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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 27 March 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Supporting Economic Growth

1. **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure that the transport system supports economic growth. [903409]

7. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure that the transport system supports economic growth. [903415]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Growth is this Government's No. 1 mission, and transport connectivity is key. We are getting on with delivering this Government's plan for change by delivering the basics of a better transport system: cutting journey times and improving connections. That means improving the everyday journeys that drive growth and improve lives.

Mark Ferguson: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. Can she update me on the conversations the Department has had with Gateshead council about the state of Gateshead flyover? This 400-tonne barrier to jobs running through the middle of our town is holding back businesses and growth, and stopping us achieving our full potential.

Heidi Alexander: I recall meeting my hon. Friend just before Christmas, and I appreciate how critical the resolution of this issue is to his constituents and the wider area. My officials, along with colleagues from the North East combined authority, have been meeting regularly with Gateshead council to build the case for the regeneration of the area, facilitated by the planned demolition of the flyover. I know that the Minister for Future of Roads visited Gateshead in January to see the issues for herself.

Douglas McAllister: Scotland's ferry network to the islands is an essential transport system. Island communities have at times been effectively cut off due to ferry chaos, disruptive cancellations and expensive repairs. The SNP has decided to inflict a 10% fare hike and sent a contract for seven new ferries to Poland. The Scottish Government

are depriving Scotland's iconic shipbuilding industry of much-needed growth and jobs. Can the UK Government assist the Scottish Government with fundamental reform of how we procure and run ferries in our country?

Heidi Alexander: As all of us know, Scotland has a world-renowned shipbuilding industry, so it saddens me that, under the SNP, Scotland's ferries are being built elsewhere. I am aware that Scottish colleagues want to see reforms to how ferries are run and procured. In the meantime, I urge the Scottish Government to reconsider sending vital jobs and investment abroad.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on improving everyday transport for UK residents, and her comments on Scottish ferries. Does she agree that my constituency, on the Isle of Wight, should not be left behind in the Government's transport plans? Will she agree to intervene and look at all options in order to regulate private equity—currently, we are entirely reliant on it for our connectivity with the UK mainland, which is harming our local economy—and to look at the potential of empowering any future combined mayoral authority with some regulatory power over cross-Solent transport?

Heidi Alexander: I had a useful meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) about this issue a couple of weeks ago, and I am afraid he slightly beat the hon. Gentleman to it in suggesting that we should consider what powers might be available through any future mayoral combined authority. Let me assure the hon. Gentleman that we are speaking to stakeholders across the island, including the ferry operators, to understand these issues in more depth and how we might make improvements going forward. That engagement will continue, and my hon. Friend the Maritime Minister will have a meeting with all stakeholders in due course.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Regional growth is really important for the wider economy. There has been a huge focus on London airports—Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton—in recent weeks. What efforts is the Transport Secretary making to address regional growth and regional airport investment?

Heidi Alexander: I meet my counterpart in the Scottish Government regularly, and I will discuss this issue with her. The potential expansion of Heathrow is very important for regional connectivity to our other airports. With regard to Scottish airports, if there are specific issues that the hon. Gentleman would like to bring to my attention, I would be very happy to have that conversation with him.

Public Transport: Newcastle-under-Lyme

2. **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of public transport in Newcastle-under-Lyme. [903410]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Transport that meets local, regional and national needs is vital for delivering this Government's missions, and I am determined that communities like

those in Newcastle-under-Lyme will benefit. The Chancellor announced over £650 million for local transport outside city regions at the autumn Budget, and the Secretary of State will confirm the allocations soon.

Adam Jogee: A well-connected transport system is critical to the local economy, a healthy population and a sense of pride in our communities. However, many of my Newcastle-under-Lyme constituents in Betley, Bradwell, Wolstanton, Audley and the rest of the villages have made it clear that they cannot access medical or retail services due to a lack of local bus provision, hurting our shops and the health and wellbeing of my constituents. Will the Minister come to Newcastle-under-Lyme to meet me so that we can establish a path forward to get my constituents the bus services they need?

Simon Lightwood: While I would always welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend, I urge him to lobby Staffordshire county council, which will get £11.1 million in bus funding in 2025-26, consisting of £5.8 million in revenue and £5.3 million in capital, specifically to support and improve bus services and infrastructure across Staffordshire, including in his constituency.

Aviation Sector: Support

3. **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the aviation sector. [903411]

17. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to support the aviation sector. [903426]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): The Government have shown that we will support the UK aviation sector by backing airport expansions that promote economic growth while meeting climate and environmental standards. We have invited proposals for a third runway at Heathrow, and introduced a package of measures to encourage the production and use of sustainable aviation fuel.

Gurinder Singh Josan: Aviation is a crucial part of the UK economy, with regional airports supporting jobs in communities across the UK, but with many more opportunities ahead. Will the Minister make representations in relation to the industrial strategy both to support the development of hydrogen fuel and to develop the associated infrastructure to make hydrogen-powered aviation a reality?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is a great champion in this area. In addition to the sustainable aviation fuel I mentioned, we recognise the role that hydrogen can play in decarbonising aviation, because it literally produces zero emissions at the tailpipe. We have invested £63 million in the advanced fuels fund, announced by the Chancellor, which will also be available for power-to-liquids sustainable aviation fuel projects.

Chris Vince: I thank the Minister for his answer. As the Prime Minister pointed out yesterday, Stansted airport is a huge employer and training provider for my constituency of Harlow. What work is the Department,

alongside the Department for Work and Pensions, doing with employers and training providers in the aviation sector?

Mike Kane: I acknowledge that my hon. Friend is a great champion for the airport near his constituency. We engage with airports to understand their plans. Stansted has committed to creating over 5,000 jobs from its £1.1 billion expansion, and it has established an employment skills academy in the Aerozone to boost careers and deliver STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—outreach. I encourage him to carry on engaging as he has been doing.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I know that the Aviation Minister will understand the need for a major diversion field in the south-east of England. With that in mind and in the light of my question to the Prime Minister yesterday, will he welcome the potential reopening of Manston airport in Kent in October 2028, and the huge investment and growth potential that will create?

Mike Kane: The right hon. Member, who raised this with me while I was in opposition and has now done so while I am in government, is a doughty champion for this campaign. Manston needs to come forward with its plans, which will be subject to a development consent order, and we will then make a judgment about what is in our best interests.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answer. There are lots of training and employment opportunities for young people in careers as cabin crew and pilots, or indeed in aerospace and engineering—for example, at Spirit AeroSystems in Belfast—so what can be done, working alongside the Education Minister, to ensure that those opportunities are made apparent in schools to all the young people who will be the future of our country?

Mike Kane: It gives me great pleasure to wish the hon. Member many happy returns on his 70th birthday earlier this week. I think he is actually asking to be retrained in aviation skills. [*Laughter.*]

Northern Ireland is a great place for the aerospace industry with its three great airports—the two in Belfast and City of Derry/Londonderry—which gives people a lot of skills. There is no limit to what people can achieve by getting into this industry in Northern Ireland and travelling the world over practising their skills.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I add my birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Significantly muddled messages are being sent to the aviation sector. On the one hand, the Climate Change Committee, upon whose altar the Government appear to worship, wants flights to fall by 2030, which is a massive blow to our aviation sector, while the Government equally say that they want growth and that they want to expand airports. Who is going to win? Will Ministers stand up to the Climate Change Committee or are we just going to end up with bigger, emptier airports?

Mike Kane: The Climate Change Committee advises; we decide. We are not going to take any lectures on tough decisions. I remember when the former Member for Uxbridge was Foreign Secretary in 2018, he concocted a trip to Kabul to avoid a debate on expansion plans for Heathrow. We are getting on with growing aviation in this country.

Greg Smith: If it is tough decisions the Minister wants, I invite him to look at what happened in the Budget of broken promises. Air passenger duty went up significantly. For example, a couple flying to New York will pay £204 in tax. That is a 16% increase. Does the Minister not see that he needs to stand up to the Treasury if he is going to stand up for the aviation sector? Otherwise he is doing what socialists always do: tax growth out of existence.

Mike Kane: I enjoy the hon. Member trying to polarise the Chamber. He is sort of all right at it, but we are getting on with decisions around Luton, Stansted, Heathrow and growing the aviation sector. Yes, tax is an important element, but in the past two months we have seen the biggest demand ever—even before the pandemic—in people wanting to fly. That is a testament to the work we are doing in Government to get on with the decisions that should have been taken years ago.

Promoting Active Travel

4. **Anna Dixon** (ShIPLEY) (Lab): What steps she is taking to promote active travel. [903412]

6. **Maureen Burke** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to promote active travel. [903414]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government recognise the importance of promoting active travel. We recently announced almost £300 million of active travel funding, enough for up to 300 miles of new footways and cycleways. We will say more very soon on the next steps for the third cycling and walking investment strategy.

Anna Dixon: Increasing active travel by 50% in England would result in 1.8 million fewer GP visits and 4 million fewer sick days. I therefore welcome the Government's commitment, reiterated by the Minister, to build 300 miles of new cycle lanes and walkways. Will the Minister meet me and the Friends of Wharfedale Greenway to see how we can secure investment to open up this amazing active travel corridor in Wharfedale and boost the health of my constituents?

Simon Lightwood: Our investment in active travel will lead to fewer sick days and millions more journeys walked, wheeled and cycled every year. More than £17 million has been allocated to West Yorkshire for active travel. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I will also ask Active Travel England to make contact with the Friends of Wharfedale Greenway about that specific scheme.

Maureen Burke: Earlier this week, I was delighted to welcome St Paul's Youth Forum from my constituency to Parliament. It does amazing work to provide opportunities to young people, no matter their background.

One example of its work is the On Bikes scheme, which helps young people stay active by offering repairs and bike loans. Will the Minister join me in celebrating the fantastic work of St Paul's Youth Forum, and will he consider visiting to see its community work in action?

Simon Lightwood: I am really pleased to hear about St Paul's. Giving young people cycle skills is so important, which is why we are investing £30 million a year in Bikeability cycle training in England. Active travel is a devolved matter, but I am sure my counterpart in the Scottish Government will consider a visit.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Active travel in Eastbourne is being undermined by the poor quality of our roads. We have potholes on Pacific Drive, Upperton Road, King's Drive and Milfoil Drive, and poor investment in pedestrian crossings. Residents in the Hawthorns cannot cross the road safely on Carew Road or The Avenue. Will the Minister urge Conservative-run East Sussex county council to get a grip of our roads and crossings, and properly invest hard-earned taxpayers' money to address those transport challenges?

Simon Lightwood: I will indeed join the hon. Gentleman in calling on the council to do just that. There has been a 40% uplift in the funding to tackle our highway backlog and potholes. Some of that money can be used on improving walkways and cycleways, which are part of the highway.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Women cycle a lot less than men—71% of women do not cycle, compared with 54% of men. Safety concerns are the main barrier. That gender gap is not acceptable. What are the Government doing to address that?

Simon Lightwood: The hon. Lady raises a very important question, and I am passionate about this issue. She will be aware that the Government will be bringing forward a new road safety strategy—the first one in over a decade. Part of that will be looking at how we can address that imbalance and the perception of and actual issues with safety on our highways.

Road Safety: Gig Economy Couriers

5. **Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve road safety for gig economy couriers using two-wheeled vehicles. [903413]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): This Government have announced a £500 million road maintenance funding uplift for next year, as well as £300 million for active travel schemes. That will improve road conditions and safety for all road users, including delivery riders.

Bambos Charalambous: Two-wheeled couriers working in the gig economy experience more road dangers than average riders due to time pressures from employers. Research from University College London shows that gig economy riders are three times as likely to report damage to their vehicle and nearly twice as likely to

report injury. What steps are being taken, including with employers of gig economy riders and other stakeholders, to protect gig economy riders and reduce dangers for them and other road users and pedestrians?

Lilian Greenwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important issue, which I know will be familiar to many Members across the House. In December, the Minister for Local Transport wrote to the main food delivery companies to remind them of the importance the Government place on the safety of food delivery riders and other road users and to remind them of their obligations. It is essential that delivery riders follow the highway code, despite the time pressure they are sometimes operating under.

Local Bus Services

8. **Matt Turmaine** (Watford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve local bus services. [903416]

10. **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve local bus services. [903418]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Improving local bus services is vital to kick-starting economic growth. Through our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill and the £1 billion we are investing to support and improve bus services, we are taking definitive action to help deliver the better, more reliable bus services that passengers deserve throughout the country. I was delighted to see the results of the recent Transport Focus survey, which show that passenger satisfaction has increased to 83%. We can and will do more.

Matt Turmaine: I thank the Minister for his response. In Watford, private bus operators such as Arriva change bus routes on a whim, usually providing less frequent services and sometimes withdrawing them altogether. That leaves Hertfordshire county council scrambling to plug gaps in services through expensive contracts. Does he agree that there must be a better way to run local buses that puts passengers first and foremost?

Simon Lightwood: It is vital that passengers have access to a stable and reliable bus network, and our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill includes a measure that offers greater protection to services from being arbitrarily cancelled or reduced. Alongside our investment in buses, including £12.2 million for Hertfordshire, this Government are taking action to help local leaders improve their bus services.

Olivia Bailey: Scores of my constituents, including Carole, have told me they oppose the removal of the No. 15 bus service in parts of Calcot, which has meant they cannot get to work, the supermarket, the GP or even the food bank. I am proud of our bus service in Reading, which is a shining example of a locally run service, and I am glad to see the Government commit to strengthening services further. Does the Minister agree that local routes need to serve all those who need them in every part of our communities, and will he back my campaign to reinstate the No. 15 bus in Royal Avenue and Garston Crescent?

Simon Lightwood: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I encourage her to continue to speak with the operator to understand whether changes can be made to the route to better meet her constituents' needs. Our buses Bill, alongside the £2.4 million for Reading and the £1.6 million for West Berkshire, will give local leaders the tools to deliver better bus services for passengers.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Local bus services are part of the integrated travel plans for my constituency, but my constituents also rely on Transport for London to commute into London. One frustration of my community is that concession fares are offered to London residents who live very close to the Hertfordshire border but not to my constituents. As accessibility to public transport remains one of my top priorities, will the Minister push Transport for London to extend those concessions to every TFL user regardless of their address?

Simon Lightwood: That is a devolved matter, but I appreciate that TFL also subsidises many routes outside that boundary. I am happy to pick up that matter with the hon. Gentleman outside the Chamber.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): In my constituency, bus services are a lifeline for residents of all ages, young and old. I was shocked to hear at a recent meeting at Hereford sixth-form college that 21 students this year have had to stop their studies because of problems with the reliability and cost of public transport. Our older residents get free bus travel, but our young people do not. Does the Minister agree that it is essential that every young person is enabled to access education, employment and training? Will he meet me to discuss how the Department for Transport can work with the Department for Education to ensure that all young people can access those opportunities?

Simon Lightwood: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The English national concessionary travel scheme provides off-peak bus travel to those who are eligible, including those with disabilities and those of state pension age—currently 66. However, local authorities have the power to go above and beyond their statutory obligations. Areas including the hon. Lady's area will receive bus service improvement plans funding, which can be used for exactly that, but I am of course more than happy to meet her to discuss this further.

Passenger Rail Performance

9. **Jade Botterill** (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail performance. [903417]

16. **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail performance. [903425]

20. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of passenger rail performance. [903430]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): We are starting to see train performance stabilise following a decade of decline, and cancellations are no longer

rising. We have ended the national industrial dispute, bringing passenger confidence back with a 7% increase in passenger journeys. Furthermore, we have made station-specific performance information available for the first time, as a visible sign that we are determined to improve standards.

Jade Botterill: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. In rural towns, rail links are vital to keep our communities connected, but many stations, such as Shepley station in my constituency, have poor accessibility for disabled and elderly travellers. Can she offer an update on the Department's plans to upgrade accessibility at Shepley station through the Access for All programme and through its consideration of the business case submitted by Kirklees council to ensure that all residents can use it?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that accessibility is at the heart of our plans for rail reform. Although I am not yet able to comment on next steps for Access for All projects at specific stations, such as Shepley in her constituency, I assure her that we are committed to improving the accessibility of the railway. It will be a priority for Great British Railways.

Natasha Irons: The Croydon area remodelling scheme would upgrade East Croydon and Norwood Junction stations in my constituency and improve services across the Brighton main line and most of the south-east. However, after the previous Government withdrew funding for this vital infrastructure project, passengers continue to suffer delays, and opportunities for growth across the south-east remain untapped. Given the Government's mission for growth and increased demand for rail services to Gatwick airport, will the Secretary of State look again at the Croydon area remodelling scheme and meet me to discuss how investing in Croydon's transport infrastructure could unlock growth across the south-east?

Heidi Alexander: I am sorry to say that the previous Government recklessly over-promised on rail infrastructure projects, misleading passengers who have struggled for far too long to access the services that they deserve. In fact, I would go as far as saying that Conservative Ministers travelled around the country promising rail users the moon on a stick, paid for with fantasy money. I will gladly meet my hon. Friend to discuss the Croydon area modelling scheme.

Tessa Munt: The Secretary of State will know about the planned engineering works between Didcot Parkway and Swindon and in the Paddington area, which will cause significant disruption between London and Bristol and in south Wales this Sunday and next Sunday. Disruption on major routes causes massive chaos on the rural routes that are accessed via Bristol and further to the south-west. Then there is the closure of the M4 between Bath and Bristol, which means that there will be no buses between Swindon and Bristol on those days. The alerts about longer and busier journeys and train cancellations and delays advise us to travel the day before or the day after. That does not seem adequate. Will the Secretary of State please pull the rail, bus and road bodies together to avoid clashes such as this, particularly when we face six years of further disruption as a result of High Speed 2 works, which will not benefit the south-west in the slightest?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. Having readjusted my own travel plans for this weekend, I feel her pain somewhat. This Government recognise that Sunday performance in particular, irrespective of planned engineering works, has not been good enough on Great Western Railway, and we are working actively to address that. GWR is continuing to make tactical interventions to improve the resilience of timetabling, diagramming and rostering. I will raise her wider point about join-up between modes with officials in my Department.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Given that one in five trains operated by Southern Rail arriving at Chichester station is late, and that there is no fast service connecting Chichester to London, what steps are being taken directly to improve train punctuality and reliability for my constituents, especially considering that an annual ticket is nearly £8,000?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady is right to demand excellent train services for her constituents, and that is what this Government are determined to deliver. We are working with the train operating companies on plans to improve timetabling and staff availability and rostering. I am happy to take away the specific issues that she has raised in relation to Chichester and provide her with more detail on the intervention plan on that line.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): We are told that nationalisation is the answer to improving passenger rail performance. If that is the case, surely it would make sense to start by nationalising the worst performing operators. CrossCountry comes last out of all train operating companies for passenger satisfaction and it is not complying with its obligations. The Secretary of State could call in that contract, so why is it not the first operator to be nationalised under GBR?

Heidi Alexander: We made a commitment to bring the train operating companies back into public ownership without any cost to the taxpayer. The appropriate point at which to bring the train operating companies back into public ownership is when the franchises expire. If there is terrible performance, we can seek to break a contract earlier. I am pleased that there are some improvements at CrossCountry. We are seeing improvements from the train operating companies that have been brought into public ownership. In particular, for TransPennine and LNER there is a really positive story to tell on passenger journeys and revenue growth.

Jerome Mayhew: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but she ducks the point that if she had the political will she could bring CrossCountry in-house now. It is not the first operator to come under GBR or even close to it. Under current plans, the Government will not get around to tackling CrossCountry until 2031. In the meantime, highly effective private operators with some of the highest levels of customer satisfaction such as c2c and Greater Anglia will be subjected to dislocating nationalisation this year. Why are the Government forcing nationalisation in areas where current services are liked, and sitting on their hands where people are crying out for improvements?

Heidi Alexander: I am not sure the hon. Gentleman listened to my previous answer. I said clearly that we are bringing the train operating companies into public ownership in a way that offers good value for money for the British taxpayer. The number of cancellations on CrossCountry has reduced markedly since the start of this year, and although we recognise that there is more to do, CrossCountry is on a good improvement trajectory.

Railway Capacity

11. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase capacity on the railways. [903419]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): We are committed to increasing railway capacity. For instance, the delivery of HS2 phase 1 will more than double long-distance seated capacity between London and the west midlands, and many projects that will increase capacity are being funded through the rail network enhancements pipeline, particularly in the north and midlands.

