abbey, Wrest Park in Silsoe, Ridgmont station and its fantastic heritage centre, Ampthill Park House and so many others. Visitors who want to get out into nature can walk the Pegsdon hills on the edge of the Chilterns national landscape area or hike the Greensand ridge, perhaps strolling through the scenic Woburn Deer Park to the village of Eversholt, made up of 13 of Bedfordshire's historic "Ends" settlements, and up past the ruins of All Saints church at Segenhoe, an ancient scheduled monument.

On their way to browse the historic market town of Ampthill, first awarded charter market status in 1219 by Henry III, visitors might pass through the village of Millbrook, home to one of the largest vehicle testing centres in Europe, which has played host on the silver screen to British icons from James Bond to Jeremy Clarkson. Beyond Ampthill, they will come across another scheduled ancient monument at Houghton House, before passing through the village of Maulden, home to sites of special scientific interest such as Church meadow and Maulden wood, and on to Clophill, where they can see the remains of Cainhoe castle and enjoy scenic views of the whole Greensand ridge from St Mary's church.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and I strongly support his work for his county. I have friends in his area and have visited some of those wonderful beauty spots. We have exactly the same challenge in my constituency: many people pass through our town but do not recognise or have time to appreciate the wonderful heritage there, particularly the ruins of Reading abbey and Reading gaol, where Oscar Wilde was incarcerated, as well as our beautiful riverside and many other spots. Does he agree that there are other towns and country areas in the south of England that, like Bedfordshire, could do with greater promotion of their wonderful beauty and visitor attractions?

Blake Stephenson: I absolutely agree. Commuter towns, particularly those just outside London, become areas that people travel through and do not stop off in, and we can do more as a country to promote them as destinations. I will come on to some ideas on that in a moment, particularly for my constituency.

If people want to spend more time in beautiful countryside, they could visit the beautiful Sundon Hills Country Park, the new community forest in Marston Vale or the Barton hills national nature reserve. While in Barton-le-Clay, they can do some shopping in the charming Olde Watermill shopping village. Across our villages, people can experience the historic and characterful traditional English village pub, whether that is The Chequers in Westoning, The Greyhound in Haynes or The Star in Chalton. Our pubs have been at the centre of village life in Bedfordshire for centuries and continue to be vibrant places to grab a drink and a bite to eat.

Families can come and visit the Woburn forest Center Parcs just south of Millbrook or Go Ape in Woburn, or perhaps spend a day at one of our fantastic safari parks in Woburn or Whipsnade—the latter in the constituency of the hon. Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins). Also in her constituency is the historic estate of Luton Hoo, which I hope will be able to welcome the Ryder cup in the coming decade. Golf fans need not limit themselves to Luton Hoo, as we have fantastic golf courses right across Bedfordshire, including the Millbrook, Aspley Guise & Woburn Sands and South Bedfordshire clubs in my constituency.

We do not just have great golf. Rugby fans can enjoy Rugby Football Union championship rugby at Ampthill, and football fans will soon be able to visit a state-of-the-art new stadium at Power Court to watch Luton Town, or they can get an authentic non-league football experience at Ampthill Town, Totternhoe or Barton Rovers. I met Barton Rovers recently and I hope that the Minister will work with me and the club to explore how we can secure funding for a new 3G pitch that will help us to take the club to the next level.

I trust that colleagues will forgive me for my whistle-stop tour of the attractions of Bedfordshire, and in particular some of the fabulous ways to spend time in my beautiful Mid Bedfordshire constituency. But I feel that it is important to do all we can to promote the varied reasons to spend time in our county because, as I noted, Bedfordshire should be a prime location for a thriving tourism industry. It is 30 minutes from London, centrally located between Oxford and Cambridge, home to an international airport and served by a major motorway. But too often, we are a county that people pass through; they do not stop to spend time and money in our local communities. My vision for Bedfordshire is a place that is more than a blur through the train window—a place where domestic and international visitors will get off a plane or train and be excited to stay a while.

Since my election in July, I have met VisitEngland, UKHospitality, Experience Bedfordshire, local businesses and other local stakeholders to understand what we need to do to grow our local tourism, hospitality and leisure economy. Bedfordshire is one of the last counties in England without a local visitor economy partnership. Although there are differing views on exactly what the right solution to promote our local tourism industry looks like, the consensus has been clear that we need to do more to promote it.

The imminent delivery of East West Rail will help to deepen our county's connections to Oxford, Cambridge and nearby Milton Keynes and provide new markets for our local tourism industry. The potential of a major expansion to Luton airport, which would bring millions more passengers to Bedfordshire, and which is currently sat on Ministers' desks, offers another major opportunity to put Bedfordshire on the radar of more potential visitors.

But we must ensure that Bedfordshire is in the right position to attract those new visitors from across Britain and overseas and make them see our county as a place to stay, not just a place to travel through. That means getting the right support for local tourism and ensuring that Experience Bedfordshire and our local councils have the resources they need to promote our county. It means fully embracing the opportunities provided by the busy Bedford line and the new East West Rail services on the Marston Vale line to put our county's best face forward at local stations to entice holidaymakers to get off the train and stay a while locally.

Attracting new visitors to Bedfordshire also means promoting our county and its destinations more abroad, taking advantage of the UK's international campaigns to promote UK tourism in order to promote tourism in Bedfordshire. We can offer international visitors an authentic experience of a traditional British county and all the best that Britain has to offer, all within an easy commute of London, Oxford and Cambridge. We need to ensure that we promote that. It means doing more to ensure that the people coming off planes at Luton airport are encouraged to stay in Bedfordshire. It also means protecting the things that make our county such a fascinating place to visit. We must do more to ensure that the small, independent and often family-run businesses at the heart of our tourism, hospitality and leisure economy have the support that they need from Government. They need to be supported to employ more local people, not taxed more through an employers' national insurance hike that will make it nearly three times more expensive in taxes alone to employ a full-time worker on minimum wage.

We must also ensure that the Government's efforts to deliver thousands of new homes in Bedfordshire do not come at the cost of the things that make it a great place to live, work and spend time. Natural England highlights the vital importance of the whole Greensand ridge national character area in protecting our distinctive estate villages from inappropriate development. We need to protect and enhance the historic character of our villages with sympathetic, small-scale development while restoring nature and conserving the beautiful landscapes of the Chilterns and the Greensand ridge. We must ensure that development, where it does happen, comes with the right infrastructure, so that we build great places with strong local character where people want to spend time, not just characterless, gridlocked suburbia that they could find anywhere.

I do not want the Minister to misunderstand me. I know that we cannot grow our tourism economy in Bedfordshire by just stopping, standing still and looking back at the past. From my conversations with Experience Bedfordshire and others, I know that one of the biggest barriers holding back tourism in our county is a lack of accommodation providers. If we are to seize the opportunities to grow our local tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors, we must attract new hotels and wider accommodation settings.

[Blake Stephenson]

We have some fantastic opportunities to grow our tourism industry in Bedfordshire. They include the Bedford to Milton Keynes waterway park, which would run through the Marston Vale, near the villages Brogborough, Marston Moretaine and Wootton in my constituency, connecting the Grand Union canal and the River Great Ouse. This project will attract 750,000 visitors, create nearly 1,000 jobs and bring in an extra £26 million to our local economy.

We need to ensure that this project is delivered to a high standard, as quickly as possible, to seize the benefits it will bring to our economy. Government support would help us to deliver this project faster and I hope the Minister will ask his officials to look at how the Government could assist in delivering this project of regional significance.

However, the waterway park is not the biggest potential boost to our local tourism economy. The site that used to be the world's largest brickworks, at Stewartby in my constituency, which once fired the bricks that built our nation, now has the potential to power our local economy again, as the home as the Universal UK theme park project.

Backed by 92% of local people and local leaders from all parties, this would be a £50 billion boost for our local economy, bringing around 20,000 jobs for local people, but would also, crucially, offer us an opportunity to turbocharge our local tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors with potentially 12 million more visitors in our area every year. It is a game changer—bringing millions more visitors to Bedfordshire to stay in our communities and see all that we have to offer.

Universal could be the key to unlock the Government's growth mission in Bedfordshire, bringing in billions in investment that will have both direct and indirect benefits for our communities. We have already seen what the Jurassic coast has done for tourism in England. I come here today to ask the Minister to work with us to unleash the benefits of "Jurassic Park" on tourism in Bedfordshire.

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I knew that was coming.

Blake Stephenson: I could not resist it.

Bedfordshire is a beautiful, historic place to live and spend time in. We are fortunate to have some absolutely fantastic local hospitality, leisure and tourism businesses. As its Member of Parliament, I am determined to put Mid Bedfordshire on the map as a place for people to visit.

If the Government are serious about their growth agenda, Bedfordshire represents a real opportunity. Unlocking Universal, delivering the waterway park and ensuring that we have the right promotion in place to take advantage of the opportunities presented by East West Rail and Luton airport would turbocharge our economy.

I hope the Minister will work with us to deliver this agenda. I would welcome him to Mid Bedfordshire to show him the opportunities and some of our beautiful attractions first hand.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I am pleased to be able to offer my Jurassic chairmanship. I call Sir Chris Bryant.

4.37 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Sir Roger, you are not Jurassic. You are a mere slip of a boy, in parliamentary terms anyway.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this debate. I think one of his first parliamentary questions was on this subject. He is obviously very determined to make sure that tourism and the expansion of the tourism offer in his constituency is a key part of securing economic development in his area. I guarantee that if he comes up with any good ideas that we can steal off him, we will be like the proverbial magpie—we will pick it up and run with it. If he ever wants to have a meeting with officials in my Department to discuss specific issues around tourism in Mid Bedfordshire—perhaps we might do that with all the Bedfordshire MPs—I would be more than happy to arrange that.

It is good to have an MP called Blake. The hon. Member might be the first MP in the history of Parliament to be called Blake. I noted the other day that "Blake's 7" is back—Sir Roger, you can probably remember "Blake's 7".

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I am afraid I do not.

Chris Bryant: You can remember some things still, Sir Roger. By the time "Blake's 7" ended, it did not have seven people in it, and it did not have a character called Blake in it, which was a bit rum.

I agreed above all with a point that the hon. Member made in his very first paragraph. He talked about Bedfordshire not just being a place that people pass through. I am very conscious of that. My brother lives in St Albans and I am endlessly getting on trains that say the final destination is Bedford, but I never go to Bedford, because I get off at St Albans.

There is a key aspect to what we need to achieve in our tourism and visitor economy strategy over the next few years. It is all very well people coming for a day or half a day and going out with the kids or whatever, but we need to make sure that there is the right kind of accommodation and accommodation mix at different price points in a whole series of different places around the country. Matching the accommodation with the needs and desires of both domestic and international tourists is a key part of what we need to secure in our tourism strategy.

The hon. Member gave us the Cook's tour, but when he was talking about Wrest Park, which is run by English Heritage, he did not mention that 194,693 people visited in 2023. It has a great Narnia event, which starts, I think, next week or at the end of this week, and that is why parts of it are closed at the moment. He also referred to Houghton House, Woburn Abbey and the safari park. Some 489,751 people visited the safari park, and that was in 2015, so it is likely that the numbers have gone up since then.

The hon. Member focused on what is in his constituency, but we should look at the whole county—of course, tourists and visitors do not say, "I wonder whose constituency I am going to visit today"; they think about the whole offer in an area, including transport links and whether they will be able to park. One of my ambitions in life is to have one parking app for the whole United Kingdom, so that people do not have to

use a phone to download a new app every time they go to park somewhere. It is especially irritating when the local council has just changed the app to another app, and people cannot remember the passcode and all the rest of it. Those are the aspects of someone's journey—every bit, end to end—that we need to think about when we try to create an effective tourism strategy for the United Kingdom.

I would add to the hon. Member's list the John Bunyan museum in Bedford and, for that matter, the Panacea museum. That is something that politicians have been seeking forever: if only there were a panacea that could cure all ills—although the danger with a panacea is that it is a mirage, and does not really offer what it proposes.

Let me talk about some of the things we are already doing for the visitor economy across the whole United Kingdom. From representations that were made to me immediately after the Government came into office in July, I know that a lot of people in the visitor economy and hospitality industry were particularly worried about the cliff edge that they saw coming at the end of this year in relation to business rates. I am glad that we could take forward the 40% relief. I know that it is not 70%, but placing it on a permanent footing is important, because it allows hospitality businesses to make investments for the future and have a secure financial footing.

One issue in Bedfordshire and many other parts of the country is short-term lets, whether through Airbnb, individual people renting out a room or whatever it may be. In areas with heavy concentrations of visitors at particular times of the year, the art is to come up with a scheme so that we get the benefits of the visitor economy—all the footfall and added money that that brings to a local area—without the danger of ending up with a completely vacated town or village when the tourism period has ended. That is why, following the previous Government's legislation on short-term lets, we will soon consult on precisely how to implement the legislation, so that we can, at the very least, have a clear understanding of what short-term lets there are across the whole country and then, if necessary, take further action.

The hon. Member rightly referred to local visitor economy partnerships and the fact that there is not one in Bedfordshire at the moment. That is an issue of concern. As he knows, the local visitor economy partnership programme was part of a new vision for England's tourism management landscape and was recommended by the independent destination management organisations review. In February 2023, VisitEngland launched the LVEP accreditation programme, which will continue through 2024-25 and which seeks to accredit high-performing, strategic and financially resilient organisations that can lead visitor economy development in their areas, working with businesses and local authorities. As I understand it, VisitEngland is working closely with Experience Bedfordshire and other local stakeholders in Bedfordshire to support their progress in building

capacity and moving towards local visitor economy partnership status. Over the coming months, I will ensure that I keep in touch with my officials about how that progresses. I am sure that if it does not progress to the hon. Member's satisfaction, he will call for another of these debates and I will have to answer to him.

In the Budget, the Chancellor confirmed the Government's support to deliver the East West Rail scheme in full, which is good news; the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire referred to it. It will strengthen the region's thriving life science, technology and innovation sectors, but it will also facilitate journeys for tourists and locals throughout the Bedford area. East West Rail is set to bring billions of pounds-worth of growth to the Oxford-Cambridge region, along with tens of thousands of new homes and jobs. I note that the hon. Member was not quite so happy about the tens of thousands of new homes. For what it is worth, my personal view is that the most important thing when developing large numbers of new homes, which we all know this country needs, is to ensure that we have all the infrastructure to be able to cope with them. If there is going to be a significant expansion of the tourism industry, or the visitor economy industry in Bedfordshire, the people who are going to work in that industry will need houses to live in. All those things have to come together.