Tom Gordon: I pay tribute to Brian Dunsby OBE, who was a pillar of the Harrogate business community. He tirelessly campaigned to improve our railways, including getting a direct service from London to Harrogate. One of the issues that we spoke about before he sadly passed away was how the Leeds to York line via Harrogate becomes a single track at Knaresborough, which has implications for running higher levels of services and for delays, as once one service is delayed, the entire day can quickly fall. I am launching a campaign for the dualling of the line between Knaresborough and York so that the railways serving our communities are fit for purpose. Will the Secretary of State join me in that? Will she offer any advice on how we can go about securing that investment?

Heidi Alexander: May I express my condolences on the loss of the rail campaigner and constituent the hon. Member mentioned? I am aware that Network Rail is looking at both electrification schemes and potentially longer platform schemes for stations that serve his constituency, but I recognise that he is talking about dual tracking. May I suggest that he seeks a meeting with the Rail Minister in the other place to discuss that in more detail?

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): My constituents in Uttoxeter have no trains on a Sunday until 3 pm due to long-standing Network Rail staffing issues in signal boxes. With Uttoxeter's growing population, it is unacceptable that residents are left without transport for much of the day on Sunday. I thank the Rail Minister for his engagement with me so far, but will the Secretary of State say more about how the Government are improving the reliability of train services?

Heidi Alexander: I am clear that we must have a seven-day railway where trains are as likely to turn up on a Sunday afternoon as they are on a Monday morning. We are working with train operating companies across the country, including those that serve my hon. Friend's constituents in Uttoxeter, and I am happy to provide more information to him in writing about the specific action we are taking in his constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): In 2017, South Western Railway ordered 90 new Arterio trains to increase capacity on its rail network. They were meant to enter service in 2019. However, six years later, only five are in service—presumably not counting the empty one that sailed by a teeming and seething platform at Wimbledon this morning. With SWR set to be in Government hands in two months, what steps will be taken to ensure that those trains are finally brought into service?

Heidi Alexander: I know that the Rail Minister is seized of this issue. He has spoken to me about it, and I understand that it relates to issues with lighting on platforms, what can be seen from the CCTV cameras and the role of the guard. We are across the detail, and it is important that those issues are resolved before the trains are brought into public ownership on 25 May.

Swindon and Oxford Railway

12. **Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the proposed railway line between Swindon and Oxford. [903420]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Great Western Railway is currently operating a trial of direct Saturday services between Bristol Temple Meads and Oxford that call at Swindon. Officials are working with Great Western Railway to explore the feasibility of expanding the current Saturday trial of services between Bristol and Oxford to other days of the week.

Will Stone: Over the past decade, we have seen uncertainty in the rail sector. Will the Minister please reassure me that she will be taking decisions differently, to focus on delivery, especially on links such as Swindon to Oxford?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend will know of the ministerial team's commitment to Swindon. We are committed to delivering a unified and simplified rail system that focuses on improved services for passengers and better value for taxpayers. We are actively exploring the feasibility of the proposal that he described.

Gloucestershire: Eastward Transport Links

13. **Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of eastward transport links from Gloucestershire. [903421]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Department is working with the rail industry to improve the performance of rail services in Gloucestershire, while Gloucestershire county council's scheme for the M5 junction 9 and A46 in Ashchurch is currently being considered as part of the Department's major road network and large local majors programmes.

Cameron Thomas: The Government recently announced a UK-silicon valley project linking Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes and Cambridge. There was no mention of

Gloucestershire, with its burgeoning cyber-tech and engineering sectors. From Gloucestershire, our primary arterial road eastward to Oxfordshire is the A40 and it is woefully inadequate as a single carriageway. Will the Minister meet me to develop improved links eastward from Gloucestershire to the benefit of our neighbours in the east?

Lilian Greenwood: Yes, of course.

Decarbonising Transport

14. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What steps she is taking to decarbonise the transport sector. [903423]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Our new maritime decarbonisation strategy, which launched this week, is the latest demonstration of this Government's commitment to decarbonising transport. We are overhauling public transport services to make the sustainable choice the most convenient one, turbocharging the roll-out of electric vehicles and charging infrastructure, and making the UK a world leader in the production and use of sustainable aviation fuels.

Gill Furniss: I am delighted that our Labour Mayor of South Yorkshire, Oliver Coppard, is bringing local buses back under public control. Does the Minister agree that taking back control of our buses will allow us to deliver on a low-carbon future for local transport services? What steps is she taking to increase the roll-out of zero emission buses nationwide?

Lilian Greenwood: I too welcome the steps that Mayor Coppard is taking to deliver better bus services for passengers in South Yorkshire. I know that the Minister for Local Transport was delighted to launch our new UK bus manufacturing expert panel in Sheffield earlier this month, which will help to ensure the UK remains a leader in bus manufacturing. Expanding the roll-out of zero emission buses is central to our efforts to decarbonise the bus fleet and improve air quality. Our Bus Services (No. 2) Bill will accelerate that by requiring bus operators not to use new non-zero emission buses.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): What steps are the Government taking to address diesel islands, which are sections of track without electrification such as those between Reading and my constituency, to support the decarbonisation of the transport sector and encourage the transition to cleaner rail travel?

Lilian Greenwood: The Rail Minister in the other place is very much focused on how we decarbonise our rail sector. A combination of electrification and extended use of batteries can allow us to do that. I am sure he will be happy to write to the hon. Lady about the specifics of the case she raises.

Bus Service Accessibility: Kent

15. **Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the accessibility of bus services in Kent. [903424]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Improving access to local bus services throughout England is a priority for this Government. Our reforms through the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, combined with the £23 million we have allocated to Kent county council in 2025-26, will empower local leaders to deliver better bus services for passengers across Kent.

Tony Vaughan: Conservative-run Kent county council recently confirmed that £9 million of the £10 million grant provided by central Government to improve bus services will go solely to propping up existing services. That is despite the decline in access to bus services over the past 14 years in Kent, as key routes have been abolished or restricted. My constituents in Broadmead have no weekend bus service into town, for example. Does the Minister agree that that is a shocking indictment of the services that the Tories have presided over and that change in May at the local elections is how we improve bus services for our constituents?

Simon Lightwood: I could not agree more with my hon. and learned Friend. I am absolutely clear that too often local bus services are not delivering for passengers right across the country. That is why our ambitious reforms to bus services, including through the buses Bill, will give local leaders the powers they desperately need to reform services to best meet the needs of passengers, including in Kent. I am proud that our reform to bus funding allocations has meant additional funds for buses across the country, unlike under the Conservatives, who presided over 4.7 million fewer bus miles in Kent alone between 2010 and 2023.

Community Buses: Category B Licence Holders

18. **Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): If she will make it her policy to allow holders of category B driving licences to drive community buses. [903427]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I am sympathetic to the hon. Member's concerns, but to date there is not enough evidence to prove that the repeal of the legislation would not have an adverse impact on road safety. Since 1997, holders of car driving licences have not received an automatic entitlement to drive minibuses; this is primarily to improve road safety.

Martin Wrigley: My constituency is fortunate to have both Dawlish community transport and Newton Abbot community transport. They provide vital services for many people who would otherwise be isolated and lonely but, like many other volunteer groups, they are finding it hard to recruit. Recruiting drivers for their minibus services is a particularly. Anyone who took their driving test before 1997 automatically got a D1 minibus class licence, as I did. Since then, younger drivers have had to take a new driving test; the estimated associated training and costs are between £800 and £1,800. Will the Secretary of State work with me to add exceptions to D1 requirements to cover community transport and other volunteer community groups?

Simon Lightwood: Unfortunately, up to 30% of drivers who take the D1 test fail. When we are considering changes, it is important that safety is at the forefront of our thinking.

Supporting Electric Vehicle Usage

19. **Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support people to use electric vehicles. [903429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Government are accelerating the roll-out of charging infrastructure: it was up 32% in the 12 months to 1 March this year. We are engaging with industry to improve consumers' experience, including with contactless payments and design standards. Electric vehicles also receive favourable tax rates, with targeted grants supporting electric vans, taxis and wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

Sam Rushworth: Some 58,000 households in County Durham, including many in my constituency, are unable to charge their vehicles at home. What support are the Government giving to innovative local schemes such as kerb charging so that we can make electric vehicles more accessible for all my constituents?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that charge point numbers increased by 45% in rural areas such as the one he represents, and that the North East combined authority received almost £17.3 million from the local electric vehicle infrastructure fund, which means more public charge points for his constituents. We are also supporting cross-pavement solutions that provide safe charging options for those without driveways, as he describes.

Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure

21. **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. [903431]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood) *rose—[Interruption.]*

David Davis: It actually follows rather well, because—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has to answer the question first.

Lilian Greenwood: It is lovely that people are so keen.

Charge point availability is increasing everywhere. As of 1 March, there were over 75,000 UK public charging devices, with one added to the network every 29 minutes, but we recognise that there are still regional disparities. The local EV infrastructure fund will deliver a further 100,000 charge points right across England.

David Davis: We new boys are still finding our way, Mr Speaker.

My part of the world, Yorkshire, has the lowest EV charging points per head of the whole country. The National Audit Office has pointed out that only 15% of charging points are in rural areas, compared with 44% in London and the south-east. The net zero aims will collapse if we do not fix the equitable provision of EV charging points. What will the Government do to correct those problems?

Lilian Greenwood: The right hon. Member is absolutely right to raise concerns that although charge point availability is increasing rapidly, there are regional disparities and differences between urban and rural areas. The local EV infrastructure fund is designed purposely to tackle some of that regional disparity. As I say, charge points in rural areas have increased by 45% in the last year. The East Riding of Yorkshire, which covers the right hon. Member's constituency, has received £2.7 million in LEVI funding; I hope that that will deliver the improvements he seeks for his constituents.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Minister update us on the zero emission vehicle mandate consultation? When can the sector expect an outcome?

Lilian Greenwood: I know that the global challenges facing the automotive industry have been significant over the past couple of months. During the ZEV mandate consultation, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I met 95% of the vehicle manufacturers. We are currently considering carefully the representations that they and others have made. We will make a further announcement later in the spring.

Maritime Sector: Support

22. **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the maritime sector. [903432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): This week we published our maritime decarbonisation strategy, setting decarbonisation goals, along with policy and regulatory measures, to support the sector through the net zero transition. The strategy provides clarity to the sector and will unlock investment in clean maritime technologies, ensuring that the sector is prepared for a zero-emission future.

Dr Sullivan: The lower Thames crossing announcement a couple of days ago was a disappointment to many of my constituents. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can use a small proportion of the tolls to support the maritime sector, particularly the Tilbury-Gravesend ferry, to reduce congestion and rat-running through the villages?

Mike Kane: I recently met my hon. Friend about her campaign to reinstate the local ferry. Local ferries are a matter for the competent local transport authority, and I call on Kent county council to help her in that campaign to re-establish the ferry. I know that she is working with maritime partners, but I am happy to meet her.

Topical Questions

T1. [903434] **Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I put on record my thanks to all those involved in responding to the major incidents that we have seen unfold on land and at sea in recent weeks. The collisions of vessels in the North sea and the fire at the electricity

substation serving Heathrow have caused disruption and distress. I am pleased that recovery has been swift, and I am clear that no stone should be left unturned either in identifying the causes of the incidents or in learning lessons for the future.

I am pleased with the work taking place across my Department to keep Britain moving. On Monday, we announced what councils need to do to unlock their full share of almost £1.6 billion of investment to repair our broken roads. For the first time, we are asking every council in England to tell us how many potholes it has fixed to unlock its allocation. As we strive to make our trains more reliable, I welcome the end of the Avanti West Coast dispute. Transport continues to drive the Government's plan for change, unlocking jobs, growth and opportunities for all.

Julia Buckley: Last weekend in my constituency, our Shrewsbury Moves festival celebrated progress towards our 10-year plan to implement more inclusive and integrated public transport across our beautiful medieval town. What additional transport is the Department making available to historic and economically thriving towns such as Shrewsbury in order to combat congestion by enabling more integrated public transport?

Heidi Alexander: The Aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), tells me that he was at Shrewsbury Moves on his wedding anniversary and had a very good time.

The integrated national transport strategy will set the long-term vision for transport in England. Different places face different challenges, so we want to enable local leaders to deliver the right transport for communities. That will always include good public transport, as well as schemes that balance the needs of drivers, cyclists and pedestrians on the roads.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): When the Government handed the ASLEF trade union an eye-watering £9 billion pay agreement in the summer, they promised that it would

“protect passengers from further national strikes”.

Yet recently the Secretary of State said on national television that

“there will be occasions on which strikes will be necessary”.

Will she provide the House with an example of a necessary strike?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman will know that I have extensive experience from my time in London, where we did take strikes when safety was at risk. That is one direct example that I can give him.

Gareth Bacon: The Secretary of State will be aware that in response to her Department's recent rail consultation, the trade unions welcomed her plan and said that a just transition to nationalisation would mean the levelling up of pay and conditions for rail workers. The cost of that to the taxpayer could be considerable. Would she consider a strike over harmonising pay and conditions to be a necessary strike?

Heidi Alexander: Let us be clear: the cost of those national rolling strikes over two years was £850 million in lost revenue. I am sorry, but I am not going to take any lessons from the shadow Secretary of State on industrial relations on the railway.

T2. [903437] **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I have launched a petition in my constituency asking Warwickshire county council to take our buses back under public control. Almost 30% of buses do not run on time, and my constituents are sick and tired of being stranded if they do not have a car. Does the Minister agree that Warwickshire county council must do the right thing and improve the dismal service that my constituents are currently stuck with?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Simon Lightwood**): We know that too often local bus services are late or, worse, do not turn up at all, blocking passengers from accessing vital services. Our reforms to the bus sector, combined with that £1 billion investment in buses, will give local leaders the tools they need to ensure that services truly reflect the needs of passengers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Yesterday, the Chancellor spoke about the importance of getting individuals back to work in order to grow our economy, but the uneven coverage, unreliability and inaccessibility of our transport network are key barriers that prevent many from doing so. Furthermore, the Chancellor maintained the decision she took in October to cut the Department for Transport's budget. Does the Secretary of State believe that cutting the transport budget is a good way of increasing economic growth?

Heidi Alexander: I know that the Chancellor and her colleagues in the Treasury understand completely the importance of investing in our transport infrastructure to unlock the jobs, homes and opportunities of the future.

T3. [903440] **Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): People in my constituency desperately need better and faster railway connections across our region and into the north-west of England to connect with jobs and opportunities. I thank the Secretary of State for her positive engagement with the Welsh Government and the Secretary of State for Wales on the topic of rail infrastructure in Wales. Will she meet me and colleagues from north Wales to specifically discuss the latest on the north Wales main line?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. As I said in my letter to Ken Skates in January, we do

“recognise that railways in Wales have seen low levels of enhancement spending in recent years,”

and we will seek to address that.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): When the Roads Minister came to Norfolk recently, she was reported to have cast doubt over the approval of the A10 West Winch housing access road, which is essential to unlock thousands of homes and economic growth. Without the

road, the homes will not be built. Given the Government's commitment to house building, will the Transport Secretary reaffirm her support for this long-standing road scheme?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I was pleased to find myself in Norfolk announcing huge amounts of investment in the region's roads. There are a large number of schemes awaiting the outcome of the spending review, but I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about the specific scheme that he raises.

T4. [903441] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Electric bikes are very popular in my constituency. However, they travel at high speed—with a maximum speed limit of 15.5 mph—and are heavy, which is causing quite a lot of distress to many residents. They can be speed-limited, and often are in our parks. Has the Secretary of State considered a lower speed limit for e-bikes for safety reasons?

Simon Lightwood: E-cycles must comply with the existing regulations, which state that "electrical assistance must cut off when the vehicle reaches 15.5mph". The police already have the power to seize e-cycles and electric motorbikes being used illegally and to fine individuals who fail to stop when instructed to do so.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Secretary of State will recognise that it is very difficult for private landowners and local authorities along the line of High Speed 2 to plan future development when they do not know what will happen to land that is necessary for construction but is not needed for the long-term operation of the line. A land disposal strategy for HS2 is overdue. Can she produce one urgently? When she does so, will she seek opportunities to benefit communities like those I represent, which are suffering the disruption of the line but will not benefit from its operation?

Heidi Alexander: This is a matter that I am seeking to expedite, as I recognise the uncertainty it causes for landowners and communities along the line. I will take the right hon. and learned Gentleman's wider point into consideration.

T6. [903443] **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): East Midlands Railway has a new fleet of trains that will be on the tracks this year—a £400 million investment. These trains can be powered by electrified tracks, but can revert to diesel when travelling on the parts of the midland main line that are not yet electrified. As electrification means cleaner air, less diesel and quieter and faster trains, does the Secretary of State agree that the more of the track that can be electrified, the better it will be for passengers, communities and the environment?

Heidi Alexander: I do agree that Government investment in new bi-mode trains and electrification on east midlands railways will result in lower energy costs, a reduction in noise emissions and a significant improvement to the railways.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As the Secretary of State will be aware, the Government moved the money earmarked for Aldridge train station on the

whim of the Labour Mayor, sadly making Aldridge residents feel that they are no longer cared about. As the Government say that they are minded to grant open access from Wrexham to Euston, will they work with me to demonstrate to the people of Aldridge that they do actually care by working to deliver a train station by 2027, as planned and budgeted for by the Conservatives?

Heidi Alexander: I find it rather strange that every month I come to the Dispatch Box and answer the same question from the right hon. Lady, given that she was Rail Minister for a number of years. I am very happy to discuss the importance of Aldridge station with the Mayor of the West Midlands and to update the right hon. Lady further.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Yesterday, the all-party parliamentary group on cycling and walking published its report on social justice as it impacts on vulnerable road users. Injuries to pedestrians could be cut significantly with simple side road zebra crossings without Belisha beacons. That would align with the 2022 highway code changes. Such crossings are common across the world, and they are being trialled around the corner from this building at the Department for Transport. Will the Government consider amending the guidance for highways authorities so that these crossings can be rolled out across the country?

Simon Lightwood: The Government agree that everyone should have the opportunity to walk or cycle, whatever their background, and we will obviously study the contents of the report in detail, which correctly highlights some of the ways in which cycle to work schemes, for example, might be reformed. The Government agree that adapted cycles, which are included in the report, also play an important role in providing freedom and independence.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The root cause of the pothole problem is councils' inability to afford to resurface roads. Wokingham borough council saw no uplift in resurface funding for many years, with no account taken of inflation or new roads. This is a legacy of the Conservative party in government, leading to maintenance funding per mile effectively being halved. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the urgent need for funding for resurfacing of new roads?

Lilian Greenwood: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's local council has suffered the same fate as councils across the country as a result of the under-investment in local roads maintenance under the previous Government, but they will now have benefited from their share of our £500 million uplift for the year ahead, and they are absolutely encouraged to use that to resurface the roads and fix potholes.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her answer on the work the Government are doing with businesses to support people dealing with the consequences of the gig economy and road safety. Will she join with me in my work to ensure that the area around Baker Street is safer for residents, and will she work with me and

residents around Baker Street to make the case to gig economy businesses that we need to do more on enforcement and on the regulation of these workers?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise concerns. Obviously, enforcement of the rules on using cycles and e-cycles is a matter for the police, but I would be very happy to meet her to discuss the issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This week the Government have given a commitment to providing extra EV charging units right across this United Kingdom, so may I ask the Minister a very helpful question? What discussions has she had with the Northern Ireland Assembly in relation to expanding EV charging infrastructure in the devolved nations? How can we help Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to catch up?

Lilian Greenwood: As a departmental team, we have regular meetings with our colleagues across the devolved Governments, including on issues of how to extend EV charging, and I would be very happy to pick that up with the hon. Gentleman further.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency has a very successful passenger branch line, but there also used to be a freight line. There is a tiny piece of track that, quite inexpensively, could be reopened to carry tin and lithium out through the docks. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the possibility of doing that?

Heidi Alexander: This Government are committed to moving more freight from road to rail, which is the right thing to do for our environment and our economy. I would be happy to have that meeting with my hon. Friend.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Derby station has recently been revealed as the seventh worst for delays in the UK. When people cannot get to work on time, it is not just a pain for them; it also impacts productivity and holds back our local economies. Will the Secretary of State outline the steps she is taking to tackle delayed trains in Derby and the east midlands, so that the transport system supports economic growth rather than holding it back?