The hon. Member referred to the prospect of a major development with Universal UK, which is a new theme park. Obviously, I cannot enter into the specifics of the ongoing discussions—that would be unhelpful to everybody—but I am hopeful that we will get to the significant and dramatic change that it would make, not only to visitor numbers in Bedfordshire but to the whole of the United Kingdom.

That takes me to my final point. Of course we should be ambitious for the whole of the United Kingdom in our tourism strategy, but it would be counterproductive if every single person who came from overseas to this country—and we still do not have the numbers that we reached before covid—decided that they were going to visit only London and did not even get to Bedfordshire, let alone farther-flung parts of the United Kingdom. That is why, in all the work we do on behalf of VisitBritain and VisitEngland, we need to ensure that our tourism strategy is genuinely sustainable. It should take people to see not just the historic sites in the capital city of London, or, for that matter, Bath, Stratford, Oxford, Cambridge or Edinburgh, but the full diversity of what we have to offer in this country.

We are a country with extraordinary things to see. There are enormous adventures to take part in across the whole country. The hon. Member has highlighted some of those in his own constituency. I am keen to ensure that many more people come to the United Kingdom, including Bedfordshire, and, as he said, they do not just pass through but stay the night.

Question put and agreed to.

Tourism: Northumberland

4.48 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered increasing tourism in Northumberland.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I am delighted to see so many other Members in Westminster Hall who share my interest in both the opportunities and concerns for tourism in my part of the world. I extend my thanks to organisations such as Visit Northumberland and the Vindolanda Charitable Trust, as well as Northumberland county council and many members of the public in my constituency, who made valuable contributions ahead of the debate. Before outlining the importance and the challenges of tourism for the region, it is necessary to acknowledge the deep history of my constituency. It is for that precise historic legacy that many tourists can, should, and indeed do visit.

As I outlined in my maiden speech back in July, my constituency is named for the town of Hexham, a medieval town boasting Hexham Abbey, which dates from the 12th century, Hexham Old Gaol, which to my knowledge is the earliest purpose-built prison in England, the beautiful Sele Park, which opened to the public in the 18th century, and the legacy of the Victorian era.

However, the constituency that I represent is so much more than just the town of Hexham. In the north we border Scotland, which is part of the legacy of the border wars between the kingdoms of Scotland and England in the 13th century, and in the south we take in the Allen valleys, which have some of the most stunning scenery in England.

Near Bardon Mill, visitors may find out more about my area's history from as far back as the first century at Vindolanda, which is the ruins of a Roman auxiliary fort and a UNESCO world heritage site. Hadrian's wall runs from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) to the namesake constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glendon). And I cannot forget to mention Prudhoe castle, which was built as part of a series of Norman castles after the 1066 conquest. It was the only Northumberland castle to resist occupation by the Scots.

It should also be noted that although stars of the big screen recently walked the red carpet at the latest premiere of a film by Ridley Scott, my fellow north-east native, the headlines were stolen by the announcement that a 2,000-year-old knife handle depicting a gladiator had been found in the River Tyne, and that it will be displayed near to where it was found in Corbridge from next year.

Visitors to my constituency will also find The Sill, which is the National Landscape Discovery Centre and a gateway to Northumberland national park. The park is home to the magnificent Kielder forest, which embodies the sheer beauty of the region and which was also the site of my first overnight trip with my school in year 4.

Yet for all that the Hexham constituency boasts deep historic roots, the attraction and the allure for tourists should not be limited to our history. Visiting the region should be as much about the present as the legacy of the

past, including the community spirit and the region's facilities. Attractions include the regular Hexham farmers' market, Hexham's bluegrass festival, Ovingham goose fair, the Northumberland county show, a flock of illuminated sheep that can be found at locations along Hadrian's wall, the Hexham lantern parade, Hexham spook night and the Corbridge Christmas tree festival. The culture of my constituency is an attraction for tourists in and of itself.

That culture is not limited to festivals and markets; there should also be recognition of my constituency's cuisine and its hospitality sector. For example, there are Restaurant Pine, The Feathers Inn at Hedley on the Hill, Bouchon Bistrot and Restaurant Hjem, to name just a few local inns and restaurants.

The local pubs also contribute to the culture of the community. From the reopening of the Sampson Inn as a community pub in Gilsland to The Tannery in Hexham, where I was first served a pint, to my local pub, The Crown in Humshaugh, and The Falcon in Prudhoe, local pubs contribute immeasurably to the culture of the constituency.

I will also briefly touch on some of the sports tourism available in my constituency. I am not a golfer myself, but I am told that there are world-class courses at Close House, Slaley Hall and Matfen Hall. Close House is a favourite haunt of many people I know; I also know that it draws many visitors to the region, but could draw many more.

However, as I am sure the Minister and every Member present in Westminster Hall knows, despite the rich history and beauty of our region, tourism in Northumberland and the north-east still lags significantly behind tourism in other parts of the United Kingdom. Visit Britain, the national tourism body, has outlined that between September 2021 and October 2023 there were 860,000 domestic visits to Northumberland per year. In the same period, there were 49,000 international visits to Northumberland and 459,000 international visits to the north-east. By comparison, London had over 20 million visitors in 2023, even though, from a personal perspective, I would rather be in my constituency than in London on any given day of the week.

Nevertheless, the north-east remains at the bottom of the league tables on international tourist spending and domestic tourist spending. When we compare tourist spending in London with that in the north-east, we see that London receives £16.7 billion of international tourist spend, while Northumberland received just £20 million of international tourist spend in 2023. That is a stark difference. So, I would like to see the Government prioritise increasing the proportion of overseas visitors to the region, particularly from Germany, France, Netherlands, the Nordic countries and the United States, which already have strong links with the region and which provide key opportunities to maximise the growth potential within Northumberland.

In my constituency, we also have Newcastle airport. However, because my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) is here in Westminster Hall, I am conscious that I only have two thirds of the runway in my constituency. We have had a few discussions about what constitutes constituency airspace. However, it is vital that we work with the airport to support the jobs that it underpins and international tourism in the region. It is crucial that the

identity, culture and environment of Northumberland are protected, as is maintaining proper infrastructure, and increasing and investing in tourism in my part of the world.

Although increasing tourism is crucial for boosting our rural economy and for increasing job opportunities, there are areas that require support if we are to expand tourism. Transport, roads and infrastructure must be invested in to handle an influx of domestic and international tourists. We regularly see long queues to visit Hadrian's wall along the A69 in my constituency, particularly during school holidays, with known waits to see those wonderful sights.

I am sure the Minister will agree that, when advocating an increase in tourism, we must not overlook the interests of local people who could be impacted by the influx of visitors. Local people who use roads for short journeys should not have to experience travel delay due to the tourist influx, but investing in public services and improving the condition of our roads will be a welcome investment for locals and tourists travelling to the region, resulting in a net benefit to our economy by growing it even further.

We need to consider the interests of local people to ensure that there is proper infrastructure in place to support increasing tourism, allowing visitors to experience the stunning hills, the deep history and community culture of our region. I am proud that the new Labour Government have already committed to improving public transport to reduce delays, directing funding into improving the condition of the roads, such as the £500 million investment to deal with potholes outlined in the Budget. Such attention to investment is welcome following 14 years of austerity and neglect under the Conservatives.

To preserve the rich history of Hexham and Northumberland we need to protect our heritage. This month, Historic England released its heritage at risk register that outlines historic sites in England at risk of decay and damage threatening their survival. The register revealed that 262 of the 4,891 entries at risk are in the north-east. My constituency has a concerning number of sites under threat. They include the Corbridge Roman site, multiple sections of Hadrian's wall, the church of St Cuthbert in Haydon Bridge and the Kershope castle at Kielder. Vindolanda is further threatened by the possible risk of climate change. Those Roman ruins are preserved in waterlogged environments, but climate change could affect the chemical make-up of the soil and damage artefacts currently preserved in the ground.

The work of Historic England and that of organisations such as the Vindolanda Trust to preserve our history is commendable. Improving infrastructure, investing in the preservation of those historic buildings and places, and restricting climate change, in collaboration with local and national organisations, will boost the regional economy, generate more job opportunities and preserve Northumberland's rich history. I am sure the Minister will agree that England is a country with a rich historical tapestry, as is the UK, but we cannot overlook Northumberland's contribution. Through preservation and protection of central heritage sites, we can lead the way for domestic and international tourism to flourish.

A central issue in rural regions, as I outlined in last week's rural affairs debate, is the skills shortage. Rural regions are used to under-investment and to seeing younger people leave due to an inability to find an

appropriate job. That contributes to the migration of young people from rural areas in search of work, contributing to a skills shortage in the region, fundamentally affecting the tourist sector in Northumberland. Such a shortage of skilled workers has a significant impact on the provision of services that could encourage domestic and international tourism to the region. Sonya Galloway from the Vindolanda Trust outlined that one of the biggest challenges jeopardising Northumberland's tourism is that skills shortage, and problems recruiting people in the hospitality and tourism sector.

By investing in people, to create inclusive employment opportunities and develop skills, we can ensure that the tourism sector in my county flourishes. I am proud of the Labour Government's advances in employment opportunities for the British workforce, through educational initiatives and reforms to apprenticeship schemes, granting young people the skills and opportunities to enter careers that align with their interests and benefit the British economy and the tourism sector more generally. The Skills England initiative will drive growth across the country and support people to get better jobs when they enter the job market.

When we promote UK tourism abroad, I plead that we consider how to promote Northumberland to that wider international audience, through effective media and marketing of content-first and destination strategies that showcase the experiences of our county. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) planned to be here but could not make it, so I will quickly pay tribute to the magnificent coastline in his constituency.

Collaboration between Visit England and Visit Northumberland would provide a valuable opportunity to promote domestic and international travel to the north-east. Further, increasing funding for national tourism boards would expand marketing, outreach and visibility for the region. The scenery of my constituency is no stranger to the homes of families across the UK and the world: TV's "Vera" trekked across the region in a matter of minutes to solve a case; there have been a number of series by Hexham's own Robson Green in which he shares his passion for the beauty of Northumberland; and famously it was on the big screen in "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves", where Kevin Costner and Morgan Freeman walk along Hadrian's wall by Sycamore gap, which is an opportunity that has sadly been denied to future generations by an act of thoughtless vandalism. The continued depiction of Northumberland will continue to shine a light on one of our country's hidden gems, and I welcome any support that the Minister's Department can offer to achieve that.

I also want to recognise and commend the incredible work that is already being accomplished on the expansion of the tourism sector in the north-east. The piloting of the destination development partnership was welcome, which saw a £2.25 million investment from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport over three years. Such a scheme has a positive impact in directing tourism towards the north-east, catalysing our north-east Mayor's 10-year plan to double the size of the regional visitor economy.

I would like to draw attention to the north-east Mayor, my good friend Kim McGuinness, and her announcement in September of her intention to double north-east tourists over the next 10 years, which would double our visitor economy from £5.2 billion and create

[Joe Morris]

more than 25,000 new jobs for locals. Those will be situated in not just my constituency in Northumberland but Newcastle-upon-Tyne and areas in the constituencies of Members across the House. I support Kim's work and that of the North-East combined authority in its commitment to encouraging growth in tourist numbers. I believe that, through collaboration and co-operation, Northumberland can attract domestic and international tourism that can symbiotically benefit the local economy by creating more job opportunities, while providing an enriching, educational and relaxing holiday for visitors.

5.1 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your esteemed chairmanship, Sir Roger. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) on securing this debate. Tourism is a vital industry in Northumberland and it provides a huge number of livelihoods in our communities. Before we get into the matter at hand, it is really important to correct the record. While Robson Green was born in Hexham, he grew up in Dudley in my constituency.

Now that we have that matter out of the way, in my constituency of Cramlington and Killingworth we are blessed to have access to some of the most beautiful parts of this country. Tourism is the largest share of the economy, bringing in over £1 billion and seeing over 10 million visitors each year. I know that many will go to places such as Hadrian's wall in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham, or perhaps Bamburgh castle in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), but Cramlington and Killingworth in south-east Northumberland is the gateway for many into our great county and a destination in its own right.

We boast some of the best coastline anywhere in the world in Seaton Sluice, which many will know from the detective drama "Vera" as the place where an extraordinary number of bodies happened to turn up. Thankfully for our tourism industry, that is more brilliant fiction than fact, and instead there we find thousands of families, dog walkers, cyclists, surfers and more from across the region and the whole country, enjoying what is a fantastic and well-regarded beach. Events such as Harbour day are fantastic community events and draws for locals and tourists alike.

We have so much more to offer than the beach and the harbour. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham may have Michelin-starred restaurants, but he should know that my constituency has the best fish and chips in all Northumberland—the world-famous Harbour View fish and chip shop. It is so good that, on Good Friday each year, the queues are so long that it has to provide live entertainment, with musicians and even a magician recently entertaining customers in recent years. It is the opportunity to both have fantastic food and overlook the harbour and the sea, which attract so many people to travel from far and wide to our beautiful county.

Further inland we have access to serene wooded walks through the countryside, such as Holywell Dene, and destinations that attract tourists from near and far to see some of the art on the south-east Northumberland

art trail. The Giant Spoon in Cramlington, which represents the area as one of the UK's breadbaskets, and the eerie but magnificent Capella statue nearby, the Shroud, are again one of the many reasons why people travel to Northumberland. We also have the benefit of the sensational Seaton Delaval hall, a grade 1 listed, English baroque country house that contains all the most eccentric trappings of country life and is run by the National Trust. People travel to see the architecture and the renovations that have kept that hall alive for the public. There is also the famous story of the "White Lady" who fell in love with one of the Delaval heirs and can be seen waiting for her forbidden partner to return. As I mentioned in my maiden speech in the House, it is also the iconic setting of "Geordie Racer", a part of history in its own right. How can we not mention the great land sculpture of the Lady of the North, or Northumberlandia? This sculpture of a woman set into the ground is 400 metres long and 34 metres high. It is an artistic masterpiece that captures the beauty of the human form using the earth from Shotton mine. There is also a regular market there providing opportunities to support local business, and I can highly recommend the Sunday dinner at The Snowy Owl nearby.