Heidi Alexander: We are working closely with East Midlands Railway and CrossCountry to resolve cancellations and delays, whether related to train fleets, staffing or infrastructure matters.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): The reduction in funding for our waterways by 5% year on year from 2027 will have a detrimental impact on the operations of the Dudley Canal and Caverns Trust. Will my right hon. Friend commit to a review of the funding of our waterways and reinstate that support?

Heidi Alexander: I am happy to look into that issue for my hon. Friend and provide her with a written update.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I recently met the managing director of Morebus again to call for new services to Hengistbury Head, reinstated services to Throop and better services, such as an improved 33 route and routes to the Royal Bournemouth hospital and the airport. Does the Minister agree that better buses are good for our communities and our economy, and that there is a lot of growth to unlock in Bournemouth and the south-west with better buses?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is a fierce advocate for good public transport in his constituency and I absolutely agree with the sentiment of what he said.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Project Willow reported back last week. Among the options is a hydrogenated esters and fatty acids plant producing sustainable aviation fuel and renewable diesel, and the report recommends a delay in the implementation of the HEFA cap. Is the Department currently considering that action?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his commitment to Project Willow at Grangemouth. We introduced a 2% mandate from 1 January, so 2% of all aviation fuel has to come from sustainable sources. We will be legislating on the revenue certainty mechanism and looking at how we can contribute to the future of that great site.

PIP Changes: Impact on Carer's Allowance

10.37 am

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the changes to personal independence payments and how that will impact those who receive carer's allowance.

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The "Pathways to Work" Green Paper sets out our plan to fix a broken system, providing proper employment support for those who can work, and a strong and sustainable safety net for everybody who needs it. We will change personal independence payments to focus support on those in the greatest need. That change will be in primary legislation, with a full debate and scrutiny in Parliament. The cost of personal independence payments has increased by £2 billion above inflation in each of the past five years, and those increases are carrying on. That is simply not sustainable.

In the Green Paper, we are consulting on how best to support those affected by the changes to eligibility, for example with transitional protections for those no longer eligible for PIP and for the entitlements linked to it, including carer's allowance, as referenced in the hon. Member's urgent question, and the universal credit carer element, which is an increasingly important part of the picture. The PIP changes will be implemented from November next year. They will apply to new claimants and to people at their award review after that date, and those with severe conditions who will never work will be protected.

I pay tribute to the millions of unpaid carers across the country. We recognise and value their vital contribution, providing care and continuity of support, including to many people with disabilities. The 2021 census indicated that approximately 5 million people in England and Wales are doing some unpaid care. As the hon. Member knows, we are delivering the biggest ever cash increase in the earnings threshold for carer's allowance, increasing it by £45 a week to £196, benefiting more than 60,000 carers by 2029-30. Our reforms will build a system that is fairer and more sustainable so that it will always be there for those with the greatest needs to live with the dignity and support that they are entitled to.

Steve Darling: Yesterday saw the biggest cuts to carer's allowance for decades. Although we need to manage down appropriately the benefits budget, that needs to be done in a way that is caring, compassionate and far from rushed, which is what we saw yesterday. We are looking at approximately 150,000 carers losing allowances under these proposals. Half a billion pounds will be taken away from those who care. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that some couples will lose £12,000 a year, when PIP cuts and carer's allowance cuts are taken into account. While I welcome the apology that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury gave yesterday in relation to his references to pocket money, will the Minister agree that it is inappropriate to compare cuts to PIP with cuts to pocket money?

Sir Stephen Timms: I very much agree that this all needs to be done in a managed and compassionate way, which is exactly what we are doing, so I do not agree

that it is being rushed. As I have said, the changes will not happen for more than 18 months—they will not take effect until November 2026. They will not affect current recipients of personal independence payment until their first award review after November 2026, and review periods are typically three years, so this is definitely not being rushed. It will happen in a properly planned, staged and careful way.

The hon. Gentleman referred to couples losing £12,000. I think he must be referring to instances of people who receive personal independence payment and also receive carer's allowance for caring for their spouse—he is right that there are some instances of that. There are couples for whom that happens both ways. The transitional arrangements we are consulting on, which are referred to in the Green Paper, need to take account of that incidence, but it is absolutely the right thing to do, to ensure that personal independence payment continues in the long term as part of a sustainable benefit system.

We do have to make some reductions, as I think the hon. Gentleman acknowledged. If he has another idea on how that can be done, I am interested to know what it is. By concentrating on those whose impairments are the most severe, which the proposed changes will do, we will be able to ensure that the benefit is there for the long term and that it is sustainable.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to safeguard the future of the welfare system, we must ensure that it is sustainable?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we have to do that. Five years ago, we were spending £12 billion on personal independence payment, and this year, in current prices, we will spend £22 billion. The Government have to address that, precisely as he says, in order to ensure that this crucial safety net is there for the long term. We will not be means-testing it, freezing it or converting it into vouchers, as the Conservative party suggested; we want it to be a cash benefit that can meet the needs of those who depend on it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) on bringing this important matter before the House. In government, my party supported carers: we increased carer's allowance by £1,500 and, with the support of the Liberal Democrats, introduced carer's leave. We are united again today in dismay at what this Government are doing.

The Government had 14 years to prepare their welfare reforms. We had nothing for eight months, and then everything in a rush, because the Chancellor crashed the economy. With growth this year cut in half, inflation rising further, unemployment up, productivity down, debt interest soaring, a record tax burden and 200,000 people being pushed into absolute poverty by the measures taken by this Government, they have had an emergency Budget containing cuts to benefits for disabled people. Perhaps if they were not in such a rush, they would have realised that these crude reforms also impact carers. Some 150,000 people who gave up income to look after a loved one, and who rely on carer's allowance to make ends meet, are now going to lose it.

The Government are balancing the books on the backs of the people least able to take the weight. That is Labour: making other people pay for the fiasco of their Budget. First they came for the farmers, then for the pensioners, and now it is the carers—the most important people in our society, doing the most important job a human being can do, not for the money but for the love. The least the Government can do is to give them our support. That is what we did in government, so why will they not?

Can the Minister confirm whether carer's allowance was a deliberate target of the Government's reforms, or did they not realise the impact of what they were doing to PIP because of the rush they were in? Do they think that taking £500 million from carers while giving above-inflation pay awards to the trade unions is the right priority, and does the Minister share the Chief Secretary to the Treasury's view that cutting support for carers and disabled people is like taking pocket money from children? Is that what he believes carer's allowance is—pocket money?

Sir Stephen Timms: I suppose the hon. Gentleman has no choice but to attempt to defend his party's record in government. As I have referred to already, the Conservative party's plan was to convert PIP into vouchers—that really frightened people who were dependent on that system—and they also wanted to make some big cuts to the work capability assessment, which were ruled out by the courts as unlawful. We announced in the Green Paper that we are going to abandon those cuts. For example, the Conservatives were proposing to remove the mobility descriptor from the work capability assessment on the grounds that people can now work from home, but it is clearly ludicrous to claim that a mobility impairment does not affect a person's ability to work. I remind the hon. Gentleman that in responding to the Green Paper on behalf of the Opposition, his hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) demanded further cuts, so the outrage he has expressed is a bit inappropriate.

We have a proper plan, set out in the Green Paper. It has been well thought through—as the hon. Gentleman will find if he reads it properly—including a reference to unpaid carers on its very last page. We are well aware of the impact it will have, which is why we are consulting on the transitional arrangements.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming before the House and calmly laying out some of the facts on this matter, as I would expect from him, given his experience. However, there has been a lot of fear out there, and confusion among MPs, advisers and—most worryingly—people who are in receipt of PIP and other benefits and are affected by these changes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that clear communications at all times about this matter are very important, and that every Minister should be very careful about clumsy and inappropriate language, because of the impact it has on the people who are most affected?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the sensitivity of this issue. I particularly regret the anxiety that has been caused by press speculation over the past several weeks—that has certainly been regrettable. From my postbag, the thing that particularly

frightened people was the point I have already referred to, which was the previous Government's proposal to switch PIP from a cash benefit to vouchers. That caused a great deal of concern, but my hon. Friend is right: we now need to be absolutely clear in our communication about these matters. I think the Green Paper is clear. The accessible versions of the Green Paper will all be published by the beginning of next month, and we will then have a 12-week consultation period. As a result of those versions, including the easy-read version, being available, I hope that everybody will be able to see clearly what is proposed and will be able to respond to the consultation with their views.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The analogy of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has proved to be controversial, but the Minister agrees with the point he was making, does he not?

Sir Stephen Timms: I did not hear what my right hon. Friend said. What I can say is that a very large number of people are dependent on the personal independence payment. We want it to be a sustainable benefit that will be there for the long term. Because of the changes we are making, which will reduce the future increase in spending on personal independence payment, we can be confident and recipients can be confident that that will be the case.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I am potentially one of the few Members of this House who has been a recipient of the higher rates of living allowance. I was a recipient of the higher rate of mobility allowance, and I relied on a Motability car for many years, too. On the flipside, I remember, after my second hip replacement in my early 30s, having to try to navigate the Access to Work scheme, which was pretty impossible. In fact, it locks people out of work, rather than letting them in.

There are many good things in the Green Paper that has been brought forward that address some of those points. When I think back to what I had to go through from age 13 to 17, I am also pleased that those benefits will be protected for people in that situation. PIP is also what we call a passporting benefit. Such things as access to the blue badge scheme and carer's allowance are often dependent on PIP, so one potential implication is that people could be locked out. Will the Minister consider carrying these things forward and meet me to discuss access to the blue badge scheme and carer's allowance for people who might lose PIP, but would still be entitled to those benefits?

Sir Stephen Timms: I very much welcome my hon. Friend's testimony to the value of the support that the system provides and the importance of maintaining that into the future. He is right about passported benefits. The availability of blue badges is not affected by anything in the Green Paper, because the mobility component of personal independence payment is not changed by any of the proposals we have made. Access to carer's allowance, as we have said, certainly will be, and I would welcome a discussion with him about that.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I declare an interest as an honorary vice-president of Carers UK, and I sit on the board of the Fife Carers Centre. Last September, I had the Adjournment debate on support

[Wendy Chamberlain]

for unpaid carers. In that, the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), promised that we would

“forge ahead together with the promise of that future in which unpaid carers are visible, valued and supported.”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 288.]

That is not how unpaid carers are feeling today. The Minister referred to how the earnings limit for carer's allowance has increased, but there is still a cliff edge. Are the Government planning to bring forward plans to link the earnings limit to the 16 hours of employment at the national minimum wage? We know that those are some of the things that caused the overpayments for carer's allowance in the first place.

Sir Stephen Timms: Yes, the earnings threshold will in future be set at 16 times the hourly rate of the national living wage, and that will continue indefinitely. In addition, the Chancellor announced in the Budget last year that we will look at the idea of an income taper in carer's allowance to replace the cliff edge, which, as the hon. Member rightly says, is a feature of it at the moment. We are looking at that assessment.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for how he is responding to this urgent question. The Conservatives, after 14 years in government, broke our social security system and created a hostile environment for disabled people, and therefore it is for us—Labour in government—to fix our social security system. I would like to press my right hon. Friend on this: 30% of disabled people already live in poverty, and the proposed changes to personal independence payment could see more being pushed further into poverty and many being pushed out of work. Indeed, the Government's impact assessment highlighted that 150,000 people could lose carer's allowance or the carer's element. May I press him again to think about how we ensure that we support ill and disabled people as we fix the mess that the Tories have created?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we were left with a broken system. May I pay tribute to her for her work on the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, which focuses on supporting people into employment? That is the crucial element of this package. We will invest substantial sums, rising to £1 billion a year by the end of the Parliament, in supporting people who are out of work on health and disability grounds into work, and I very much look forward to working with her in that endeavour. When somebody who is out of work moves into a job, the likelihood of their being below the poverty line is halved, so there will be a very positive poverty impact from that commitment.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I have already been contacted by carers in my constituency who are scared about what will happen to them and the people they care for. I welcome the Minister's explanations thus far, but there will clearly be a problem with encouraging people who care for others to go out to work, who will say, “Who's going to care for the person I care for now?” What message does the Minister have for those who look after very vulnerable people and cannot leave them alone, and who cannot work?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. Given his description of the people being cared for, they will continue to receive personal independence payments. Once the changes have taken effect from November next year, those who do not score at least four points on any of the 10 daily living activities that the benefit conditions set out will not be eligible for personal independence payments. I would need to look at the particular cases that the hon. Gentleman has in mind, but I imagine that people who cannot be left alone at home will continue to score at least four points. Therefore, the carer's allowance for their carers will continue as at present.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have the highest respect for my right hon. Friend, but I am afraid he is not right on this policy. As a former physiotherapist, I know that many people will not be able to claim carer's allowance. Now that we have had the impact assessment, we have seen that nearly 400,000 disabled people will be pushed further into poverty, including 50,000 children, and that 150,000 carers will lose the lifeline of carer's allowance. We do not have a social care system to replace it; besides, social care is more expensive. Today, I want to speak truth to power. Sometimes Governments get things wrong, and I ask the Government to seriously reflect on these policies. The first half of Pathways to Work is good, but the second half will let a lot of people down. Please reflect, and please withdraw this policy.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but we will not withdraw the policy. We will certainly reflect on it, and we will consult properly on the content of the Green Paper. The figures published by the Office for Budget Responsibility yesterday showed that the benefit changes, on their own, will take 250,000 people, including 200,000 adults, below the poverty line, but that is before any consideration of the impact of the big commitment that we are making to employment support—up to £1 billion a year by the end of the Parliament. That will clearly have a very positive effect in reducing poverty. The Office for Budget Responsibility will look at all of this over the summer and then update its figures in the autumn. We will see what it concludes, but I think the balance of this package will be very positive for reducing poverty in the UK.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): To help families, the last Government put in place the household support fund, which this Government have continued. However, it is due to run out in 2026, when the Minister's changes are coming in. What hope is there for households who need emergency support if the household support fund will be dropped when his changes come in?

Sir Stephen Timms: We have retained the household support fund, as the hon. Member rightly points out, and the future arrangements will be set out in due course. However, I can reassure him of the absolute commitment of this Government to supporting families who need our support. The child poverty taskforce is working on this issue at the moment, and will bring forward a strategy to address the problem of child poverty. The figures published this morning on households

below average income show just what a huge challenge there is, given the very high level of child poverty left by the previous Government. We will be addressing that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for paying tribute to carers for the economic and social contribution they make, and for the biggest ever increase in the employment earnings threshold for carers. There is a lot of worry about the changes, so could the Minister confirm that nobody on PIP will be impacted by them until November 2026 at the earliest? In the meantime, I will be working with disabled groups in my constituency to understand the impact on individuals, and the impact of the investment on supporting disabled people into work. The Minister spoke about transitional arrangements. How can I ensure that the views of disabled people in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West feed into decisions about the implementation of these changes?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to underline again the hugely important contribution, not least economic contribution, made by carers. The consultation is under way, and it will run for a full 12 weeks from the time when all the accessible versions of the Green Papers are published, which will be in early April. I would be very grateful if she encouraged the organisations that she is working with to respond to that consultation, and I would also be very interested to hear and see her response to it. We will take those contributions extremely seriously as we finalise the details of these proposals.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Before I put my question to the Minister, I am sure that the House will want to join me in offering condolences to Keith Brown, our deputy party leader, on the death of his wife Christina McKelvie, who was a very distinguished and long-serving Member of the Scottish Parliament and a Minister.

The impact assessment snuck out yesterday under cover of the spring statement confirmed what the SNP has been warning about for some time. Labour's austerity cuts will have a devastating effect, with the poorest and most vulnerable in society forced to foot the bill for the Chancellor's incompetence. Some 150,000 people will be affected by the changes to carer's allowance, but also—at an absolute minimum—250,000 people, including 50,000 children, will be forced into poverty. These are very modest assessments; I heard the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) give a figure of 400,000 people. Labour promised that it would improve living standards, but with the full extent of the damage now spelled out, does Labour's promise not lie in tatters? What will it take for the Government to change course before irreversible harm is done?

Sir Stephen Timms: I echo the hon. Gentleman's condolences. The figures were certainly not snuck out yesterday; I do not think anyone can accuse the Office for Budget Responsibility of sneaking them out. They were published on the day of the spring statement, as they always are and always have to be. Let me make it clear that spending on the personal independence payment will continue to increase above inflation. It will not increase as fast as it would have done if we had done nothing, but the advantage is that the funding for that

benefit will be sustainable, and that is vital because so many people depend on it. It is not going to be means-tested and it is not going to be frozen. It will be there for the long term.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): There is real fear among many of my Calder Valley constituents with disabilities and with caring responsibilities about the proposed changes to PIP, and that fear has been exacerbated by some of the reporting. Can the Minister please give me a categorical assurance that the consultation on these measures is genuine, and that the Government will ensure that the responses of disabled people and of disability rights campaigns such as Scope will be given the weight they deserve?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise those points. I can give him the assurance that he seeks. Indeed, I spoke to Scope yesterday, and to other disability charities. Yes, this will be a proper consultation, and we will listen very carefully to what people say to us in response.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Terminal illness devastates people's finances. More than 100 terminally ill people every month are refused PIP, and every day 300 people die in poverty, having fallen through the cracks of our benefits system. Many family carers in the midst of bereavement are then left with nothing. The Government's plans in the Green Paper say nothing about how the terminally ill or their carers will be affected by these cuts. Can the Minister guarantee today that they will not be plunged into deeper poverty?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that point, but the Green Paper is very clear about the protections provided for people who are terminally ill. There are special rules in place, and they will absolutely be maintained. She can be very much reassured about what the Green Paper says about that group. If there is a point that I have missed that she has spotted, I would be grateful to hear about it, but we have very robust protections for those people for exactly the reasons she sets out.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I grew up caring for two disabled parents. As I said in my maiden speech, I would not be here if it was not for the sacrifices they made when they had so little in the first place. I have seen both my mother and my father forced out of work by their poor health. I have seen their mental health suffer, because they could not get a foot in the door of the NHS. I have seen the consequences in our family home; they suffered significant bouts of depression. I know the dignity and importance of work to people who want to and can work. When my parents' health got worse, they could not work, so I know the importance of protections for people like them. I am pleased that the Government are emphasising both parts of the issue. Will the Minister please assure my constituents, who are concerned because of the leak, into which an official inquiry is under way, that the Government are truly listening to our constituents? Will he give the assurance that, through the pathways to work consultation, the Government want to hear from disability groups in my constituency, including the Cambian

[Tom Hayes]

Wing college, whose representatives I met on Monday, and other organisations? Will he also reassure the public that the Government are committed to closing the disability employability gap? We need employers to support people into work, too.

Mr Speaker: I understand that this is a very important urgent question—that is why it was granted—but I need to try to get everybody in; that is what I am bothered about. If we can speed up questions and answers, that would help us all.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing his experience to this debate. I can absolutely give him the reassurance he seeks.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Earlier in the week, I wrote to the Secretary of State, asking her to confirm that the plans would not go ahead if the proposals were assessed as being harmful to disabled people. The equality analysis says that the families who will lose out are estimated to represent 20% of all families who report having someone with a disability in the household. Given that PIP is not related to work, and that the money cannot be made up through work changes, does the Minister agree that proceeding is not acceptable when there is this level of harm?

Sir Stephen Timms: The assessment published yesterday is that 90% of those receiving the daily living PIP component will continue to receive that benefit after the changes take effect, so I think the concern that the hon. Lady raises is not entirely appropriate.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): Like thousands of others, I carried out my caring responsibilities this morning before I came to this place. I have first-hand experience of worrying about paying the bills every month due to caring responsibilities—something I no longer have to worry about. Will the Minister consider whether we need a plan across Government Departments to identify the support available to ensure that carers can work, and that they and their loved ones do not fall into poverty as a result of the announcements made?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am working with the Minister for Care in the Department of Health and Social Care on this. I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to work across Government on these issues. We need to be concerned about the effect on young carers in the education system, so the Department for Education needs to be involved as well. His point about cross-Government working is absolutely right.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Almost a third of all unpaid carers in Wales live in poverty. That is over 100,000 people caring for the sick, the elderly and the disabled. The Labour First Minister in Wales, Eluned Morgan, has already asked for a Wales-specific impact assessment of welfare cuts. She has not even had the courtesy of a reply. Can the Minister tell me how many more unpaid carers in Wales will be pushed into hardship due to losing their entitlement to carer's allowance?