Much of our tourism industry is about experiencing beautiful places such as Seaton Delaval hall or Northumberlandia, but it is also about the people, the culture and the feeling of a place. Geordies are famous for being friendly and kind. It is the passion we have for our places and the people who keep them running every single day that make people want to visit our county, just as much as the beautiful places and sights do. We know that when people come to Northumberland, they leave feeling embraced by a people in the north-east who welcome them and want to share with them the beautiful sights. This industry is reliant on people, and without the support that my friend, the hon. Mackem—sorry, I mean my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham—mentioned so valiantly in his remarks, we face a future where, despite our Geordie charm, it is just not possible for so many of our beautiful places to be enjoyed and protected for the next generation.

5.6 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) on securing this important debate. I am fortunate enough to have enjoyed tourism in Northumberland very recently; I stayed in Longframlington and Hexham with my wife and daughter, where we visited Hadrian's wall. During the few days we spent there, we also visited Lindisfarne, from where we took home a bottle of spiced mead. I can recommend it to Members seeking ideas for an alternative Christmas tippie that would be popular with Vikings and monks alike. We enjoyed time at Bamburgh castle, Alnwick castle and Warkworth. At Bamburgh, we saw the exhibition about "The Last Kingdom", which prompted us to start watching that series on Netflix. If there were a competition for UK castles, Northumberland would surely be the premier league.

Liberal Democrats believe that tourism is the lifeblood of the UK economy. The UK contains a rich tapestry of destinations beyond our capital cities, ranging from traditional bucket-and-spade resorts such as Blackpool to creative hotspots such as Brighton, rural retreats such as the Lake district and modern city attractions

such as Hull. If our tourism industry is to flourish, more focus is needed. We must all work, as the Minister alluded to in the previous debate, to rebalance tourism away from London; that is why this debate is so important. Doing so would benefit not only Northumberland, but also my constituency, Cheltenham, which welcomed 2 million visitors in 2022—an influx that supports around 4% of local jobs. Many of those are found in Cheltenham's excellent hospitality sector, as will be the case in any tourism destination, and most of those businesses will be small and medium-sized enterprises.

The previous Government let small businesses down badly and took them for granted. When businesses needed certainty and stability during the recovery from the pandemic and the energy bills crisis, the chaotic approach of the previous Government made things so much worse. Liberal Democrats have called for a complete overhaul of the unfair business rates system, replacing it with a commercial landowner levy based on the land value of commercial sites rather than their entire capital value, thereby stimulating investment and shifting the burden of taxation from tenants to landowners. That this new Government are exploring changing the broken business rates system is positive and we welcome it, but small and medium-sized businesses need action sooner rather than later—they need it now, and much more urgently as a result of the decision to reduce the retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief from 75% to 40%.

At the weekend, I visited Emma, the landlady of the Hewlett Arms. She told me that it currently feels as if the Government still do not quite understand properly how the hospitality sector works. She thought that the contribution of independents in the hospitality sector needed to be better acknowledged, and that the combined impact of the Budget, alongside cost differentials between pubs and supermarkets in particular, meant that her job was getting significantly harder. I am sure that applies to many places in tourism destinations, including in Northumberland. I am certain that the new Government have a vision for tourism, having heard about it in the previous debate. I cannot promise the Minister that I will agree on every single point, but I will always aim for the compassionate, creative and constructive approach of the monks at Lindisfarne rather than that of a Viking invader.

5.9 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. As I make my debut as the shadow Minister for DCMS, it is great that I am now shadowing my friend, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), as he shadowed me in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. I hope we will have a constructive debate today and going forward.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for securing this debate and for his illuminating speech about what his constituency, and the whole of Northumberland, offers in the way of tourism. We should all aspire to nurture the tourism industry in our constituencies. I look forward to visiting his constituency in Northumberland in the near future.

We should all recognise the immense contribution of the tourism industry to our economy, our constituencies and our local communities. Tourism is a vital sector,

contributing more than £70 billion to the UK economy annually and employing more than 1.6 million people directly, with millions more benefiting indirectly. Indeed, brand Britain depends on a thriving tourism industry.

The latest annual Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor report on the economic impact of tourism shows that the Northumberland visitor economy has experienced strong year-on-year growth. In 2023, it recorded its highest ever gross value contribution of £1.262 billion, a 7.9% increase from 2022, with Northumberland welcoming more than 10 million visitors. That demonstrates that Northumberland's tourism industry is continuing its post-covid recovery, thanks in part to the support provided by the previous Government's tourism recovery plan. I put on record my thanks to the former Members who contributed to that plan, Guy Opperman and Anne-Marie Trevelyan, who are greatly missed on the Conservative side of the House.

However, it is now up to the new Government to demonstrate how they plan to support the tourism sector in sustaining its post-covid recovery. During the general election and throughout their time in power, we have seen no indication yet of a comprehensive, long-term strategy. Can the Minister outline when the Government will present a sector-wide support plan to help counties such as Northumberland, and the businesses that rely so heavily on tourism?

Many businesses in Northumberland are heavily dependent on seasonal tourism in particular, which poses significant challenges when it comes to retaining experienced staff and making long-term investment in their businesses. To truly support local economies such as Northumberland, it is crucial that we shift towards a year-round tourism model, which provides the stability and growth opportunities that our businesses need. Can the Minister confirm whether the Government's tourism plan will consider specific support for businesses to operate year round, helping them to overcome the seasonal challenges that they face?

The increase in national insurance contributions for businesses, made by the Chancellor in the last Budget, will have a profound impact on the hospitality sector. The sector is vital for the success of tourism-dependent businesses, as we are continually hearing. As noted by many industry leaders, including UK Hospitality, it could force many small, tourism-related businesses—including those independent ones previously mentioned—to close, reduce employees' hours, or even scale back their expansion plans.

Tourism businesses, including hotels, restaurants and attractions, rely on part-time and seasonal workers to meet demand during peak times. The changes in NICs may make it more difficult for those businesses to retain or take on staff, limiting their capacity and ability to make a profit. That is especially concerning for Northumberland, where tourism clearly not only contributes to the local economy, but plays a key role in sustaining small businesses and preserving local jobs.

Given the ongoing recovery of the tourism sector following the pandemic, those additional financial challenges may well threaten to undo much-needed and well achieved progress, particularly for small businesses struggling with already thin margins. Therefore, it is essential that the Government consider how those new cost pressures will affect tourism and hospitality businesses, and that they work to provide support to help those businesses navigate the challenges in that sector successfully.

[Saqib Bhatti]

To unlock Northumberland's full tourism potential, we must prioritise investment in key supply-side areas such as transport infrastructure, as rightly pointed out by the hon. Member for Hexham. Improved connectivity, whether by road or rail, is vital for attracting domestic and international visitors. Enhancing access to Northumberland's iconic sites—from Hadrian's wall to Alnwick castle—will enable more people to experience the county's rich cultural and historical heritage.

In addition, strengthening digital infrastructure is crucial. Many rural areas in Northumberland suffer from limited broadband, which affects not only local businesses but tourists' experience. Will the Minister clarify the Government's commitment to improving Northern Rail and investing in digital infrastructure as part of its tourism strategy?

Northumberland's tourism industry has demonstrated exceptional resilience in its recovery from the pandemic. However, the Government's recent changes to national insurance contributions could push small tourism and hospitality businesses to the brink. It is crucial that the Government provide the necessary support to the tourism sector, particularly in counties such as Northumberland, to help them to absorb those additional financial pressures and work towards returning to pre-pandemic levels. I look forward to hearing the Minister's plans for the future of tourism in the UK and in Northumberland, and for the communities that depend on the industry to thrive.

5.14 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I again welcome you to the Chair, Sir Roger, and it is good to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris). He is actually named in my documents from the Department as "Joe Hexham"; that is probably how he will be presenting himself at the next general election as well, I should think—unless boundaries change in some bizarre, unhelpful way. It is good to see so many new MPs wanting to talk about tourism and the visitor economy, because it is so important to so many parts of the country. As part of the creative industries, it is important that the Government are saying that it is also part of our industrial future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham said in passing that this is about not just the legacy of the past—he listed some of the things in Northumberland from our historical past that are important—but what we do today. One of the things we need to change about our whole tourism strategy as a country is that there is a danger that international visitors think, "The United Kingdom never changes. It's always got that Parliament building, castles, the monarchy—things like that. You can go next year or the year after." Actually, we want people to think that now is the time to come to the United Kingdom: "We're not going to put it off. We're going to come now." If they come now, they might come again next year because they want to see a different part of the United Kingdom.

I have a word of caution. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham said, "Wouldn't it be a good idea if, when we as the UK are selling our tourism abroad, we specifically mention Northumberland?" I get it. I am a Welsh MP,

and I have often said that it would be good if we started mentioning Wales a bit more in our tourism marketing around the world. The question is whether it works.

I have an anecdotal story, but it is true none the less: Charlotte Church, a young Welsh singer—at the time much younger—was asked to go and sing, for George Bush I think, in the White House. She sang very beautifully, and afterwards George Bush was introduced to her and asked where she was from. She said, "Wales." He said, "What state is that in?" To which she said, "Terrible." There was a complete meeting of minds.

That story makes an important point about our tourism strategy. I completely agree that it is embarrassing that so many international visitors conceive of coming to the UK as being only about visiting London—or, as I said in the other debate, perhaps Bath or Oxford and Cambridge as a day visit and then maybe Edinburgh. There is far more to see in the United Kingdom. The question is how we best effect that change.

We may be able to do several things. There is no point in my rehearsing the numbers of people who go to the north-east in compared with London, and the difference in spend; my hon. Friend did that perfectly. I want to change that, but that will require a five or 10-year strategy, which I hope we will be able to publish over the coming months. I would be interested to talk to people from different parts of the country about making sure that we put a strategy in place that will genuinely work.

My hon. Friend also talked about the difficulty of ensuring that local people are not shunted out by the tourist influx. One of the things I am keen to work on more is the question of short-term lets. If, as often happens on the coastline, large numbers of short-term lets are all full for two or three months and completely empty for the rest of the year, that does not seem like a win for the local community. That is why, building on what the previous Government did with their legislation on short-term lets, we hope to launch a consultation fairly soon on how we can develop a register of such lets, so that at least we know what is out there, and on how we could use that register to better effect to try to get the benefits of tourism, including visitors not just coming during the day, but staying overnight, without the downsides that sometimes come with that.

Several Members mentioned particular places in Northumberland. I think "Vera" got a look-in several times, which is inevitable—I do not know what Northumberland is going to do if "Vera" ever stops. Brenda is a wonderful actress, but I do not know whether she has another 50 years in her.

My favourite place, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), is Lindisfarne. We have a little painting of Lindisfarne in our downstairs toilet at home in Wales: it is a place of phenomenal beauty and extraordinary history. It is extremely well run and has thousands of visitors every year. I have swum in the sea at Cullercoats—in winter, too, which is quite an ambitious thing.

Both Bamburgh castle and Alnwick castle have been referred to. In fact, I think I am right in saying that Northumberland has more castles than any other county in England. Wales might beat everywhere else on the castle front, but that is Edward I for you. I think Alnwick castle is the second largest in England; it certainly

has the second largest number of rooms. It is still the home of the Northumberlands and an extraordinary place to visit.

Tourism for music was not mentioned, but the north-east has a phenomenal music tradition. Sam Fender was on in Newcastle when Pink was on in Gateshead: I know that because I went to Pink. It was a phenomenal concert—the whole region was alive, with every single hotel room in the whole area taken—but people may wonder whether it is a good idea to have two massive concerts at the same time, how that can be managed to best effect and whether it is good for the local economy or whether it would be better to spread them out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) referred to having the best fish and chips. I have been in many debates in my years in Parliament, and I must have heard nearly every MP say that the best fish and chips come from such and such a place in their constituency. I warn her against that, because you end up eating an awful lot of fish and chips in the process. I am sure her frame can take it, but I would just say that what makes a good fish and chip shop is actually its range—and the best fish and chip shop equipment is provided by Preston and Thomas. It is no longer functioning in Cardiff, but it had the best range none the less. I know that because my father's best man was either Preston or Thomas. I can't remember which.

I turn to the destination development partnership pilots. Up in the north-east, as I saw when I visited not long ago, there is a real determination to seize the opportunity, not just in individual constituencies or local authority areas but across the whole region. I really praise Kim McGuinness: she is absolutely determined that the numbers are going to change. A key part of it is about trying to bring in a new centre—let us hope that it may become a national centre of excellence for hospitality and tourism—based in Newcastle, but working across the whole of the region. It would be good to get additional investment in that.

One thing that has often worried me—this relates to a point that the shadow Minister made—is that in many other countries around the world, people are so proud of tourism that they think of a job in the hospitality industry not as something you do if you really have to, because you have to pay for a course at university or are on a gap year or whatever, but as something people do for the whole of their life, because they are proud of the community they live in and want people to enjoy it. It is a proper career for a whole life.

To enable that here, we need to do several things. We need proper determination across the country that that is what we are going to do. We have to change the whole ethos around serving people in the hospitality industry. We have to enable the industry to work with the Government to develop more career pathways. Tourism must be a key part of the industrial strategy. All the different bits of it, from the moment somebody lands in this country to the moment they leave, need to be singing in the same way. We also have to reform the apprenticeship levy so that it works for small businesses and the creative industries in general. We have to bind together all of the creative industries: we have already talked about music, but lots of people travel for sport as well. It all needs to work together if we are really going to change the prosperity of this country as it derives from tourism.

That is why what is happening in the north-east is so important. I visited not long ago, and I expect to visit in the next fortnight as well. I am very keen to work with those on the ground who want to ensure that tourism becomes an even more significant part of the economy in the north-east.

I welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti). I have written down, "Welcome him and be nice." To be fair, I am quite fond of him: we were on the Foreign Affairs Committee together. Where it is possible for us all to drive the economy forward together, there is no partisan advantage. I am very happy to work with him. I know he has my number and I have his, in more ways than one. I very much hope that we can work together.

The hon. Gentleman asked about a sector-wide plan. As I said, in the next few weeks I will make a speech about tourism in which I hope to lay out some of our ambitions. It may be that we want to do a much more substantial piece of work on our long-term and medium-term ambitions in tourism for the whole of the United Kingdom. We will be thinking about that over the next few weeks.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the issue of seasonal staffing. That is a legitimate point that relates to issues that other parts of the economy have had with seasonal workers coming in from other parts of the country. I was really struck, when I was talking to the French Tourism Minister a couple of weeks ago, by the fact that we have a seasonal workers deal with France so that British people can work in ski resorts there. It affects the best part of 100,000 people, who go over and work there every year. It may be that there are perfectly sensible arrangements that we can come to in that regard.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the additional support that we will provide. That sounds like the Conservative party asking for additional spending, but the problem with additional spending is that it normally requires additional taxation—this is one of the problems of opposition. My party has been in opposition in Parliament for more of my years than it has been in government. If I may make a suggestion to him, it is that you cannot ask for one without willing the other. If the Leader of the Opposition made a fatal flaw last week in her questions to the Prime Minister, it was not recognising that if you are going to ask for more money to be spent, you also have to will the ends and the means.