Sir Stephen Timms: As the hon. Lady will have gathered, the impact assessment was published yesterday. The figures are there for everybody to see, and the impacts are across the UK; that is correct. I want the support that we provide to be sustainable in the long term for those who depend on it. That will be the impact of our changes to the personal independence payment. I also want better support for carers who want to combine working with caring. That is not always easy for people to do. We made a commitment to providing up to £1 billion in better employment support by the end of this Parliament. If we can use that to support carers as well as people who are sick and disabled, we could see a significant reduction in the number of people living in poverty.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Like many Members, I have had emails from constituents who are worried about these changes. Can the Minister confirm that the most disabled people, who will never work, will be protected; that he is consulting on a new higher rate of universal credit for those who are most severely disabled; and that the Chancellor's £1 billion investment in employment support will help those disabled people who could work to find good-quality jobs, which are the best route out of poverty?

Sir Stephen Timms: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on disability employment, which has been an important contribution. I can give the reassurances she seeks.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): As someone who lives with ulcerative colitis, I am all too acquainted with the fact that health conditions can vary wildly. We know that people with conditions such as Crohn's and colitis and their carers already have issues accessing PIP and carer's allowance. What consideration has the Minister given to conditions such as those in the context of these cuts?

Sir Stephen Timms: It is very important that the system properly handles fluctuating conditions. One of the benefits of the proposal in the Green Paper to record by default PIP assessments is that we will be able to provide better assurance that the assessments get these judgments right, particularly in the case of fluctuating conditions.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I know from speaking to charities, local groups and people from brilliant projects such as JobSmart in my constituency about the increasing complexity of the relationship between different forms of benefit, including carer's allowance, and the rules around working. That makes it increasingly difficult for people to use the options they have. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that the record amount of employment support will address the issue of the flexibility that we need to support sick and disabled people into some form of work, and will not just be for mentoring for those in other categories?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I join him in paying tribute to organisations such as JobSmart in his constituency. When the previous Labour Government introduced the new deal for disabled people in 1998—I was the Minister then, as I am

now—the disability employment gap started to fall, and it fell steadily all the way until 2010, when it stopped falling. I want to get us back to that positive downward trajectory.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is an honourable man. I have known him a long time, and I know that he tries to be compassionate and helpful, but I have deep concerns about this. It would appear that the books are to be balanced on the backs of the vulnerable. I have a genuine concern that the outworking of the spring statement may push some people with severe mental health problems over the edge. How will the Government put in place greater support for those who have to battle their recognised illnesses and live—not just survive—in this pressure-filled world? That will be even harder after these changes are implemented.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the start of his question. Our proposals fully protect the personal independence payments of those with the most severe impairments. I think those are the people that he is concerned about, and they are fully protected under these plans.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Obviously, the work of carers is important, as we have been hearing. Can the Minister help me with one constituent's case? He is a carer, but is now suffering from long covid and would be due PIP. What will happen to him under the points system?

Sir Stephen Timms: An assessment will be carried out by a properly trained health professional. If the person to whom my hon. Friend refers scores more than four points on any one of the 10 daily living activities, they will be eligible for personal independence payment, as at present.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is shocking that one in eight of our young people is not in education, employment or training. I want this to be a country in which all working-age people, including young people, feel that sense of opportunity again. I know how important work is in lifting people out of poverty. I also know that it is in our DNA as a Labour party to be there for people who are disabled, vulnerable or not able to work. Will the Minister share how that £1 billion-a-year support package will help those who can work get into work? And does he agree that we will always have the backs of those who cannot work, and those who care for them?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will be working with disabled people over the next few months on the plans for how that commitment should be taken forward. We said in the “Get Britain Working” White Paper, before Christmas, that we will be setting up a disability employment panel specifically to work on those plans. I will be very keen to work with her on those details as we draw them up.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Members will need to move a little faster, as will the Minister.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents will welcome the reforms to get more people off benefits and into work. Many recognise the urgent need to make our welfare system more sustainable, but many also deeply worry about not just the impact on carers, but the impact assessment that suggests that 50,000 more children will be pushed into poverty by 2029. Can the Minister assure me not just about the transitional arrangements to help both parents and children, but that this summer's child poverty taskforce will take urgent steps to correct the impact assessment and that parents and children will be scored urgently in any future impact assessment that the Government come up with?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the challenge of high levels of child poverty. I certainly can give him the reassurance that he seeks. I think the employment impact will be very positive on future child poverty, but the work of the child poverty taskforce will be as well. And, yes, that will be fully scored once the policy has been announced.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to the Government for focusing on getting people back into work because it gives them pride, power and ownership, but, as ever, it is not what you do, but how you do it. I say to the Minister that, rather than allay my concerns, the impact assessment has actually given me several more. I ask him to find time to meet me so that we can go through two things: the concerns that my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme have, and those that I have, too.

Sir Stephen Timms: I will gladly meet my hon. Friend and look forward to the meeting.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to improving the experience of people going through the assessment process, as I am regularly shocked by some of the experiences of my constituents. Can he say a little more about how he will improve claimant experience, particularly for the most vulnerable claimants?

Sir Stephen Timms: The key proposal in the Green Paper is the default recording of assessments, so that when something goes wrong, we can check back and see what happened. I have had the experience, as my hon. Friend probably has, of talking to people who have been through the assessment and then seen it and said, “Well, that wasn't me. It is unrecognisable.” That should not be happening, and we want to change that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for young carers and young adult carers. Does the Minister agree that the role of young carers is critical not only to those who are cared for, but to the economy? Although young carers under 16 do not receive carer's allowance, will he consider the impact of any plans on young carers and how we might better support them?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, I remind the hon. Member that this is an urgent question, not a statement.

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the needs of young carers. I have spoken to young people who started caring in their primary school years. It takes a while for them to be recognised as carers. We need to speed things up.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I have spoken to Jobcentre Plus in Rugby about its excellent work to support people into work, including young people with special educational needs whom I have met. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the package of employment support announced last week—something that charities in my constituency have long been calling for—is one of the biggest ever amounts of money to give disabled people and those with long-term conditions the help they need to find work?

Sir Stephen Timms: Absolutely, it is. The people that my hon. Friend described will be the beneficiaries of the big commitment that we have made.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the constructive and thoughtful way in which he has engaged with Members over the past week. I have written to him in the past couple of days on two matters, and I would like to take the opportunity to put them to him. First, he is leading a review of the PIP assessment—will its terms of reference be made public? Secondly, there is a case for looking again at the PIP criteria, as set out in secondary legislation, which were opposed by Labour 12 years ago. Will he continue to engage in the manner that he has been doing with Members now that we are in the consultation period, including on that point?

Sir Stephen Timms: I will be very glad to. My hon. Friend is right that the indicators used in the current personal independence payment assessment were drawn up in 2013. It is high time that we had another look at them, and I will be happy to put the terms of reference for that work into the public domain. I look forward to the opportunity to discuss it with him.

Scunthorpe Steelworks

11.22 am

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade to make a statement on the future of Scunthorpe steelworks.

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): First, my thoughts are, and the thoughts of all hon. Members will be, with British Steel workers and their families, following the company's announcement of plans to close the blast furnaces and other steelmaking assets at Scunthorpe, and its commercial decision to consult on redundancies. This is not what we wanted, and I know how worrying it will be for all those involved. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), who is in his constituency today engaging directly with his local community.

In the immediate term, we must support the people who work at British Steel. Our contingency plans have kicked in to ensure that all possible support is made available to British Steel's workforce. Both the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education will have teams on the ground shortly to engage with employees for as long as necessary. We have asked British Steel that officials be given direct access to British Steel sites to bring their support as close as possible to affected workers.

This Government inherited a steel sector in crisis, and resolving the long-standing uncertainty around the future of Scunthorpe has been a priority from our first days in office. That is why, when we committed up to £2.5 billion of investment to support our steel industry, we earmarked substantial funding to support British Steel, in addition to the funding allocated to our new and improved deal with Tata Steel.

I confirm today that we have taken another significant step forward. On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Business and Trade Secretary made a generous conditional offer of financial support to British Steel designed to deliver a sustainable future for the workforce, industry and local communities. In the light of the challenging fiscal context, this speaks volumes about our commitment to the steel industry. The offer follows months of intensive engagement with British Steel to reach a deal that meets our public accountability and legal requirements, works for local people and UK taxpayers, safeguards as many jobs as possible and ensures the company's long-term commercial viability. The offer that we have made is conditional on British Steel meeting those key tests, which is consistent with our approach to similar investment deals.

The company must provide the commitments that we need, and which taxpayers would quite rightly expect, in exchange for substantial public funding. It is regrettable that it has not yet done so or accepted our offer. I therefore call on the company to reconsider its plans to announce early closures, accept our conditions and accept our generous offer, which remains on the table.

I assure the House that we are working tirelessly to find a solution. We believe that there is a bright future for steelmaking in the UK, and we call on British Steel to work in partnership with a Government who care deeply about the steel sector to put the business on a sustainable footing for the future and to put an end to the years of uncertainty at Scunthorpe.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the updates that she has provided to me in recent weeks. As she said, there will be increased anxiety among the workforce today, and we look to the Government to provide maximum support.

For the sake of clarity, will the Minister confirm that the Government do wish to maintain blast furnace production until an alternative arc furnace installation is up and running? Will she also confirm that they want to maintain production to meet the demands of the defence sector, particularly in view of the recently announced increased spending?

The Minister will be aware of the projects that North Lincolnshire council have proposed, such as the green growth zone and those in the artificial intelligence sector. Will she confirm that she will support them? She will also be aware of other projects in the region that are looking for Government support. Will she confirm that she will look sympathetically on them? Also, although I would not want to advocate this, will the Government consider nationalisation of the industry as a last resort?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the manner in which he has represented his constituents today and engaged with us previously. On the point of clarity, I confirm that we would rather the blast furnaces remained open. He knows that if they closed before a supply of steel were secured, that would be significant in terms of customer confidence and what will happen to the customer base.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about defence, as was said at the Business and Trade Committee yesterday, there was a reason why the Russians bombed the blast furnaces in Ukraine first: steelmaking capacity is needed not just for defence, but for building the structures required for construction. He was therefore absolutely right on that front.

This morning, I met the council and talked about both the plans for us to work together on British Steel and the wider question of what else we can do in the region and how the Government can support that. A small ministerial team has been coming together to think about those things.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point, as he knows, the amount of money that we are talking about to develop new infrastructure is significant. Our preferred approach by far is that British Steel comes back to the table, talks with us about the offer on the table and we have that private sector investment in the future, but of course we are looking at all options.

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): May I welcome the Minister's explicit ambition to retain primary steelmaking capability on these islands? I hope the whole House will row in with that. I also welcome the £2.5 billion that the Government have earmarked for investment in the sector. Will she, however, put a rocket up the Trade Remedies Authority? We have heard very clearly from steelmakers that they need the same safeguards against diverted Chinese steel flooding into our market that will click into place in Europe in April. It is not acceptable that we have to wait

until the summer for our markets to be safeguarded in the same way. The TRA needs to act, and it needs to act now.

Sarah Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and his contribution through the Select Committee session we had yesterday. The TRA announced yesterday that it will widen its review of UK steel defences. It has accepted the challenge from UK Steel to do just that and is acting. The Secretary of State and others will be looking to make sure our steel defences are as strong as they need to be. Today's news about Scunthorpe sits alongside the wider issues about tariffs and the global trade of steel. We need to make sure we are helping in that space too.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The news from Scunthorpe is deeply concerning. Jobs are at risk and our thoughts are with all those who now face uncertainty. The world is becoming more dangerous and we need to bolster our defence industry. Without the ability to produce our own primary steel, those efforts could be put in jeopardy. What impact does the Minister believe the news will have on Britain's defence industry and what impact does she believe closure would have on our national security?

It takes a special something to be able to offer someone £500 million and for them to reject it, but whatever it is, I guess the Business Secretary has it. Whenever Labour negotiates, Britain loses. Whether with Mauritius, AstraZeneca or now British Steel, the Government confirm that—and so far, at least, that appears to be the case with the United States too. The Government pretend that tariffs on steel are inevitable, which, as we showed in government, is simply not the case. Therefore, will the Minister update the House on United States trade negotiations, in particular in relation to steel? Will the Minister confirm that the Business Secretary has engaged further with Jingye since it rejected him?

Tariffs are but one challenge facing the industry. Alongside the jobs tax and the unemployment Bill, the steel industry is being choked by the Government's ideological green targets. Will the Minister tell the House what concerns British Steel has expressed about those net zero targets? As I said at the beginning, this news will be deeply concerning for steelworkers in Scunthorpe. Has the Minister or the Secretary of State spoken with them about the news and, if so, what support are they being offered?

Sarah Jones: I do not want to insult this House by suggesting that there was any kind of deal on the table under the previous Government and that anything happened on steel other than a halving of production over the last decade—a halving. Lots of things shut down and closed during that period, not just in the steel industry but in many others. I look at my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for proof of that.

Whether in steel, in shipbuilding or in the automotive sector, the previous Government had neglected to take major decisions or had kicked the can down the road. All we inherited were a series of industrial crises that we are now trying to solve. We delivered a better deal with Port Talbot than had been negotiated under the previous Government. We are still in talks with British Steel and

[Sarah Jones]

hoping that we can come to a resolution, and not just because of the very many very highly skilled workers in Scunthorpe who we respect, honour and want to make sure stay in their jobs. I have nothing more to say on that front.

On tariffs and the situation with the US, we are in a good position in this country in that the relationship that our Prime Minister has built with President Donald Trump and his team means that we are in active conversations about a potential trade deal. This is a good, positive thing, and we are carrying on having those conversations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been talking regularly with our American counterparts, as Members would expect. We will have cool heads in this space and navigate our way through. We—our officials—are talking daily with British Steel. We are talking with the trade unions and all the players to try to ensure that, in the difficult global landscape that we find ourselves in, we are doing right by the people of Scunthorpe.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my background as an official of the GMB steelworkers union, that union's support for my constituency party and my membership of GMB and Unite.

The three steelworkers unions—GMB, Unite and Community—have put forward a multi-union plan for Scunthorpe. Will the Minister meet those unions urgently, including with cross-governmental officers, so that we can do everything possible to keep that multi-union plan on the table?

Sarah Jones: I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the trade unions—GMB, Community and Unite—which we have been working with closely. We have been discussing their plan. As I say, our preference is that British Steel accepts the deal—the incredibly generous offer of public funding—we have given it. We hope we can find a way forward that involves keeping the blast furnaces open, but we are of course looking at every other option, and we certainly have been talking to the trade unions about their suggestions.

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

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Like the Minister, my thoughts are with the British steelworkers and their families following the closure of the Scunthorpe site.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is not closed yet.

Clive Jones: It is going to.

From electric vehicles to wind turbines, high-quality green steel is an important component of our transition to a low-carbon economy. The Government need to move rapidly from the Conservative's legacy of a patchwork of last-minute rescues to a genuinely long-term approach that is effective for British industry and does not harm British workers. What are the Government doing to ensure that communities in Teesside and Scunthorpe are supported against job losses? When will the Government realise that sitting on our hands and hoping that Trump

will not hit us with even more tariffs is not a good negotiating strategy? Will the Minister take a stronger approach and bring forward retaliatory measures against Donald Trump's political allies such as his co-President Elon Musk and his company Tesla?

Sarah Jones: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are not sitting on our hands, and there is a good reason why it would not be right to comment in this place on the internal negotiations between this Government and the United States. We will rightly keep a cool head in those conversations and ensure that we are ultimately doing what is right for our industry and our people, but we are in a good position in that we are engaged in deep conversations with the US and will continue to do that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the support for local people. There are various stages. The starting point is that we very much hope that we can come to a deal and negotiate with British Steel—that it will accept what we are offering and that we can move forward on those terms. In the short term, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education will be there on the ground ensuring that people are getting the immediate support they need. If the consultation continues and there is a closure, of course much more intervention to support local people would need to kick in. We are already working on all manner of contingencies to ensure that we support people as we are doing in Port Talbot, but our aim is absolutely not to get to that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Select Committee member Sonia Kumar.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): The UK now produces less steel than our European neighbours Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Austria and Poland, and over the past 30 years, China's share of global steel production has risen from 13% to 54%. To safeguard the future of the steel industry, we must think about diversification. Does my hon. Friend agree that supporting British small and medium-sized enterprises into the steel industry will make it more competitive and sustainable?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that conversation and all her work with the steel industry in her constituency. The steel strategy that we are putting together, which will be published in the spring with £2.5 billion to invest, will consider how to stimulate demand, use research and development and get the most out of scrap in the UK, as well as looking at trade and overcapacity, carbon leakage and the availability of sites—there is a whole raft of work going on. She is right about ensuring that there is an industry for the big and small players. That is what we are working through, and I look forward to working with her on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Scunthorpe neighbours my constituency, and many of my constituents who work there will be desperately worried today. This is a vital national interest—a crisis. For the past 150 years, wars have been won by states that can make virgin steel. Will the Government do anything—tariffs, or the Secretary of State going up to Scunthorpe now to negotiate directly with the company—to ensure that we keep our vital national interest going, which means blast furnaces?

Sarah Jones: As the right hon. Gentleman would expect, the Secretary of State is and has been talking to Jingye, as have I and officials. Those negotiations will continue. The site at Scunthorpe produces a lot of different types of steel, as he will know. It provides 95% of all steel used by Network Rail. It is incredibly important in that sense, and he is right to draw attention to that. There are many different ways of making steel. On the primary steel point, we are investigating the merits of investing in direct reduced iron, which is when hydrogen is used instead of the old blast furnaces. The reality is that the Scunthorpe blast furnaces are old infrastructure—decades old—that needs updating. We need to move to new technology, and that is what we are trying to do with Jingye.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Clearly, the absence of an industrial strategy in the past five years has had an impact, so I welcome the Government's notion of a steel plan. Given that the industrial strategy features three major elements—construction, defence and energy infrastructure—will the steel plan look not at a 10-year horizon but at one of 25 to 30 years, to ensure that we get the investment we need for the UK to have virgin steel production, like all other 19 countries of the G20?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his expertise as a member of the Select Committee. We had this debate yesterday. Yes, having a long view has to be the right thing. The Government must ensure that we spend that £2.5 billion of taxpayers' money in the right way to secure the industry well into the future.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): As the grandson of a steelworker in Corby, Northamptonshire, I understand something of the iconic nature of the industry. The hon. Lady tries to blame us Conservatives for what went wrong. Is the situation not too confused? The Government are not sending the right signals to the industry and we are not sure what we want. We already do not make the right kinds of steel for much of the defence industry. The steel strategy will be published in the spring—wonderful. When is the spring? The Government need to get a grip and send out signals now. If we are going to negotiate with the Chinese about the Scunthorpe mill and the amount of money we are spending there, should we not have some kind of golden share so that taxpayers are comfortable about what is going on there?

Sarah Jones: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I very much have a grip. We are working with officials, the Secretary of State and others all the time. In terms of the conditions that he suggests we should put on the offer of funding, the offer we made was conditional on job targets, fair terms for workers, adhering to UK law, protecting taxpayers' money—a whole raft of conditions were set and need to be adhered to.

As for the hon. Gentleman's haste, there was no steel strategy in the 14 years of the previous Government. We are developing one. I am not going to stand in front of taxpayers in my constituency and say, "I have spent £2.5 billion just on a whim." We have to get this right.

We are working with industry. I was at Celsa in Cardiff this week at a roundtable of the scrap industry and the steelmakers talking about the plan. I have done

roundtables with all the industries that buy steel to ensure that we understand what demand will be over the coming years. We are getting this right, which is what the taxpayer would expect of us.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin) is in Scunthorpe right now, supporting our fantastic steelworkers. Many of my constituents work in Scunthorpe; I know that they will be feeling extremely anxious, and my heart goes out to them. Will the Minister confirm that she remains steely in her determination to secure the future of the UK construction and steel industries, and that she will do everything she possibly can to support my constituents who are affected?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend's constituents who work for British Steel will, of course, be deeply worried. When I was last there in February, I talked to workers, the unions and management. This is a proud industry of good jobs with good salaries compared with the local averages. I am well aware of how anxious those workers will be feeling; I hope they can take some comfort, at least, from the fact that we are doing absolutely everything we can to secure a deal with British Steel.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is difficult to listen to the Minister at the Dispatch Box saying that everything is okay with the United States because of the positive relationship between the Prime Minister and the President, when it can be characterised as the President saying, "Jump," and the Prime Minister asking, "How high?" The US has visited precisely the same tariffs on the UK steel industry as on the Chinese. If that is a special relationship, I would hate to see what an ordinary relationship looks like.

When will the Government get a grip on the production of primary steel? It is a non-negotiable for a G7 nation to produce primary steel. It is intrinsic to our defence and security. The Government seem to be trying to negotiate a situation that is the worst of all worlds, whereby the taxpayer has to stump up the money but the private sector in China gets to dictate the terms.

Sarah Jones: I do not recognise that framing at all. We are in a better position than many other countries in terms of the strength of our relationship with the US and the building up of relationships that has happened over recent months. As I said, the Secretary of State is in regular talks with his counterparts and we are having constructive talks with our counterparts. We cannot go into the details of those negotiations, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that we have a cool head, we know what we want and we will do what is best for our industries in the long run.

On the matter of primary steel and steelmaking in the UK, we need our defence and our security to have strong, vibrant steelmaking production in the UK. There are different ways to do that, including with different technologies, which are moving all the time. That is why the steel strategy needs to anticipate where technology is going and make sure we get that right.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I think the Minister is giving a few mixed messages, if I may say so. The Government are sending support people to counsel those who may be out of a job and are making an offer to the firm that will actually be providing those jobs to

[*Bob Blackman*]

try to cushion the blow. The sad reality is that if those blast furnaces close down they will not be recoverable, so the first thing that has to happen is ensuring that they are not closed down. The consequence would be the steel industry going into steep decline, with more people unemployed; we would then have to import steel from China at a much higher cost. Why will we not give a guarantee that the blast furnaces will not close down?

Sarah Jones: I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that this is a private company that will make decisions of its own. We are operating within that environment. We have put an offer on the table that is about the development and redevelopment of Scunthorpe, the creation of an electric arc furnace and the transition for that. The offer is still on the table and we are still talking to the company about it. The reason that we are there on the ground now is that the company has decided to launch a consultation on redundancies, and it is right and proper that we are there to provide support to workers.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State for their hard graft to secure a deal in the interests of my steelworkers in Teesside and those in Scunthorpe. It is deeply concerning that Jingye has chosen to reject the generous offer that was on the table. I am sure I stand with Members across the House in urging Jingye to come back to the table and secure that deal. Will the Minister reaffirm that all options remain open, including strong national intervention to protect our steel industry and make sure that British steel is made here in Britain?

Sarah Jones: I know that my hon. Friend is working hard on behalf of his constituents; I appreciated being able to talk to him in the run-up to this. I can reassure him that this Government want to deliver a vibrant steel industry in the UK. We are very well aware of the importance of British Steel and of the Scunthorpe site and associated sites. We are doing all we can to make sure that we keep that operation going.

Richard Tice: We all know that steel, and particularly the ability to make primary steel, is a critical national industry. The Chinese might be giving up on British steel, but the British people do not want to give up on British steel, nor should we allow the final two blast furnaces to close. May I urge the Minister to take this not as a negative, but as an opportunity to be positive? We should take British Steel into public ownership and create a long-term, 20 to 30-year positive plan to invest in steelmaking for British industry and for our defence industry.

Sarah Jones: Through our plan for steel and the £2.5 billion that we are investing in the steel industry, we are aiming to do exactly that, to keep the industry going. I invite the hon. Gentleman to go and see the other sites around the country where we have electric arc furnaces in operation, because they are not that different from blast furnaces: they are still massive buildings melting and making the steel, but in a much more efficient way. The problem we have with Scunthorpe is that the blast furnaces are very old and will need huge amounts of money spent on them, and of course British Steel is losing £700,000 a day on Scunthorpe. This is not

about ideology or particular political beliefs; this is about economics and about making sure that we protect our country, that we provide the defences we need, and that we are as secure as we can be in a changing world. On that, I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement; I know that she is doing all she can on the issue. We cannot have a defence industrial strategy unless we have our own primary steelmaking facilities, so clearly we cannot let these furnaces close. I was interested to hear what the Minister said about having various meetings in Whitehall and with the Treasury. When is she likely to be able to come back to the House and report on the progress made on this issue and, importantly, on a steel strategy for the long term—not just five or 10 years, but 20 years or more?

Sarah Jones: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Treasury is completely committed to having a plan for steel. We talked to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor a lot about this when we were in opposition, just as we have been doing in Government. The very generous offer put on the table to British Steel was signed off, as is quite right, by the Chancellor and by the Prime Minister. They are both committed to this. We will be coming back in the spring with the steel plan, in which we will set out how we will spend the rest of the fund that we have. In the meantime, I again urge British Steel to come back and talk about the offer that is on the table and see whether we can come to a deal.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Given the geopolitical uncertainty ushered in by the new American Administration and by America and China's attitude to net zero, will the Minister assure the House that in making decisions on the future of critical national infrastructure that touch upon the defence of this country, such as the extraction of shale gas and the continuance of blast furnaces producing virgin steel, she will be very careful about doing anything that would reduce this country's capability to stand on its own two feet?

Sarah Jones: I will certainly ensure that we do not do anything that reduces our ability to stand on our own two feet. I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her comments on the national steel strategy and for agreeing to meet the owners of Union Electric Steel in my constituency. Does she agree that continuing to be able to produce cast steel rolls in the UK is an essential part of the steel strategy that will benefit Scunthorpe, Port Talbot and other communities?

Sarah Jones: I am very much looking forward to the meeting with my hon. Friend's constituents, who are an important part of the steel chain. He makes an important point: we make many different products and have many different assets in the UK that we need to protect, beyond the big six steel companies.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is now clear that domestic virgin steel production is a national security imperative. Acting on it is not acting on a whim. Will the Minister respond to her hon. Friends and to

Conservative Members by recognising that domestic virgin steel production is a national security imperative? Whether it is through nationalisation, golden shares or the other ideas that have been suggested, if it is a national security imperative we must act, regardless of technology. Will the Minister please tell the House that she agrees with that?

Sarah Jones: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will recognise the conversations that we are having from your experience as Minister of State in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The Opposition seem to have a new-found enthusiasm for virgin steelmaking that in government they did not have at all. We will make sure that we are doing the right thing. *[Interruption.]* I do not have time to go into this conversation at this point, but I will be very happy to have it with the right hon. Gentleman. There are some important points to note, including that we make a lot of our steel for defence not from primary steel but in electric arc furnaces. It is about getting the right mix. That is what we will make sure we do.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, I visited British Offsite, whose chief executive officer hails from my constituency of Harlow, about the innovative house building that it is doing using techniques that require a lot of steel, although I have to say that it uses it efficiently. What meetings has the Minister had with house builders, as well as with the defence sector, as she rightly said, as part of the Government's steel strategy?

Sarah Jones: I meet house builders regularly; I have some meetings with them today. The production and recycling of steel is important to construction, as are some of the off-takes from steel that can be used to make cement; there is recycling that can be done on that front as well. We need a lot of steel to build the 1.5 million homes that the Government want to build, so we need to make sure that the steel industry is strong.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. We all share her frustrations about the process. The news that the Government's offer of funding to retain jobs at Scunthorpe is to be rejected certainly outlines the difficulties in British businesses no longer being owned by those who have an interest in British jobs. My thoughts are with the workers today who are looking at their children and their mortgage repayments and wondering how they can make it work out, when all they want to do is work. How can the Government give confidence to workers in Scunthorpe and in industries that rely on steel throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so that they know that a way forward can be found?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about how we can give comfort in what is a very difficult time; we are not shying away from that at all. The immediate support that we will provide through the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education is important. If there is a closure, there will be a big transition board, through which we will support people as much as possible, and ensure that they get skills and training, as he would expect. The comfort that we can give people now is that we are trying as hard as we can to make sure that closure does not happen.

Business of the House

11.59 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall. The business for the week commencing 31 March includes:

MONDAY 31 MARCH—Consideration of Lords message on the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 1 APRIL—If necessary, consideration of Lords messages, followed by Second Reading of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 2 APRIL—If necessary, consideration of Lords messages, followed by a motion to approve the draft Infrastructure Planning (Onshore Wind and Solar Generation) Order 2025, followed by a motion to approve the draft Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2025, followed by a motion to approve the draft Whiplash Injury (Amendment) Regulations 2025.

THURSDAY 3 APRIL—General debate on the impact of digital platforms on UK democracy, followed by a general debate on access to sport and PE in schools. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 4 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 April includes:

MONDAY 7 APRIL—General debates: subjects to be confirmed.

TUESDAY 8 APRIL—General debate on the potential merits of awarding a posthumous Victoria Cross to Blair Mayne, followed by a general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Easter recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 8 April and will return on Tuesday 22 April.

Jesse Norman: May I start by thanking the whole House for their wonderful messages of condolence during last week's business questions? I could not be more grateful. I single out, in particular, the Leader of the House for her very gracious remarks.

I turn from fathers to mothers, as this Sunday, of course, is Mother's Day. The infant shadow Leaders of the House have been instructed—not that they needed it—on how to manage the occasion. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in celebrating mothers at the weekend, and expressing ourselves in all kinds of ways to thank our mothers and the mothers we have among us for all the work they do.

This has been the week of the spring statement. The House will recall the October Budget in November of last year. It was described as a once-in-a-generation Budget, with no tax rises to follow. This week we have seen that the Chancellor's own growth forecast just four

[*Jesse Norman*]

months later has been halved, and she has increased cuts to welfare benefits. That follows the interesting strategy of abolishing NHS England, having just fired all the team running it. The tax burden is on track to hit a record high in 2027-28.

We should give credit where credit is due—the Chancellor has protected capital investment, which is a very important and correct decision—but there have also been wheezes. I am sorry to say that she has somewhat pulled the wool over the eyes of the Office for Budget Responsibility in relation to housing growth, which is the Government's new “get out of jail free” card. It has never been included in an OBR estimate before, and it is very doubtful and unlikely that it will happen in any case, even at those levels—the target has already been downgraded from 1.5 million houses to 1.3 million houses—because of the planned upheaval in local government. Meanwhile, the immensely damaging Employment Rights Bill goes entirely unscathed economically by the OBR. We will see what it says about that piece of legislation next time around.

The brutal fact is that although the Government claim to prioritise growth, growth has halved since they came into power. They have talked about little else, but even their own forecasts do not show growth getting back even to 2% by the end of the decade, and every major independent expert forecast of the economy's future growth is lower than that of the OBR.

What do we see if we look more closely? The spring statement is not really about work at all; it is about moving people from welfare into lower-paying welfare. The cut to universal credit announced last week has been followed by a freezing of universal credit—why? It is because that appears to hit the Chancellor's own fiscal headroom number to the decimal point. Last week we heard all the rhetoric about the moral case for nudging people back into work, but now it seems that this is actually an accounting exercise, and the economic and moral justification for the policy has been lost sight of.

The second point is the question whether artificial intelligence, which the Government have greatly emphasised, will actually have the effect of increasing growth. The Chancellor suggested that this idea was somehow obvious and conventional wisdom, but that is very far from true. The Nobel prize-winning economist Bob Solow famously said that the effects of the IT revolution could be seen everywhere except in the economic numbers. Other countries are scaling and deploying artificial intelligence with massive speed, and many experts believe that AI could increase unemployment and inequality, and raise the costs of retraining people and reintegrating them into the workforce. Far from creating economic growth, the advent of AI could end up forcing a Government—possibly this Government—into even more spending than they presently contemplate.

Finally, we get to the vexed and much-discussed issue of so-called fiscal headroom—or, to use a more technical phrase, the goolies-in-a-vice problem. It has been suggested that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing expecting a different result. So far, we have seen minimal fiscal adjustment at the statement, and meanwhile the Chancellor has managed to recreate the same constraining conditions that existed beforehand. This is a situation entirely of the Government's own making. It was the Chancellor's decision to choose these fiscal

rules, and it was her decision then to take measures that undermined economic growth. She has staked her own credibility and that of the Government on those decisions. The result is that we will now have endless uncertainty and avoidable speculation about the fiscal position every week, through the comprehensive spending review and into the autumn Budget.

The Chancellor has refused to rule out making more cuts to spending. Even so, she may have to impose tax rises, and those tax rises could come even sooner than anticipated if the US decides to go ahead with the tariff it has suggested. As such, my question is this: what will the Leader of the House feel in her own heart, and what will she say to her Cabinet colleagues over the next few weeks, as the full effects of these terribly damaging decisions become clear?

Lucy Powell: I join the right hon. Gentleman in saying that it was really heartwarming to hear so many tributes paid to his father at last week's business questions. Such moments show the House at its best, and I thank him for bringing his eulogy to the Floor of the House. I also join him in looking forward to Mothering Sunday—maybe I will get some rest on that day, but we will see. First, I will have to pay a visit to my own mum, who I pay tribute to as well. Her very favourite phrase, which has stuck with me throughout my life, is “Them who does nowt does nowt wrong.” I will leave that to linger with a few colleagues.

As the right hon. Gentleman says, yesterday we heard the spring statement. We heard that this Labour Government are taking on the unprecedented long-term challenges that this country faces—I know that he and Conservative Members do not want to acknowledge it, but I am afraid that is the reality. The problems that we face run deep. There is huge global uncertainty, as he knows; there have been years of under-investment in infrastructure and in people, leading to low productivity and low growth; there are the effects of covid, to which we were particularly exposed, and which his Government did not address, leaving a generation of working-age adults consigned to benefits and 1 million young people not in education, training or work; and our economy remains in the long shadow of Liz Truss, who destroyed fiscal confidence, leaving high and costly debt, high interest rates and ordinary people paying the price. That, I am afraid, is the legacy we are trying to address.

We are facing up to those realities and putting this country on a path to improved living standards, secure work, an NHS that is back on its feet, affordable homes to live in, and security through defence and our global leadership. That is going to take time—there is no denying it—but the forecasts published yesterday, which the right hon. Gentleman took a selective view of, show the green shoots of recovery. He might not want to hear it, but as the OBR said yesterday, growth forecasts after this year have been upgraded as a result of our policies.

Britain is now set to be the second-fastest growing economy in the G7 this year and next year. I am glad that the shadow Leader of the House is welcoming the boost in capital investment, after years and years of under-investment and a downward trajectory in capital spending by his Government. That has led to another £2 billion extra earmarked for defence, another £2 billion more for affordable and social housing, and a transformation fund that will help reform our public services and deliver those better outcomes.

After the right hon. Gentleman's Government left millions languishing in the aftermath of covid—that is what they did—we have got a plan to get people back to work, and we are making sure that the welfare safety net is sustainable for the long term. That is a far cry, I am afraid, from his Government. Our plan includes a pay rise for the lowest earners, coming in next week. The Employment Rights Bill, which we on the Government Benches are proud of, will give dignity and security in work. We have protections for the most in need and the biggest back to work programme in a generation. Even in the long shadow of Liz Truss—a very long shadow—which looms large over our fiscal credibility, interest rates are coming down, inflation is now under control and stability is restored.

The shadow Leader of the House asked about the headroom, but I gently remind him that the headroom that the Chancellor set out yesterday is 50% more than the headroom she inherited from her predecessor. One of the most shocking aspects of what we inherited was the eye-watering cost of servicing our enormous debt. We now spend £100 billion a year servicing debt, which is more than we spend on defence, justice and the Home Office combined. That is what we inherited from the Conservatives. Even in the face of those challenges, the Labour Chancellor announced yesterday that the Government's day-to-day spending will be going up above inflation each year for this forecast, and that will help restore our public services and give support to those who need it most. Those are Labour values in practice, making different choices for this country in the interests of working people. That is what Labour values are all about.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I refer the Leader of the House to the public office standards Bill, better known as the Hillsborough law, which is how I would like to refer to it. She will know my history in what happened at Hillsborough and, subsequently, with the independent panel report, and the involvement I had in the negotiations between Ministers, families and others. From what we are hearing, it seems that we are approaching a similar situation, where Whitehall is finding reasons to find problems with the law, rather than delivering it. It was only when we had the intervention of the then Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, and then Baroness May of Maidenhead, when she became Home Secretary, that we got things moving again. Can I ask the Leader of the House to talk to her Government colleagues to ensure that the duty of candour, parity of funding for families at inquest and other issues that we agreed on will be included in that Bill and that it will be published soon?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I know of his long history with the Hillsborough disaster—indeed, I understand that he was there that day. He and all the families affected want to see justice, and they want to see the Hillsborough law coming into effect. This Government remain committed to bringing forward legislation in that regard, as we have said, but we want to ensure that it reflects the full range of concerns and experiences of those affected, and that is the most important thing with this legislation. We remain committed to working with the families and all those affected to make sure, as we work at pace on that piece of legislation, that it meets their expectations. We will be setting out our next steps shortly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The Government's welfare changes, announced in yesterday's spring statement, will see 150,000 carers losing half a billion pounds of support by 2030. Carers receive precious little support already, so removing what little they get will do nothing to help people into work. Instead, it will just put more pressure on already overstretched carers, social care and, as we all know, the NHS. These changes come when the NHS is in a state of flux and uncertainty. Integrated care boards who run local health services have been told to make eye-watering cuts of 50% to their running costs, but the Government have not published an impact assessment on these ICB cuts or set out what the effect will be on patients.

Are we to assume that the Government are doing this in the dark? Should we assume, perhaps, that they are closing their eyes and hoping for the best, while in reality not having a clue what it will mean for patients, carers or people in their time of need? Surely if they had properly assessed their proposals, and it was all going to be fine, they would waste no time in telling us.

The alternative, of course, is that the Government know exactly how bad these cuts will be and what they will mean for our struggling health and care services. Either way, it is right that this House and the public should know what the Government know about the impact of their plans. Will the Leader of the House therefore grant Government time to discuss the impact on our NHS of cutting carer support and of their rushed cuts to integrated care boards?

Lucy Powell: On carer's allowance and the reforms to welfare that have been set out to this House in a number of statements and urgent questions, our guiding principles are to ensure that the safety net is there for the most in need, that there is better support for those who can work to get back into work, and that our welfare system and payments, such as personal independence payments and the associated carer's allowance and other things that sit alongside it, are there for the long term. Frankly, the situation as it stands today means that aspects of that are not sustainable into the long term. For example, we are seeing more than a thousand new people a day being awarded personal independence payments, and that is simply not sustainable.

However, I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that such reforms need to be done carefully, with compassion and in a managed way. We need to consider all aspects, especially in relation to what might be considered passported benefits. Primary legislation will be coming forward on these issues shortly, so they will be fully debated on the Floor of the House. I am sure that Members will take time to consider those measures.

The hon. Lady raises some questions about ICBs and the changes we are making to the national health service and NHS England. Our intention and our aim is to get more money back into frontline services and have less being spent on management and duplication in the back-office systems. Again, some of those aspects will need primary legislation. That will be brought forward, and therefore impact assessments and other things will come to light at that time.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): The UK has one of the worst paternity offers in Europe, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the police force, where new research from the Dad Shift shows that many frontline officers are taking just one week of paternity leave, because that is all they are entitled to on full pay. Does the Leader of the House agree that when the Government present their review of paternity leave to this place, a better deal for dads who serve on the frontline in the force should be an important consideration?

Lucy Powell: May I commend my hon. Friend for his campaigning on this issue, which I know he has raised in other ways, and also commend the Dad Shift for its campaigning? Police officers work tirelessly for all of us to keep our streets safe on behalf of the whole country, and they should be entitled to proper paternity leave. He is right to say that we have a review under way. The Employment Rights Bill is passing through Parliament at the moment, and I will ensure that these issues are considered as part of that review.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, it would be very helpful if we were told whether we will get Thursday 24 April in the Chamber, because we have debates requested. Equally, she has announced that there will be general debates on Monday 7 April, but we now have a queue of 37 debates waiting to be heard in the Chamber. By my calculations, that will take us up to the November recess, even if there are no further applications. It would be very helpful if we could get some of those debates allocated.

The business in Westminster Hall next week will include a debate on eating disorder awareness on Tuesday 1 April. On Thursday, there will be a debate on waste incinerators, followed by a debate on Government support for Thames Water. On Tuesday 8 April, there will be a debate on the persecution of Christians. I will follow up with the debates after the Easter recess next week.