I fully understand the problems that the visitor and hospitality sector faces. It is tough running a pub or a restaurant, and it has been for many years. The margins are extremely narrow. The hon. Member for Cheltenham said that we had slashed business rate relief, or cut it—I don't know that he used the word "slashed"—from 75% to 40%. He could have said that we took it from 0% to 40%, because it was not guaranteed beyond the end of the year. We have made it permanent, which is a good thing.

I fully understand the problems that the sector faces, but some of them relate to long-term stability and sustainability and trying to ensure that businesses have the staff they need. I hope that the north-east will be essential in developing that for the whole of the United Kingdom, perhaps in association with other countries around the world. We also need an NHS that functions, buses that turn up on time, a railway system that works, local authorities that mend the roads and a planning

[Chris Bryant]

system that works and is properly resourced. The whole public sector needs to function in order for the private sector to function. That is why I am proud of the Budget: in the medium and long term, it will help us to secure our economic future.

As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham and all Members in this Chamber will agree, tourism is an essential part of our economic future. It is the fourth largest industry in the world. We have lost share in that over recent years, but even if we were to continue losing share, we could still grow it within the United Kingdom. I am absolutely determined to do that, but it cannot be based just on bringing more and more people to London. I would like more people to come to London, but it cannot just be about that. It has to be based on understanding the full panoply of what we have to offer across the whole of the United Kingdom. Sometimes that will be based on art forms, like being able to see where films or TV series were made or where musicians are from. I note that Framlingham castle is now apparently more famous for Ed Sheeran's song "Castle on the Hill" than it is for Queen Mary discovering that she was about to be Queen, which was historically what it sold itself on.

I go right back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham made at the very beginning. It is not just the legacy of the past that we need to celebrate in our tourism; it is what Britain is today. That is the best way to secure a long-term, secure economic future for our tourism industry in Northumberland and across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): As the Chairman I am not allowed to participate in the debate, but as the Minister comes from the land of song he might like to know that Brenda lives in Thanet and is the chairman of the Thanet male voice choir.

5.30 pm

Joe Morris: I thank the Minister and everyone who has contributed to this very good and enlightening debate. To pick up on a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) made, I should point out that I did grow up in Hexham and am very proud to have grown up in Hexham, although I do support Sunderland. As I said to many of my constituents during the general election campaign, if I

can grow up in the north-east and support Sunderland during the 15 and 19-point seasons, I think I can go down to Parliament and advocate for us quite strongly.

Chris Bryant: Try being Welsh and liking rugby at the moment.

Joe Morris: It certainly teaches resilience. That is one thing that supporting an underwhelming sports team does.

The Minister mentioned music. I should mention Larry O'Donnell, one of my constituency members, who is a bassoonist in the north-east and has often spoken to me about the good work that he and his orchestra do in promoting access to music. I celebrate that.

I have a few points to make as I wind up and thank everyone for their contributions. We need to make sure that tourism is sustainable—that is absolutely right. We need to make sure that the roads are intact, that buses and trains are turning up on time and that we bring local communities with us.

I turn briefly to the landscapes of my constituency. I have been privileged in the past weeks, months and year since being selected as a candidate to engage with the farming community and the work that they have done to diversify, such as by bringing holiday cottages on to their sites. I pay tribute to them as the custodians of Northumberland's landscape. They are fundamental to a lot of what we offer in Northumberland. It would not be right to talk about tourism without talking about the great work being done by the farming community.

I thank English Heritage for welcoming me to Belsay Hall a few weeks ago. It remains my grandmother's favourite day out. It was her birthday on Friday; I have got her the mention in *Hansard* that I promised.

I thank everyone again for taking part in the debate. As the Minister says, we need to grow tourism, but we need to make sure that we grow it outside London and ensure that when people are coming from Chicago, New York, Los Angeles or Tokyo, they consider coming to Hexham spook night, perhaps when they are attending a Newcastle United home game—or a Sunderland home game, in fact. I look forward to welcoming the Minister to one of the many festivals and events in my constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered increasing tourism in Northumberland.

5.33 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Tuesday 19 November 2024

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Reform

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): This Government have set out their safer streets mission, which is committed to reducing violence against women and girls and knife crime, and restoring confidence in our police service. A key part of this mission will see Government taking a more active leadership role on policing and crime.

Our police officers and staff perform an invaluable public service. They provide the safety and security on which everything else depends. Our brave police are emphatic about the importance of preventing crime and disorder, and every day seek to deliver impartial policing that the public can trust. At its best, policing in England and Wales is truly world class.

However, confidence in policing has fallen in recent years. Visible neighbourhood policing has been decimated. At the same time, crime has become more complex, and policing lacks the systems and technology to respond. Police, and the public they serve, need a system that is fit for purpose and fit for the future.

If we want our mission to succeed, we need to reform policing to ensure it can operate effectively and efficiently. We must look at changes to the system that can be delivered as a priority, preserving those vital elements of policing by consent and operational independence, so that we can begin to support forces in improving the service they provide for the public.

I outline some of the core components of our long-term plans for necessary and overdue reforms below. However, this will be a joint programme of work between Government and policing in recognition that the challenge of rebuilding confidence is a shared one, and we will work closely with policing over the coming months to develop the detail of these proposals. I am grateful for the support and enthusiasm from policing system leaders on this important work to date, and look forward to driving it forward together. Working closely and in partnership with policing, we intend to publish a police reform White Paper next year, outlining our plans for bold and comprehensive reforms to the policing system.

Our new neighbourhood policing guarantee will include, among other things, the restoration of patrols to town centres, the delivery of thousands of additional policing personnel into neighbourhood policing roles, and the assurance that every community has a named officer to turn to.

Halving knife crime and violence against women and girls requires effective cross-system working. Police and crime commissioners and mayors in different corners of

the country have driven important local work on crime prevention, which the Home Office must take a more active role in supporting. In terms of preventing crime, we are driving new action, from curbing knife sales to tackling mobile phone theft, but we need to go much further, both locally and nationally, for the mission to be met.

To drive up performance and standards and ensure communities can have confidence in their local police force, a new performance unit will be established in the Home Office. The unit will harness national data to monitor performance and direct improvements, underpinned by a performance framework developed with the College of Policing, the policing inspectorate—His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services—the National Police Chiefs' Council and PCCs.

We are determined to work with policing to consult on the creation of a new national centre of policing to bring together crucial support services, such as IT and forensics, that local police forces can draw upon, to raise standards and improve efficiency. Looking further ahead, and having heard representations from policing, we will explore additional opportunities to expand the remit of this new body, including around those operational responsibilities where effective co-ordination is critical for success.

The 2025-26 police funding settlement for police forces, including full details on Government grant funding and precept, will be set out to Parliament in the normal way before Christmas. But as part of that settlement, I am confirming today that direct central Government funding for policing next year will increase by over half a billion pounds. This includes an increase of over £260 million in the core grant for police forces, and additional funding for neighbourhood policing and counter terrorism. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will confirm the details on the precept limit in a policy statement later this month.