On 13 April 1919, families gathered peacefully in the Jallianwala Bagh to enjoy the sun and a day out. On behalf of the British Army, General Dyer marched his troops in and ordered them to fire on innocent people until they ran out of ammunition. At the end of the massacre, 1,500 people were dead and 1,200 injured. Eventually, General Dyer was disgraced for that stain on the British empire. In 2019, the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, recognised that this event was a stain on British colonial rule in India. The anniversary of the massacre will be on 13 April, when we are in recess. Could we have a Government statement admitting to what went wrong and formally giving an apology to the people of India?

Lucy Powell: As ever, I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for arranging so much Back-Bench business and for announcing it here today, which I appreciate. As we have discussed in private and in these sessions, I will continue to endeavour to give him as much notice as possible of future slots for his Committee.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important matter of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. As he says, it is one of the most notorious and shameful episodes in

the history of British colonialism, particularly in India. I will ensure that Foreign Office Ministers have heard his question, and I will suggest that they bring forward a statement in advance of the anniversary.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): At the Copeland Street car park in my Derby South constituency, people are getting ripped off with parking charges time after time. Too often, broken parking machines or apps that will not load mean that well-intentioned drivers are fined. Too many of these unfair fines go unchallenged, with parking companies pocketing the cash. Could the House please be updated on the Government's plan to introduce a parking code of practice so that we can protect drivers from rip-off companies?

Lucy Powell: As constituency MPs, we can absolutely recognise what my hon. Friend has said, and many of us share his anger and frustration at how cowboy outfits operate. They are ripping people off, as he says. We are determined to drive up standards across the sector. A private parking code of practice will be published in due course, and I will ensure that this House is the first to hear about it.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Could we have a debate to recognise the important role that GPs and local medical practices play in our communities? Today we are joined in the Public Gallery by the practice manager of Coldstream medical practice, Yvonne Archibald, and the practice's therapy dog, Hattie. She is a huge part of the practice team and acts as an unofficial therapy pet for both patients and staff. Hattie has already visited No. 10 Downing Street on another trip, and is now enjoying her trip to the House of Commons to see you in action, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming Yvonne, the practice manager of Coldstream medical practice, and Hattie, the therapy dog. We are all looking at a very cute dog in the Public Gallery. It sounds like Hattie would give anybody some much-needed therapy—perhaps we could all go and stroke her after this session, because I feel like we probably need it. There was a video of Hattie chasing Larry the cat up Downing Street. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important work of therapy dogs like Hattie.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Today marks the 45th anniversary of the Kielland disaster off the coast of Norway in the North sea, which took the lives of 123 men. Twenty-two of them were British, including Michael Fleming, Keith Hunter, Brian Graham, John Grady and Colin Lamb from Cleator Moor in my constituency. Many questions remain unanswered for the families of those who tragically lost their lives. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should call on the Norwegian authorities to make available all the information that they collected during their inquiry in the 1980s—much of which remains unpublished—so that the families who lost loved ones can finally get some answers?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what is obviously a very important issue for his constituents, and for those still mourning the loss of friends and family in the Kielland disaster all those years ago. I am really sorry to hear that they feel that many questions

are still unanswered. I know the British authorities are working closely with the Norwegian authorities in Oslo, but I will ensure that he gets a full reply about that and that his constituents get the answers they deserve.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): In the 1960s, my constituency of Romford, which is part of the London borough of Havering, formed part of Greater London, but we are in Essex. The Government are following through with a devolution plan for the county of Essex. Will the Leader of the House please allow Havering to be considered as part of that discussion? People are deeply unhappy with the control from inner London. We feel much closer connections to Essex, and provided that there can be some guarantees about Transport for London, policing and things of that sort, it makes absolute sense for us to be part of that discussion. Will she arrange a debate on the Floor of the House, and perhaps a meeting with me and the Minister responsible, to try to find a solution to this issue and make my constituents very happy?

Lucy Powell: I hear the hon. Gentleman's strong representation for his constituency to be part of Essex, although I think he said that he would still like the benefits of being part of the Greater London area. We are embarking on the biggest devolution of powers that has happened under any Government, and part of that is about redrawing the map for local communities. His community should absolutely continue to make representations through him. I will certainly ensure that the Minister for Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), has a discussion with him about the possibility of Havering joining Essex.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): The Boyle family run Boghall Butchers in Bathgate, and have served the community and my constituency with pride for 50 years. Just three weeks ago, the Boghall Butchers doner kebab pie was crowned supreme champion at the British pie awards. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Boyle family on their dedicated service and award-winning fusion pie, and join me on a visit to Bathgate to taste the pie of pies?

Lucy Powell: Regular attenders of these sessions will know that I am very keen on invitations to taste the culinary outputs of constituencies, particularly those that come in the form of pies, although I had not heard of a kebab-filled pie. Some might call it pie-oneering. [*Laughter.*] Come on, give me some credit! I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Boyle family and all at Boghall Butchers.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Last night, President Donald Trump announced a new 25% tariff on all imported cars going into the United States, and today the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has revealed that vehicle production declined by 11.6% in February, falling for the 12th month in a row, while Stellantis is closing its Luton plant and BMW is scaling back its investments in Oxford. The automotive industry needs greater confidence from this Government. Will the Leader of the House ensure that there is a ministerial statement to update us on the Government's efforts to protect this vital sector?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will ensure that there is a ministerial statement as these things develop. The hon. Member will be aware that we are in intensive negotiations with the US on tariffs and broader trading arrangements. He will appreciate that we are in a fairly unique position among countries, in that the UK has a trade deficit with the US, so the US benefits more from that relationship than we do. I think that gives us some advantage in the conversations that we continue to have, but we recognise how important it is to make sure that we are not affected by tariffs, if at all possible. I will ensure that the House is updated.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): BBC Scotland announced last week that the much-loved, long-running drama series "River City" will be decommissioned by the autumn of 2026. The fictional town of Shieldinch is based in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire; the set and studio are in Dumbarton. BBC Scotland is part of the wider BBC, which is a public service broadcaster with a duty to use public funds to produce Scottish content, including drama. After 23 years of BBC Scotland supporting Scottish actors and production talent, I am concerned that skills and career development opportunities in the industry will be lost in the west of Scotland. Can the Leader of the House bring this to the attention of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and will she urge the BBC to reconsider its decision and save Scotland's only domestic TV soap?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear that "River City" is being decommissioned by the BBC. I know this will be of great concern to my hon. Friend's constituents and those across Scotland. He is right to say that the BBC has a duty to represent, serve and reflect all the communities of the UK, including by making sure that there is Scottish content for Scottish audiences. I will ensure that he gets a thorough response from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, but I thank him for raising this very important matter.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As a Minister, I was partly involved in the introduction of a Groceries Code Adjudicator. The aim of that supermarket ombudsman was to ensure a fair food chain, yet years later, farm-gate prices bear little relation to the prices that consumers pay, and farmers and growers still struggle to get a fair deal. The Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), has suggested that the powers of the ombudsman be increased. Can we have a debate about that in Government time? My farmers, growers and food firms in Lincolnshire deserve a fair deal. They deserve to be protected from these greedy corporate behemoths.

Lucy Powell: When I was a new MP in 2012, one of the first Public Bill Committees of which I was a member was the Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill Committee; I am not sure if the right hon. Member was the Minister. I have followed the Groceries Code Adjudicator closely ever since, as I am sure he appreciates, and I often hear about it on "Farming Today" in the small hours, when I cannot sleep. I am well aware of the issues that he raises about making sure that our farmers continue to get a good deal and are not overshadowed

[*Lucy Powell*]

and overburdened by the supermarkets, which may act in uncompetitive ways. He will know that the code needs updating; I will ensure that this House is kept fully abreast of all developments, and that he has input into it.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House and shadow Leader of the House for reminding me to wish my mum a happy Mother's Day. She has a bit of a spidey sense, so I hope she will see this on telly.

Bidfood, one of the UK's largest distributors, has suddenly derecognised the GMB trade union, which has caused lots of concern and worry among its employees. A good employer does not have anything to fear, or worry about, from a recognition agreement. Having had a recognition agreement for 30 years, Bidford should not suddenly stop that arrangement. Would the Leader of the House join me in urging Bidfood to sit at the table with the GMB and make sure that the relationship is re-established?

Lucy Powell: That sounds like quite a worrying development—Bidfood breaking the recognition agreement with its trade union. My hon. Friend is right to say that the evidence is clear that where recognition agreements exist, they work in the interests of the business and its employees. That is why we are strengthening measures on some these matters in the Employment Rights Bill, but I will ensure that Ministers take a look at this case.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Yesterday, in my trademark balanced and consensual way, I asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer if she would review her tax and spending plans. I gave her three principal examples of how she could raise substantially more revenue, which would, I hope, enable her not to cut disability benefits quite as much, or possibly even at all. She gave me a response about the Trident nuclear deterrent. I know what my position is on that, and I know that it is at odds with that of most of my colleagues in this Chamber, but so too did my constituents when they elected me—twice. Can we have a debate in Government time about the minimum standard of responses that elected Members, whatever the colour of their rosette, can enjoy from Ministers in this Chamber?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member has very politely raised this issue with me today, and I thank him for that. He will know—he is a regular attender at business questions—that I take ministerial responses very seriously, in that they should be forthcoming, open and timely, so I will certainly look into that issue.

I think the hon. Member was raising with the Chancellor the question of whether we could raise more taxes from the wealthy. Just for the record, I would say to him that we have been doing that in a number of ways, lots of which have been controversial, whether it is by reducing VAT breaks for private schools, increasing taxes on those who own private jets, increasing capital gains tax, taking on the excess profits of the energy companies and, of course, dealing with non-dom tax status. All that has raised billions of pounds for our public services, and for what we are doing. We absolutely think that those with the broadest shoulders should pay the highest price. As he has requested, I will make sure that he gets forthcoming replies.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Last week and at the weekend, the opening ceremony, group games, semi-finals and finals of the kabaddi world cup were played at WV Active Aldersley in my constituency of Wolverhampton West. The rest of the games were played at other venues in the west midlands. This is the first time ever that the kabaddi world cup has been held outside Asia. Will the Leader of the House please join me, my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), who attended matches with me, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Pat McFadden) in congratulating all the organisers and the England team, who finished runners-up to India, on a wonderful, successful tournament? It was testament to the rich cultural and sporting diversity that we have in Wolverhampton and the west midlands.

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the other Wolverhampton Members of Parliament on their support of the first kabaddi world cup games outside India.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Outside Asia.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry—outside Asia. I thank the hon. Member for correcting me. It is a great achievement for Wolverhampton. I was really pleased that the Government's Commonwealth games legacy enhancement fund helped secure some of the funding for the world cup games, and maybe next time England will do better than be the runners-up.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The right hon. Lady may be pleased to hear that I will not mention rats and squeaky blinders today. I want to raise the problem of litter, which is an expensive nuisance. Last week marked the start of the Great British spring clean. Will she join me in thanking all the individuals, community groups and schools around the country that take part in this initiative? More importantly, many of them take part in such activities to help our communities day in, day out, throughout the year. Could we have a debate in Government time on tackling litter and fly-tipping, which blights so many of our communities?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join the right hon. Lady in congratulating the Great British spring clean, which sounds brilliant. It is probably needed in the streets of Birmingham right now; I thought that was where she was going to turn the question to. These kinds of voluntary activities certainly cannot make up for failing bin services, but they are a very important part of keeping our streets and communities bright and clean.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of meeting Lucas de Gouveia from Beckenham, who, at 14 years old, already represents GB at wheelchair tennis. Lucas contacted me to ask for help in raising money for equipment and travel, so that he can participate in competitions, which are more expensive for disability sports. I have written to a range of companies on Lucas's behalf and hope to meet them soon, with Lucas. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Lucas on his incredible achievement so far, and wish us well as we try to secure sponsorship for him?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I wish Lucas all the best for this season, and for his future career. We have a great legacy in this country of producing some of the best wheelchair tennis players in the world. My hon. Friend has given a really good advert and shout out today. I hope there are companies watching this who might want to sponsor Lucas.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Addenbrooke's hospital in my constituency has launched a major expert clinical inquiry, following worrying evidence that nine young children suffered worse outcomes than expected following surgery by a now suspended paediatric orthopaedic surgeon. I have written a letter to the hospital requesting that a 2016 report into the same area be sent to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and me. Will the Leader of the House help secure an opportunity for me to meet the Secretary of State to discuss that report and the new inquiry, so that we can ensure that it is open and transparent, and so that we can reassure patients, families and the staff of the organisation, and ensure that there is no retaliation against any whistleblowers?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets the meeting and responses she requests. This sounds like a very difficult and challenging case, but she is absolutely right that whistleblowers and all those involved should be able to come forward in such inquiries, safe in the knowledge that they will be protected. That is the culture we need in our national health service, so that lessons can always be learned in an open and transparent way, and so that people are not blamed incorrectly.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I was proud to be in this House when Tony Blair and Gordon Brown established the Department for International Development, and when they established the Drop the Debt campaign. I was proud when the Leader of the House and I stood for election on a manifesto that committed us to restoring the international aid budget to 0.7% of GNI. May we please have a debate in Government time on how it might be possible to find a lost moral compass?

Lucy Powell: I think we all share pride in what the previous Labour Government did on debt reduction and aid for some of the poorest countries in the world. We are also proud of our commitment, which remains, to returning our aid budget to 0.7% of GDP. We had a statement to this House by the Prime Minister on the need for us to find extra funding for defence expenditure in this changing, uncertain and insecure world, but we remain absolutely committed to returning the aid budget to the 0.7% level that we set.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Leader of the House will surely agree that when we send our armed forces into dangerous situations, they deserve to be protected against vexatious litigious claims that are ultimately thrown out, but only after great expense, distress and strain. There was a rather inconclusive exchange at Defence questions on Monday about whether we should withdraw from the European convention on human rights, or have a derogation for the proposed force that may go on a peacekeeping mission in Ukraine. May we have a statement from a senior Law Officer confirming that it is perfectly possible to derogate from

the ECHR for a specific mission like this, without in any way committing ourselves to staying in or leaving the ECHR in the long term?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important matter and I am sorry that the answer that he or a colleague received in Defence questions on Monday was not satisfactory. I will look into that and make sure he gets one. Absolutely, this is a good matter to raise with a Law Officer. We have Attorney General questions at the beginning of May, but in the meantime I will ensure he gets a good reply about that important question.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): To have a PhD in oncology, to be a GP, to work in a women's prison—each would mark someone out as a remarkable person, but Dr Jenefer Llewelyn did all three. In her final email to me on 29 January, she said:

“I implore you to keep up the fight for those with cholangiocarcinoma.”

I regret to inform the House that Dr Llewelyn passed away on 15 March, leaving behind her partner and three children, as well as the rest of those in my community who loved, respected and relied on her. In Dr Llewelyn's name, I want to keep my promise to her and keep on fighting, so will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the treatment of those with cholangiocarcinoma?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and I pay tribute to Dr Jenefer Llewelyn. She sounds like a truly remarkable woman and I am really sorry to learn that she is no longer with us, leaving behind her partner and three children who I am sure are incredibly proud of the contribution she made across all the professions my hon. Friend described. He rightly raises the treatment and the supply chain for medicines. The Department of Health and Social Care is committed to making sure that people such as Dr Llewelyn get the treatment they need in a timely fashion, but I will make sure that a Minister responds to my hon. Friend fully.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Some 172 of my constituents have been affected by the British Coal staff superannuation scheme scandal. In the autumn Budget, the UK Government released equivalent funds from the miners' pension scheme, but did not do so for those in the BCSSS. The Government's failure to release frozen funds is causing immense hardship such as that caused to the Allied Steel and Wire workers. Pensioners who have paid into the system for decades are now left without the support they deserve. What assurance can the Leader of the House give me that the Government are working towards a fair resolution for those affected by this scandal? Can we please have a written statement on the issue?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of that case; the hon. Lady raises an important issue. We have been taking steps to make sure there is a fair resolution in these cases. I will ensure she gets a full update on the matter. Should it progress further, I will make sure that it is brought forward to the Floor of the House.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Last Saturday was the eighth anniversary of the sad passing of PC Keith Palmer, who died in the line of duty. He died

[*Matt Western*]

securing this place and we should remember him. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Up and down the country, as we saw last summer, police officers put themselves in harm’s way securing and making safe the public. They often get injured in such events. If they are injured and forced to retire early, they miss out on their long service duty medal. Will the Leader of the House join me, or perhaps arrange a meeting for me with the appropriate Minister, to discuss the need for an injury retirement medal for officers who make that sacrifice to keep the public safe?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for giving us a moment to remember Keith Palmer. Many of us were there that day, and we will never forget that he gave his life protecting those of us inside this place. My hon. Friend is absolutely right—it sounds like a really good idea to have an injury retirement medal for those who would otherwise have got a long service medal. I will ensure that the Home Secretary hears his call for that and that he gets a good reply.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The A77 and A75 roads are critical to the people of south-west Scotland, but they are also critical to the UK, because they service the exceptionally busy ferry port of Cairnryan, which links us with our friends in Northern Ireland. The difficulty with these roads is obvious if we ever travel them. There is another difficulty, however, which is that the Department for Transport here does not seem to think this has anything to do with it, and the Secretary of State for Scotland is too busy to meet me to discuss the issue. When the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart), who is in her place on the Government Benches, and I wrote to the Transport Secretary in Scotland, we received a high-handed letter saying that it would be inappropriate to meet us. What is inappropriate is the way devolution does not appear to be working. Can we pluck from the logjam of Backbench Business Committee debate ideas one on devolution and how it is failing?

Lucy Powell: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that I do not think government in Scotland is working effectively in the interests of his constituents and others. I am sorry to hear about the difficulties he has had in raising the issue of the A77 road in his constituency. I will certainly ask the Scottish Minister to meet him to discuss that, so that we can get to the bottom of who is responsible and he can speak to those who are.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): As part of the East Ayrshire Youth Awards, pupils in Bellsbank primary school in my constituency won the intergenerational champion award. Ellie, Sienna and Lacie recently joined the Bellsbank Project sewing group and made fouter blankets. They donated these to elderly residents suffering from dementia in a local nursing home. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating pupils from Bellsbank primary school on their award and their enthusiasm for learning from older people?

Lucy Powell: It is always brilliant to hear such stories, and I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Ellie, Sienna and Lacie on making fouter blankets for the

elderly residents in her constituency. What a lovely story; it is a reminder of the importance of these intergenerational programmes.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Will the Leader of the House ask her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care for a statement explaining the rationale behind a decision last month to alter the eligibility criteria for additional compensation in the infected blood compensation scheme? The special category mechanism was replaced with the severe health condition award, which means that the group of 916 people with hepatitis C, including some of my constituents, have been singled out and are now prevented from receiving the supplementary compensation they expected, and desperately need because they are so unwell.

Lucy Powell: That is actually a matter for the Cabinet Office, rather than the Department of Health and Social Care, but I thank the hon. Lady for raising it. She is absolutely right; the Government are committed to paying comprehensive compensation, not just to those infected but to those affected. We have set aside £11.8 billion to compensate those affected in full. I know of the issue she is talking about. We are determined to work closely with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to ensure that everybody impacted is aware and is part of those conversations. I will ensure she gets a detailed response.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is no surprise that under a Labour Government hospital waiting lists have fallen for five months in a row. At Royal Stoke university hospital, which brilliantly serves my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and beyond, there are now 3,311 fewer patients waiting 18 weeks or longer to be seen compared with July last year. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on reducing hospital waiting lists, so that we can continue to sustain our progress in this area?

Lucy Powell: I know from talking to many colleagues that they share my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for the significant fall we have seen in waiting lists for the fifth month in a row. That is having a direct impact on his constituents and many others. We have also hit our pledge to deliver over 2 million more elective care appointments, which will further drive down waiting lists. I will ensure the House is kept fully up to date on our progress on cutting waiting times, as we said we would.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. There are over 20 Members on their feet, and we have around 20 minutes left, so please keep questions and answers short.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Yesterday, the Office for Students levied a wholly disproportionate fine on the University of Sussex after what looks like a flawed and wasteful investigation at a time when the higher education sector is in financial crisis. Could the Leader of the House ask the Education Secretary whether she will respond to concerns about why the OfS took so long to conduct its investigation, its behaviour, the costs it incurred and the ramifications of this very serious judgment?

Lucy Powell: I understand that this is a very serious judgment which will be of concern to the hon. Lady's constituents. I recognise that it has taken some time and has led to a significant fine for the university. We have had a few urgent questions and statements on these broader matters in the House in recent months, but I will ensure that the Secretary of State responds to her today and comes to the House with an update.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Last week, I was alerted to the fact that one of my constituents, Owen Haggerty, a serving Royal Navy officer, had been detained in a jail in Bahrain. I immediately made contact with colleagues in the relevant Departments, but much to my surprise, no one would engage with me to inform me of his welfare or the current status of his case. That was apparently because I did not have his explicit consent. He was sitting in a jail in Bahrain. I had his mother's consent—she was also a constituent—and yet still nobody would speak to me.

Over a week later, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office contacted me this morning to say that it now has Owen's consent to talk to me about his case. I am very pleased that he has been granted a royal pardon by the King of Bahrain, but will the Leader of the House ensure that the FCDO works with me to arrange his urgent deportation back to this country, and that we avoid further delays in the future to MPs securing access to the information they need to support their constituents?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of my hon. Friend's experiences with the FCDO, but I am pleased that Owen Haggerty received that pardon this morning. She raised this matter with me a couple of days ago, which is why I raised it with the Foreign Office and it was in touch with her this morning. That is my role as Leader of the House when those conversations are not forthcoming. I can assure her that both the Ministry of Defence and the FCDO have been working tirelessly behind the scenes to secure the pardon, and I will ensure that they continue to work with her and Owen's family to make sure he comes back to the UK.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In reply to an earlier question, the Leader of the House said that the BBC should serve all local communities. It is around 18 months since we had a shake-up of BBC local radio, and the result is that it is much less local. Could we have a debate in Government time on how the BBC could be held to account for that and could provide local radio that is more local?

Lucy Powell: I know that the shake-up in local radio caused a great deal of concern to Members across the House when it was proposed and implemented in the last Parliament; many Members raised their concerns directly with the director general and others at the time. I am certainly happy to raise with the Department how that has gone and what the feedback has been, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman and other Members are kept informed.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It will be four years this summer since Cumbria's Newton Rigg agricultural college closed its doors, and with it ended the last course in hill farming available in England. Given the

importance of hill farming and upland land management in constituencies such as mine, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the importance of land-based education and skills?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I am sorry to hear that the hill farming course that my hon. Friend describes is no longer available; that does not sound like a good development. As part of our programme of skills and education, I know that Ministers will be keen to discuss with her how we can ensure that agricultural education such as hill farming is at the centre of our thoughts.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): At PMQs yesterday, we were joined by my constituent Harry Brown and his family, who were in the Speaker's Gallery. Harry battled childhood cancer and overcame it. After PMQs, I spoke to him about his experience. He told me how, throughout his treatment, he had to travel from the Royal Victoria infirmary in Newcastle to Great Ormond Street. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on how we can better support childhood cancers and treat people closer to home?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for bringing Harry Brown into Parliament yesterday and for talking to him at great length about his experiences. He is absolutely right: we need a balance between ensuring that we have specialist care, which is often centred in certain places, and ensuring that there is care in the community. That is at the heart of what we are doing to make sure that there is good preventative and community NHS care for all those who need it, all the time.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The football pitch at Merrylee primary school in my constituency is used by hundreds of kids every day, but it is in a terrible condition. It needs to be redone, but the local SNP-run council is refusing to provide funding, which means that local parents have to identify grant funding. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising those local parents? Will she make time for a debate on community football pitches?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I am sorry to hear that local people are having to fundraise for such an issue, but my hon. Friend is right that football pitches are at the heart of our communities. In England, we have a football Bill going through the House, which will support grassroots funding. The Scottish Government have a very good settlement with a big budget from this Government, so hopefully they can use some of it to support his community better.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Can we have a debate on the latest iteration of the crippling Irish sea border, namely the parcels border, which is due to become effective from 1 May? It will mean that every parcel moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, including personal parcels from a grandmother to a grandchild, is subject to the requirements of the EU customs border. It is particularly damaging for business, because business-to-business parcels can be sent only if the sender belongs to the trusted trader scheme and pays the fee, and if they make a customs declaration, including on where the goods came from and what they

[Jim Allister]

are. When can we discuss the fact that this United Kingdom is being partitioned and severed by an unnecessary border in the Irish sea?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. and learned Member for his question. As he will be aware, we are committed to the Windsor framework and to working through the types of issue that he raises. Those conversations are ongoing, and I will ensure that he is updated on where they are up to before 1 May.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I want to get all Members in if I possibly can, so please be kind to one another. Otherwise, some people will not get in.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): This Saturday, my constituent David Kiddie will be starting his 300 km walk for two-year-old Lily. In late 2024, Lily was diagnosed with metachromatic leukodystrophy, a rare progressive degenerative disease that will sadly, in her family's words, slowly take her away. David is raising money to support Lily and her family on this difficult journey and raise awareness of MLD. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing David well as he prepares to begin his walk this weekend?

Lucy Powell: I will join my hon. Friend in supporting David's fundraising efforts for Lily, who suffers from MLD; I thank him for raising that today. Hopefully, people will give to David's efforts.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Nigeria, where religion shapes many aspects of life, more than 3.5 million people have been violently displaced from their home. Religious leaders have been kidnapped and killed. Communities long to return to their land, rebuild their lives and be protected from marginalisation by extremist groups. They seek restoration of security and dignity, yet the camps in which they often live lack basic aid, supplies and food, while those responsible for the atrocities continue to act with impunity. Will the Leader of the House ask a Foreign Office Minister to set out what steps the Government are taking to support efforts to end impunity for the perpetrators of these crimes and say whether a reporting mechanism has been established to ensure transparency in how UK aid money is being used in the Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member has attended every single business question that I have answered as Leader of the House. I congratulate him on his 70th birthday, which was on Tuesday—I think he deserves a special mention for that. Yet again, I thank him for raising the important matter of freedom of religion and belief for all. I will ensure that the Foreign Office Minister has heard the hon. Member's call today, and that he gets a response.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I am pleased to say that the excellent Dartford Sharks basketball club will be playing in the Medway league men's cup final this weekend. However, like sports clubs all across the country, they have been finding it increasingly difficult to access regular facilities in which they can train and play, as schools and colleges are unable to afford to open their

doors to hosting external sports clubs. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the Sharks luck in the final on Saturday? Will she make time for a debate on how we can increase access to sports facilities in public buildings such as schools?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in wishing the Dartford Sharks all the very best. I think we have a debate coming up soon on supporting such measures. The Government are committed to grassroots sports facilities like the ones he describes. I hope the Dartford Sharks will be able to make use of them soon.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Shamefully, the National Brewery Centre in Burton was closed under the previous Conservative Administration and Member of Parliament, depriving us of an important link to our brewing history. The current Labour-led East Staffordshire borough council is working at pace to reopen it, and I am keen to get Government support. Given the importance of our brewing heritage to our national identity and local economy, will the Leader of the House grant a debate on support of our brewing heritage?

Lucy Powell: I know that brewing heritage is a particular interest for my hon. Friend and his constituents. I thought that he was going to invite me for a taste, but perhaps I can assist him in getting the brewery reopened first, and then we can enjoy some of its fine fare.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): This week, the disappointing decision was made to increase tolls on the Tamar crossings. Although this essential infrastructure must remain operational, I am very concerned about the disproportionate financial burden that is being placed on households and businesses in South East Cornwall. Can my right hon. Friend make time to discuss the vital issue of improving connectivity and supporting growth in the south-west as a priority? Will she ask the relevant Minister to work with me to ensure that rural communities feel the benefit of Labour's commitment to an integrated transport network?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an excellent question. She is absolutely right that rural communities such as those in South East Cornwall deserve to be better connected and integrated, and that should not come at a heavy cost to residents in her constituency. I will ensure that she gets a full reply. This is something that I am sure the House will want to be updated on.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): An issue of concern for constituents in Glasgow North and elsewhere is the unregulated use of off-road vehicles. Anyone can easily purchase one without registration, and their subsequent use can lead to antisocial behaviour and in some places, including in my own constituency recently, to very tragic consequences. Will the Leader of the House provide time to debate the regulation, including registration, of these off-road vehicles?

Lucy Powell: This matter gets raised with me all the time, which is why one of my favourite pieces of legislation is the Crime and Policing Bill, which will give police the powers to seize such vehicles and crush them—crucially, get rid of them. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that

they are a blight on our communities. We will have ample time to debate this important legislation in the coming months.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I am in touch with many parents and carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities who have to battle too hard with Buckinghamshire council to get their education, health and care plans, their school places and their home-to-school transport. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the extraordinary lengths to which parents have to go to support their SEND kids? Will she continue to ensure that this House prioritises the reforms to the SEND system that are desperately needed?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that families with children with SEND face real barriers to getting the support that they need. We have a broken system that does not give great outcomes or work for families. We are looking at reforming SEND, and I will ensure that she and the House are kept updated.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): My constituent Tia Brown has been refused vital treatment for premature ovarian insufficiency, a serious condition that affects one in 100 women under 40 in the UK, despite her doctors recommending that she be given the treatment and it being freely available in Wales. POI causes early ovarian failure, which increases the risk of serious health issues. As a mother of twins, Tia is advocating for her health and her family's future, but also for all the women needing access to this critical treatment. Will the Leader of the House support a debate on premature ovarian insufficiency and the need for access to treatment across the UK?

Lucy Powell: The Government are clear that it is not acceptable that my hon. Friend's constituent has not been able to get the care and support that she needs to deal with premature ovarian insufficiency. My hon. Friend has raised this matter on the Floor of the House; I will ensure that this particular case is looked at, but the wider issues that he has raised are a matter of concern for Ministers.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Could the Leader of the House make time for a debate about local sporting excellence, to celebrate REN96 swimming club in my constituency, which won 73 medals in one weekend, GHA rugby in Giffnock, which won the championship, and the young athletes of Giffnock North athletics club, who came home with a haul of medals and personal bests? Will she join me in thanking the army of volunteers behind that success not just in my constituency but right across the country?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I will not repeat all the clubs that my hon. Friend mentioned, but he is right that grassroots sports clubs are at the heart of our community. In nearly all cases they are run by fantastic volunteers who give their life to them. They really do provide great opportunities for young people and others to keep fit and get together for these activities.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This past month, members of the Valley Thai boxing club in Whitworth, Rochdale, have been representing team GB in Bangkok

in the world Muay Thai boxing championships. They have just come back with a record number of medals: eight gold, three silver and four bronze, including a bronze for my constituent Lynette Cook's son Keaton. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Keaton and all the Team GB members on representing our country in one of Britain's fastest growing sports?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Valley Thai boxing club and its fantastic haul of medals. It is great to highlight that growing sport in his constituency to a wider audience.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Ben and Melanie have paid thousands over the odds for their energy bills because their energy provider failed to provide accurate billing on their prepayment meter and wiped thousands in credit from their account. That energy provider has now missed nine appointments that it scheduled with Ben and Mel. Will the Leader of the House support a debate on how Ofgem can improve service standards and hold energy companies to account when they fail my constituents?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the experience of Ben and Melanie. I hope that the energy provider that he highlighted has heard this case and will quickly sort it out. The Government are working with Ofgem to reinforce our expectation that if rules are not complied with, it will enforce them. I will ensure that Ministers have heard that.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill has been substantially changed in Committee. Can the Leader of the House give an update on when the House may see the impact assessment for that Bill? Can she give an assurance that sufficient time will be available for Members to consider that analysis before we get to the Bill's remaining stages?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important matter for many colleagues across the House. He will be aware that the Bill's Committee stage ended this week. It has been considerably amended: I think that the Committee accepted more than 100 amendments from those on both sides of the debate. The Government are committed to ensuring that the impact assessment is available for Members in good time before Report. I am sure that he will recognise that that will be a challenge, given how much the Bill has been amended, but we will do our very best to ensure that Members have ample time to look at it.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I was thrilled to be at Vitality stadium to see AFC Bournemouth women's team crowned the FA women's national league division 1 south west champions. It adds to the success of Queens Park ladies under-12s, who beat all the boys in its first season to win the league. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those two teams? Might she also wish the best of luck to the men's team as they face Manchester City in the FA cup on Sunday?

Lucy Powell: I will not go that far, because hopefully I will be spending Mothering Sunday watching City win and progress to the next round, but I certainly join him

[Lucy Powell]

in congratulating the women's football teams in his constituency on beating the boys and winning the tournament.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): My constituent Darren recently shared the harrowing experience of his father Les, who went to A&E following a fall. An ambulance was called and they were told that it would take an hour to arrive. Unfortunately, it took six and a half hours. This is not an isolated incident, as such delays are becoming all too common across the country. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to discuss ambulance waiting lists across the Black Country and what more can be done to ensure that no community is left behind when it comes to emergency care?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about what happened to Darren's father Les. The waiting time that they endured is frankly unacceptable. The ambulance and emergency care wait times that my hon. Friend described are a symptom of the chronic state of our national health service, which we and the country inherited. We are determined to turn that around. As she rightly said, unfortunately, emergency care is facing a great number of challenges. I will ensure that the Minister has heard her question.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank everyone for keeping their questions short. I am sure that we will get everybody in.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I will be quick, Madam Deputy Speaker. One of my constituents in Brownsover has been flooded several times over the past 10 years from leaks in Severn Trent pipes. The company makes good the damage, but does the Leader of the House agree that that is the bare minimum? The company should compensate for emotional harm—which I saw for myself on Saturday—and also consider buying homes at market rate when people cannot sell, and divert more resources away from shareholder dividends and towards fixing the infrastructure for the long term, so that my constituents feel the benefit of first-world amenities such as proper water infrastructure. Will she consider time for a debate on this?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Water companies and infrastructure in this country have not been working and have not been fit for purpose for a long time. We have passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which will begin to turn this around. Further measures will come forward as we look more broadly at the water companies.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Since I last raised in this Chamber the negative impact of short-term lets in my constituency, Central London Forward has brought out new research estimating that 17,000 properties in my constituency are lost to short-term lets. It believes that a significant proportion of those is the result of individual owners owning up to 21 properties themselves. I thank the Leader of the House for her previous comments. Does she recognise the case I am making that the Cities of London and Westminster should be a pilot in the much-needed forthcoming Government registration scheme?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I know of these issues very well from my own constituency. As my hon. Friend said, we are introducing the short-term let registration scheme and abolishing the furnished holiday lets tax regime to remove some tax incentives. From April, councils can opt to charge a council tax premium of up to 100% on second homes. I will ensure that Ministers hear her plea to be part of that registration scheme.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): My remarkable constituent Pat Smith has dedicated 60 years of his life to coaching basketball, football and other sports, including 37 years leading the Hatfield Fliers basketball club. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Pat for his exceptional service and for being an absolutely brilliant role model to many generations, and wishing him a happy and fulfilling retirement?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Pat and wishing him a fantastic and happy retirement. He deserves a good pat on the back.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Last weekend, in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, I held a SEND forum for parents, carers, professionals and teachers. I heard a range of worrying and heartfelt stories, and emerging from all of them were real concerns about how Conservative-led Staffordshire county council communicates with the parents of SEND children. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House consent to a debate on guidelines for communicating with parents of SEND children, to ensure that communications are not adversarial, challenging and humiliating for them?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear that Staffordshire county council has fallen short in its communications and dealings with families and parents of those with SEND. This is always a difficult, challenging time for families, so councils should be much more sensitive about how they deal with the barriers that people face.

Point of Order

1.20 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, the Chancellor incorrectly stated that, on Second Reading, Green party MPs

“voted against the Planning and Infrastructure Bill”—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 971.]

In fact, none of us did that. How can the Chancellor’s inaccurate statement be corrected on the record, given that she has inadvertently misrepresented the voting record of other hon. Members?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. The Chair is not responsible for the content of Ministers’ contributions, but I am sure that the hon. Member’s concern has been heard on the Government Benches, and it is now on the record. If an error has been made in this instance, I am sure that the Chancellor will seek to correct it as quickly as possible.

Backbench Business

St Patrick’s Day and Northern Irish Affairs

1.21 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered St Patrick’s day 2025 and Northern Irish affairs.

I am grateful to all colleagues who sponsored the debate application and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting us time on the Floor of the Chamber. The cross-party support for the debate is testament to the close bond between the UK and Ireland and the House’s acknowledgment of Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom.

I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I serve on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), and I am particularly grateful to the team of Stephen, Kay, Karen, Joe and Chloe who support the Committee’s work—they are all excellent people. I also chair the all-party parliamentary group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain.

The issues before the House this afternoon are close to my heart. As anyone who knows me will say, I have always had a great love and affinity for the good people of Northern Ireland, and indeed the Republic of Ireland, as well as what could be described as a healthy appreciation for St Patrick’s day this year and all years.

We are joined in the Gallery by former deputy mayor Councillor Liz McShane, a councillor in Folkestone and Hythe and a North Down native. We were to be joined by Mr Michael Lonergan, the political supremo at the Irish embassy, but, alas, I think he is lunching. Michael has done more for British-Irish relations in recent years than anyone else I know. We will miss him when he returns home later this year. I have not met anybody who can so easily have breakfast with the DUP, morning tea with Sinn Féin, lunch with the Liberals, afternoon tea with the Tories, pre-dinner drinks with the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, and then dinner with Labour, and then get up and do it all again the next day.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman—my almost neighbour—on securing the debate. I apologise, as I cannot contribute fully to this debate as I have to go and prepare for the next debate, but I want to join him in his tributes to Michael. I have just seen Michael in Portcullis House, so I know that he is in the building, and I am sure that he will be in the Gallery at some point soon. He has been an absolute stalwart. As vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and previously its co-chair, I know just how much work Michael does to promote UK-Irish relations. We will miss him very much.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who is a near neighbour and a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, both for her interest in and commitment to Northern Irish affairs and for her full and appropriate tribute to Michael. I thank her for making it.

[Adam Jogee]

For nations across the globe, St Patrick's day is a day of celebration, acknowledgment and togetherness, and a day—it rather feels like a month nowadays—when the world can be described in two ways: those who are Irish and Northern Irish, and those who wished they were. The noble Lord, Lord Brennan, a man born to an Irish father and a Welsh mother, told me last night that as St David's day is 1 March, he was not prepared to concede a month to celebrate St Patrick's day unless it started around 8 March. I told him that as long as St George's day is safe in April, I was happy to let the debate go on.

St Patrick's day's global popularity is perhaps most obvious in the city of Chicago, which famously dyes its river green every year to mark this important milestone. While I appreciate the sentiment, I am sure that we have all had enough of the rivers and lakes in our country—whether the Thames outside this place or Lough Neagh—turning the most unusual of colours.

Much of this is closer to home. I am proud of my own family roots in Northern Ireland. My late grandmother's father was of good, solid County Down stock. I note the passing of his last remaining child, my great-aunt Margaret Wilson, who died at the grand old age of 105 last week. The blend of Irish and English is clearly a recipe for a good, long life.

My own roots parked to one side, one of the best decisions I ever made—other than being born to a good Staffordshire woman in my mother, over which I had little influence—was to marry my brilliant, wonderful wife. I had little influence in that, either—she had to say yes. My wife is a woman of and from Northern Ireland but who calls the ancient and loyal borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme home.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): My neighbouring constituency has a small Irish community now, but for some time in the 19th century Stafford was a source of refuge to a number of Irish nationals who worked in the area. While some moved on, a significant number stayed and put down roots in Staffordshire. With that in mind, does my hon. Friend agree that the contributions of the Irish community past and present have really enriched Staffordshire's cultural and economic life?

Adam Jogee: I thank my neighbour, in whose constituency my mother was born, for her timely and important intervention. I could not agree more.

Many people from the island of Ireland moved to Newcastle-under-Lyme, to Staffordshire, as my hon. Friend said, and to coalfield communities up and down our country to work in our mines and in our metal manufacturing industries, settling with their families and bringing with them a sense of culture, new ideas and, of course, great craic. But many Irish women came to England in particular to work in our national health service. I want to acknowledge Louise Ryan, who, alongside Gráinne McPolin and Neha Doshi, has written a wonderful book entitled "Irish Nurses in the NHS", which I read over the weekend, and which gives such voice to the contribution of Irish nurses in our beloved national health service.

Many businesses and organisations in my constituency would not exist without people from the island of Ireland, and many of my constituents—some of my

staff included—are proud to have strong Irish roots. I think of people like Rosi Monkman, who works at Keele University and lives in the Westlands, and my Labour predecessor, the former Member of Parliament, Paul Farrelly. I was out door-knocking in Clayton the other day when in quick succession I met Shannon, Maura, and then, of course, the wonderful Bob Bell and many more. I think of the Irish staff in this House, from Catherine Jackson, the restaurant manager, to the lovely Betty Thompson in the Terrace cafeteria downstairs: strong Irish women keeping this place going.