Next steps

Police leaders support the need for reform, and the Government are committed to working with them to bring the change needed to reconnect policing with the communities they serve. These key areas for reform are pivotal if we are to deliver effective and efficient policing. Collaboration will be key, and the Home Office will continue to engage across Government and with the sector in developing this ambitious reform programme. We will present our White Paper to Parliament next year ahead of legislation in due course.

We have a unique opportunity ahead of us to shape and implement the changes policing needs to deliver our priorities and keep the public safe. I look forward to working with policing on this ambitious programme of reform.

[HCWS232]

Petitions

Tuesday 19 November 2024

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Ilkley Lido Parking Charges

The petition of residents of the constituency of Keighley and Ilkley,

Declares that for years, visitors have relied on free parking at Denton Road Car Park to make use of the Ilkley lido and other facilities; notes concern that Bradford Council have proposed parking charges at the popular site for the first time, which will impose an undue financial burden on residents and local clubs who utilise the car park, including Olicanian Cricket Club; and further notes that Ilkley is being treated unfairly compared to other pools and leisure facilities across the Bradford District, and that there has been a lack of consultation with the community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Bradford Council to honour its previous commitment to ensure that parking charges at Denton Road Car Park do not adversely affect Ilkley Lido users and Olicanian Cricket Club, staff, players and members.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Presented by Robbie Moore, Official Report, 29 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 782.]

[P003017]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):

Thank you for making me aware of this issue. This Government recognise that availability of safe, well-managed car parking can be important for communities. Parking is the responsibility of local authorities, and in line with this Government's commitment to localism, it is for them to determine what is best for their own area. Central Government have no remit to intervene in this individual case.

Residents clearly feel strongly on issues of local parking, and there is a formal petition mechanism they may use. In 2015, the then Department for Communities and Local Government published new statutory guidance describing how local residents can petition to initiate a formal review of parking policies in their area by their council, with councillors then voting on the action to be taken.

Further information is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-challenge-parking-policies>.

TREASURY

NatWest bank closure in Angel Edmonton

The petition of residents of the constituency of Edmonton and Winchmore Hill.

Declares that petitioners have significant concerns about the proposed closure of the NatWest branch in Angel Edmonton and its impact on reducing access to face-to-face banking services locally and leaving workers at risk of redundancy; notes that the Government are a significant stakeholder in NatWest; further notes that the closure of bank branches especially impacts older and disabled people, those who are digitally excluded without access to internet banking, and small business owners; and further declares that this can make it harder for many people to manage their finances at a time when millions of families are already struggling to make ends meet.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect face-to-face person banking services, ensure that the decline in banks can be stopped and even reversed, and that accessibility to banking services is kept accessible to all.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Kate Osamor, Official Report, 23 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 378.]*

[P003012]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Tulip Siddiq):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents regarding the closure of the NatWest Upper Edmonton branch.

The Government are sorry to hear of her constituents' concerns about the proposed closure of the Upper Edmonton NatWest branch and the subsequent challenges that they may have in accessing face-to-face banking.

Banking has changed significantly in recent years, with many customers benefiting from the ease and convenience of remote banking. None the less, let me assure the hon. Member that the Government understand the importance of face-to-face banking to communities and high streets, and are committed to championing sufficient access for all as a priority. Access to financial services is key to ensuring that all citizens can both contribute to and benefit from growth in the UK.

This is why the Government are working closely with banks to roll out 350 banking hubs, which will provide individuals and businesses up and down the country with critical cash and banking services. The UK banking sector has committed to deliver these hubs by the end of this Parliament.

Banking hubs offer basic counter services provided by Post Office staff, allowing people and businesses to withdraw and deposit cash, deposit cheques, pay bills and make balance enquiries. They also contain dedicated rooms where customers can see community bankers from their own bank to carry out wider banking services.

It may be useful if I set out the mechanism by which banking hubs are deployed in more detail. Banking hubs are a voluntary service that were developed by the financial services sector in the context of legislation to protect access to cash services under the Financial

Services Act 2023. Their roll-out is overseen by Cash Access UK (CAUK), a not-for-profit company set up and funded by the banks for the purpose of co-ordinating banking hub delivery. LINK—the operator of the UK’s largest ATM network—assesses a community’s needs regarding access to cash services in the event of the closure of a core cash service, or if LINK receives a request directly from a community. Where LINK considers that a community requires additional cash services—that will depend on multiple factors, such as whether there is another bank branch or cash service nearby—CAUK will provide a suitable shared solution. This solution could be a new deposit service or a banking hub for cash users in that community.

Over 80 banking hubs are already open and CAUK, which oversees banking hub roll-out, expects 100 hubs to be open by Christmas. I am also focused on working with industry to ensure that the range and quality of banking services provided in hubs provide customers with the support they need.

Regarding the specific closure of the NatWest Upper Edmonton branch, Financial Conduct Authority guidance expects firms to consider carefully the impact of planned branch closures on their customers’ everyday banking and cash access needs and put in place alternatives where reasonable. The guidance expects firms to pay particular attention to the impacts on vulnerable customers,

such as those who are digitally excluded, disabled or elderly. This seeks to ensure that the implementation of closure decisions is done in a way that treats customers fairly. Where firms fall short of expectations, the FCA may ask for closures to be paused or other options to be put in place.

The customer information pack that NatWest has published for the Upper Edmonton branch closure highlights that customers can use alternative NatWest branches in Palmers Green, which is 2.6 miles away; Wood Green, which is 3.3 miles away; and Stoke Newington, which is 3.5 miles away. The nearest free-to-use cash machines can be found at Halifax, 128-132 Fore Street; Tesco Express, 137-149 Fore Street; and BP, 57-59 Fore Street.

The Government’s minority shareholding in NatWest Group is managed at arm’s length and on a commercial basis by UK Government Investments. The Government do not intervene in the operational decisions of NatWest, which are the responsibility of the NatWest board.

Alternative options to access everyday banking services can be via telephone banking, through digital means such as mobile or online banking and via the post office. the post office banking framework allows personal and business customers to withdraw and deposit cash, check their balance, pay bills and cash cheques at 11,500 post office branches across the UK.

Written Correction

Tuesday 19 November 2024

Ministerial Correction

EDUCATION

Higher Education Reform

The following extract is from the statement on Higher Education Reform on 4 November 2024.

Bridget Phillipson: Universities are responsible for managing their own finances and must act to remain sustainable, but Members across the House will agree that it is no use keeping tuition fees down for future students if the universities are not there for them to

attend, nor if students cannot afford to support themselves while they study. I therefore confirm that we will boost support for students with living costs by increasing maximum maintenance loans in line with inflation, giving them an additional £414 a year in '25-26.

[*Official Report*, 4 November 2024; Vol. 756, c. 48.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson):

Bridget Phillipson: Universities are responsible for managing their own finances and must act to remain sustainable, but Members across the House will agree that it is no use keeping tuition fees down for future students if the universities are not there for them to attend, nor if students cannot afford to support themselves while they study. I therefore confirm that we will boost support for students with living costs by increasing maximum maintenance loans in line with inflation, giving them **up to** an additional £414 a year in '25-26.

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**not later than
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