Irish Heritage described the contribution of the Irish to cultural life in the United Kingdom as incalculable. The cultural contribution of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is beyond doubt.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the unique contribution that the Irish diaspora has made to cultural life in the UK. For 30 years, the Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith has served the population of west London and far beyond. Under its current team of centre director William Foote, culture director Ros Scanlon and chairman Peter Power-Hynes, it has gone from strength to strength in its cultural, community and education programmes. I count myself lucky as a Member with one of the largest Irish populations to represent such an outstanding venue for the best of Irish culture. My hon. Friend and, of course, all hon. Members are welcome there at all times.

Adam Jogee: I have been to Hammersmith's Irish Cultural Centre many times. My hon. Friend speaks rightly of the contribution that it makes to people of Irish descent not just in London but up and down the country. There are also Irish centres in Birmingham, Manchester and other parts of the United Kingdom. He makes a good point, and I congratulate all those at that centre on the work they do.

In Northern Ireland we have great wordsmiths such as the poet Seamus Heaney, the playwright Brian Friel, and Anna Burns, the author of "Milkman". All of them have achieved international acclaim in both the English and Irish languages. We also have musicians such as Van Morrison—although he was a little bit mean to my friend the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), who has the pleasure of representing the community that my wife was born in and where my parents-in-law live—and, notably, the Ulster-Scots folk music movement, who have had real popularity right across the United Kingdom and indeed the world. Of course, much-loved TV shows such as Channel 4's "Derry Girls" and even "Game of Thrones" owe Northern Ireland a great deal. Anyone who has been to Northern Ireland will have seen its natural beauty up close. It is the home of the Giant's Causeway, the Ring of Gullion, Slieve Donard, which towers over Newcastle, County Down—an act of solidarity with God's own constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

I must also mention the island of Ireland's contribution to one of our most beloved institutions: the great British pub. From Ballycastle to Bletchley, Coalisland to Camden, Fermanagh to Falkirk, Portballintrae in the constituency of the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) to Pembrokeshire, Templepatrick to Tyneside, Ballybeen to Golders Green and everywhere in between, who does not like a good pint? Whether it be a pint of

Guinness, Guinness 0.0 or Guinness Clear—otherwise known as water—the approach and culture have deeply influenced our pubs, and we are all the better for it. Pubs across Newcastle-under-Lyme, whether it is the Westbury Tavern in Westbury Park, the Potters Wheel just up from Bradwell Lodge, the Sneyd Arms in town where I was last Saturday having a cold drink or the Hand and Trumpet in Wrinehill, pubs across my part of the world, as I know in many others, know how to pour a good pint of Guinness.

It was in Belfast shipyard and particularly at Harland & Wolff where many vessels for the Royal Navy and the merchant fleet were built, including the famous HMS Belfast. In both world wars, Irish volunteers fought in the British Army, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. Men and women from across the island of Ireland helped build the earliest tunnels for the London underground, as well as more modern works, such as the Victoria line, which gets me from Euston station on a Monday morning to this place. Many Irish people continue to move to our United Kingdom to work in our national health service, education system and, more widely, our public services. I take this moment to pay tribute to them for their hard work and their contributions to our country. Does my hon. Friend want to give way?

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab) *rose—*

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab) *rose—*

Adam Jogee: I will take Pembrokeshire first.

Henry Tufnell: As my hon. Friend knows, I represent the constituency of Mid and South Pembrokeshire, which is closer to Dublin than it is to London. Does he agree about the importance of maintaining and enhancing trade links? He will be aware of the ferry from Pembroke Dock in my constituency to the harbour of Rosslare and the importance of enhancing those trade links to achieve the Government's mission of economic growth.

Adam Jogee: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his wife on the imminent arrival of their first child in the coming days. We all wish him and Poppy well.

He makes an important point. Internal trade within our United Kingdom and with our closest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, would and does benefit all of us. The stronger that is, the better for my constituents and his.

Tom Hayes: I am proud to be the son of a Tipperary man and to be one of a very large Irish family who came over to the UK in the 1950s to provide an addition to our economy, tearing down some of the buildings that were bombed in the war and helping to rebuild Britain, adding to that contribution that my hon. Friend talks about, with many Irish people working in the national health service right now.

As Irish people, we know the pain and suffering of Irish football. One of my formative experiences was seeing the 1994 World cup effort, and I still have not quite recovered from that. Will my hon. Friend join me in wishing the Irish football team every success in the future and in commending 8 Sharp, an Irish and Celtic music band based in Bournemouth that provides fantastic music and cultural events across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend is wearing the England colours, so I will happily send best wishes to the Irish football team so long as England is not on the pitch.

As we give thanks to those who made a contribution to our country, it is only right that we acknowledge John “Paddy” Hemingway, a pilot in the battle of Britain who recently passed away at the age of 105. Mr Hemingway was a volunteer who joined the RAF and flew spitfires in the battle of Britain, not because of where he was from but because of the ties, whether geographical, cultural or historic, that bind us together. Those values, now shared, are more important than ever.

Mr Hemingway was one of 36 Irish pilots who fought in the battle of Britain, including Wing Commander Brendan “Paddy” Finucane, who was one of the RAF's most successful fighter aces in the war. They are a reminder to us that Britain did not stand alone against fascism as it rose on the European continent throughout the war. Despite our often complicated shared history, it is a shared history none the less; one that has seen the fates of all the people who live across these islands, whether in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or in the Republic of Ireland, bound together time and again.

It would not be right to ignore the history of these islands in a debate such as this. Nobody wants to dwell on the past; we must be honest, though, that war, death and division played a significant role in the story of British-Irish relations. How lucky are we, however, that times have changed? Northern Ireland, for all its political imperfections—who are we to pass comment on other people's jurisdictions, politically speaking—now has a functioning devolved Government led by the First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, and the Deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly. It has access to the UK internal market and to the European Union. It is on the tourist hit list and has made history.

I want to acknowledge the very strong women from both Unionist and nationalist traditions who politically have shown real leadership. I think of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna), Baroness Ritchie and Lady Hermon, formerly of this parish, alongside the former First Minister, Baroness Foster. I know that my mother-in-law, if she were watching—she may be—would be very clear that you should never mess with a woman from anywhere on the island of Ireland.

Political relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom have never been stronger, and that was evident in Dublin earlier this week, where the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee met a range of stakeholders, from former President Mary McAleese and her husband, Dr Martin McAleese, to former Taoisigh Leo Varadkar and Bertie Ahern. It was clear that ties east and west between Dublin and London are better and stronger, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister deserves much praise for his commitment to the British-Irish relationship, including hosting the first Saint Patrick's day reception at Downing Street just last week. As we talk about British-Irish relations, I acknowledge the British ambassador in Dublin, Paul Johnston, and his wife Nicola. Paul will return home later this year as his posting comes to an end and it is only fitting that the House acknowledges his service to our national interest.

Today's debate is not about the constitution or borders, or just to discuss the party political nature of, and situation in, Northern Ireland. However, we cannot

[Adam Jogee]

forget one of the greatest political developments in our shared history: the Good Friday agreement. A peace deal like no other, it remains the gold standard in diplomacy and one of the most significant peace processes in modern European history. After those terrible decades of tragedy and conflict, we now have peace on these islands because all sides came together, they compromised and they negotiated. There lies a lesson for all of us.

As the Prime Minister said on his first visit to Dublin since the election, the relationship between our two countries

“has never reached its full potential”.

It is time to unlock that potential. This new era of co-operation and friendship is all the more critical at a time when we must stand together with our closest allies who share our values.

I will quote Mr Hemingway on what he feels is his secret to achieving a long life; a secret I think my wife and some of the Members of this House might enjoy. He said:

“I can't say don't drink...I can't say don't fly aeroplanes. I can't say don't shoot and get shot at – I've done everything, and I'm an Irishman. The only advice I can give is to be Irish.”

In this case, I think we can apply “Northern Irish”, “British” and everything in between too.

Since my election as the Member of Parliament for Newcastle-under-Lyme, I have made clear my personal affection for the royal family and particularly for Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. On her first historic visit to the Republic of Ireland, at the state banquet in Dublin castle, she began her speech with the words “A Uachtaráin, agus a chairde”—President and friends. The British head of state standing in Dublin speaking words in Irish showed how much times had changed. Her late Majesty went on to say:

“Many British families have members who live in this country, as many Irish families have close relatives in the United Kingdom. These families share the two islands; they have visited each other and have come home to each other over the years.

They are the ordinary people who yearned for the peace and understanding we now have between our two nations and between the communities within those two nations; a living testament to how much in common we have.

These ties of family, friendship and affection are our most precious resource. They are the lifeblood of the partnership across these islands, a golden thread that runs through all our joint successes so far, and all we will go on to achieve.”

For all the challenges that remain, for all that we have yet to do, “family, friendship and affection”, as Her late Majesty put it, will see us through. Happy Saint Patrick's day, Madam Deputy Speaker. Here's to Northern Ireland and to the bonds of friendship between the Republic of Ireland and our United Kingdom.

1.38 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this debate. I feel I must check his entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, though, to see whether he is on the board of Irish Tourism or Tourism NI. It was a marvellous tour we had of so many wonderful places in Ireland.

I want to identify with all the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman expressed. I apologise for missing the start of his speech, but I think he was referring to Michael from the Irish embassy. Would that be correct?

Adam Jogee indicated assent.

Seamus Logan: I endorse the hon. Gentleman's remarks and pay tribute to all the embassy staff here in London.

I rise as a proud Irishman to speak in this debate celebrating the life and legacy of the late fourth or fifth-century man we know as St Patrick. But be aware that there may have been a number of people from the so-called dark ages who might have at least contributed to the legacy we now know. There is absolutely no doubt that it was Irish monks and missionaries who throughout that period kept Christianity alive, spread the good news and taught so much to so many through early versions of what we now call universities.

The efforts of St Patrick's disciples, maybe contemporaries, are felt to this day. Columba and Drostan had such an influence in Scotland, and my own church is named for St Drostan, while another local church celebrates Columba. Members will have heard of the book of Kells, but they may not have heard of the book of Deer—a handwritten copy of the Gospels written a little later. It is now in Cambridge University library, but it was written in the north-east of Scotland in a local village. I was raised within sight of the slopes of Slemish in County Antrim where, according to his own account, Patrick spent six years as a shepherd having been kidnapped by Irish pirates. They allegedly came from Dalriada, a Scottish kingdom ruled by the McDonnell clan.

There is much uncertainty about where Patrick was born. Was he Roman? Was he Welsh? Who knows and, to be honest, does it really matter? Patrick apparently escaped back home, and years later, now as a cleric, dreamt that the people of Ireland were calling him to return and walk among them. There are many stories about his life in Ireland. The one that always appealed to me was how he broke the law by lighting a pyre on the slopes of the Hill of Tara in County Meath—a privilege reserved to the high king of Tara at the time, as a fire on that spot could be seen for many miles and many counties across Ireland. But so impressed was said king by St Patrick that he allegedly converted on the spot.

Patrick is credited with teaching Christianity to the Irish people using the shamrock, with fasting for 40 days on top of Croagh Patrick in County Mayo, thus earning the right to judge the Irish at the end of time on the day of judgment. I think the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme may well have secured his future.

Patrick's legacy requires little acknowledgment from me other than to credit the eloquent speeches of other hon. Members speaking today, so in my brief contribution I will recall some personal St Patrick's day memories from the past 67 years. It was always a day on which one was released from the usual Lenten pledges, so as children we fogged the chocolate and sweets into us so hard that we almost made ourselves sick. Later, it became a day on which we would make the pilgrimage to Dublin, not necessarily for the St Patrick's day parade but for the all-Ireland club championship finals in football and hurling, which were played at Croke Park. I am pleased to say that my own local hurling team, the Cuchullains of Dunloy, contested that final on no fewer than five occasions; an amazing feat for a small village in north Antrim.

On other occasions I attended the schools' rugby cup final at Ravenhill—a tradition still carried on to this day on St Patrick's day, so for me, as Father Ted would

have said, that would be an ecumenical matter. There are many other memorable moments on this day, but a special one was sitting in a bar in Bariloche in Argentina listening on the radio to a live performance by my singer-songwriter daughter Aislinn at the London Irish Centre in Camden several thousand miles away.

I say to hon. Members: let us recognise and celebrate the life, legend and legacy of the man, or men, we call St Patrick—not least because it means so much to the more than half a million people who said in the last census that they were Irish and living on this island.

1.43 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing this important debate. This is, if I may say so to newer colleagues, always a good debate: I enjoyed last year's debate celebrating St Patrick's day and our wider Irish diaspora.

As the Member of Parliament for Luton South and South Bedfordshire, I am always pleased to recognise and celebrate the strong and proud Irish community in my constituency. Luton is a diverse and vibrant town made up of individuals with global ties, and the Irish connection that many hold is an intrinsic part of that social fabric.

From supporting the economic growth of our town by working in Luton's manufacturing industry, and by building homes, churches and schools, to their contribution to arts and culture, the Irish diaspora in Luton have contributed an immense amount and continue to do so. The post-world war two boom created a huge period of regeneration and building in the UK. Irish immigrants came in their thousands to work on motorway construction and in manufacturing jobs. Luton was no exception, and from 1951 to 1961, our Irish population more than tripled from 2,000 to over 7,000. That was primarily due to increased economic opportunity in the town, with Vauxhall Motors expanding in the 1950s and creating thousands more jobs.

At one stage, Vauxhall Motors became the single largest employer in the town, employing 22,000 people across Luton and Dunstable by the 1960s. I thank all the workers at Vauxhall in Luton; the final vehicles come off the production line this week, due to the sad closure of the plant. There were further job opportunities across Luton at Electrolux, manufacturing household appliances, and at Skefko, a ball-bearing manufacturer. Our Irish population is a core part of our workforce and plays a key role in workplace unions. I pay tribute to the local trade union representatives of Irish descent in my constituency, who continue to advocate for fair pay and working conditions.

There were also significant employment opportunities for Irish women. With the creation of the NHS in 1948, many Irish women came to Luton to work at the Luton and Dunstable hospital, fulfilling the need for more nurses as Luton's population grew. Indeed, the recently released *Irish Times* bestseller "Irish Nurses in the NHS: an oral history" features the stories of three women from our local Irish community: Betty Halfpenny and Roseanna Anderson, who came to the UK to be nurses, and Rosaleen Burke, a radiographer who worked at the L&D hospital for over 50 years. I was pleased to attend the book launch at the Irish embassy in London in

February, and to celebrate the contribution those women made to our town, and to the healthcare system more widely.

As the Luton Irish community grew, so did its lasting mark on our town's landscape, social scene and culture. In my constituency, the building of the Holy Ghost, St Margaret and Sacred Heart churches, to name just some of the Catholic churches in our town, highlighted the Irish community's desire to contribute something lasting to Luton. That was followed by the building of the associated schools, which provided education for pupils aged 5 to 18. They included Cardinal Newman high school, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), which opened in 1968 and prides itself on being

"a school of the community built by the community."

Today, these churches, schools and social spaces continue to be hubs at the heart of the community for the Luton Irish.

When it comes to the influence of Irish organisations, I cannot forget the vital role played by the Luton Irish Forum, a charity promoting Irish identity, culture and heritage. It also provides a range of support and wellbeing services to improve the quality of life for the Irish community and the wider population of Luton. That includes welfare support, debt advice and housing. It also holds mother and toddler groups, tea and chat sessions, arts and games clubs, and Irish dance and music clubs.

The Luton Irish Forum also recognises the economic contribution of our Irish community. In November, it held its first successful Irish business brunch, bringing together current and long-standing Irish businesses, supporters and other local connections to highlight the opportunities for business within the forum and its extended network. As our Labour Government focus on our mission for growth, such networks play a vital role locally, and I look forward to seeing our Luton economy thrive in years to come.

Of course, the Luton Irish Forum plays a key role in Luton's annual St Patrick's day festival, which is hugely impressive, if I do say so myself. I was delighted to join in the 26th annual celebration earlier this month, and enjoyed myself thoroughly. It was an amazing parade, with flags from every county of the emerald isle proudly on display. In true Luton style, the parade was led by a mash-up of Bhangra drums and Irish music and dancing. It was a beautiful representation of everything that Luton is about, and a coming together in celebration of all cultures.

Of course, we cannot forget St Brigid, the female patron saint of Ireland. In Luton, we celebrate her annually too: the Luton Irish Forum holds an afternoon tea and celebrates the Irish women in our community. This year, the theme was Irish wedding traditions, including the role of matchmaker, the Claddagh ring, and the bride's handkerchief being kept for her first child's christening bonnet.

I will end as I began, by thanking our Irish community in Luton for their enormous contribution to the local economy and their important work to enrich our community and ensure that the Irish connection in Luton remains strong from generation to generation. The connections between Luton and the island of Ireland continue. In the past, the main transport link may well have been the ferry, but nowadays London Luton airport enables that enduring connection to remain strong.

[*Rachel Hopkins*]

It ties our first, second, third and even fourth generation of Irish Lutonians back to Dublin, Cork, Knock, Kerry and Belfast, to name just a few places, and allows family ties and cultural influences to transcend distance. Our town is all the better for it.

1.50 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (*Rachel Hopkins*), who spoke so eloquently and passionately about the contribution of the Irish diaspora, particularly in Luton South and South Bedfordshire—a lot of souths are being spoken about today. We are also talking about the south of Ireland and its contribution to the success of our country, the United Kingdom.

It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (*Adam Jogee*) for securing a debate on St Patrick's day and Northern Irish affairs. I commend him for his years of support for British-Irish relations. I remember that when he was mayor of Haringey, he flew the Irish flag for St Patrick's day and celebrated that important occasion in the borough, and I thank him for that.

St Patrick's day is a great feast day when we come together as one Great British family to celebrate Saint Patrick, the patron saint of the island of Ireland—he is shared by Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That is an important point to make, because some people think that St Patrick is the patron saint purely of the Republic of Ireland, but as my cross of St Patrick cufflinks show, he is very much the patron saint of Northern Ireland, too.

I am also pleased to say that St Patrick's day is my birthday, so it is a special day for me. My family connections with Ireland run deep on my mother's side: my great-grandparents were Dempseys and O'Learys. Although I am very English, I am proud of my Irish ancestry.

As many of our Ulster Members know, St Patrick was a great saint whom we should aim to emulate. Fundamentally, this day reminds us of a figure who championed the Christian faith—a steadfast believer who went from the mainland to Ireland in order to cure the souls of natives. In his mission, he was a man of solemn sincerity, keeping his promise to God to convert the non-believers. He was also clearly a man of great forgiveness and reconciliation, because earlier in his life, he had been enslaved by the Irish, but he later went there with the mission of saving their souls for eternity. We can learn a great deal from the life of St Patrick.

There are many things that we as a nation could do to mark this important day and give it the gravitas it deserves. I strongly submit that St Patrick's day should be a national bank holiday, alongside all the other feast days of our kingdom's patron saints—St George's day on 23 April, St David's day on 1 March and St Andrew's day on 30 November. Not only would that be firmly in line with the position of Anglicanism as the unchallenged state religion, but it would reinforce the importance of all four corners of our nation. So, too, would the resurrection of the order of St Patrick, which was shamefully allowed to fall into abeyance many decades ago but remains a sovereign order of the United Kingdom. I hope that the

Minister will give that idea serious consideration. It would be wonderful if the royal order of St Patrick were restored. Should His Majesty decide to restore it for use in the United Kingdom, I am sure that many people would be worthy of it, including, more widely, Irish people who have contributed to relations between our two nations.

The feast day of St Patrick is not just about dressing in green, donning shamrocks and drinking Guinness; feast days are about how we value the native people of these islands, and their heritage, traditions and culture. That must be reflected in all our Great British traditions under one King and one flag. Indeed, it is my view that the Irish, Ulster-Scots and Anglo-Irish are very much part of our family within the great British Isles. All the people of these islands are deeply intertwined in every area of life. From blood and history to literature and music—and, of course, sport—we are fundamentally inseparable and should not only embrace our historical connection, but enhance it now and in future.

To that end, I was immensely proud to have chaired the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly from 2016 to 2022, when I was succeeded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (*Dame Karen Bradley*)—we worked together on that for many years. I am pleased to have recently been reappointed to BIPA. Its role is fundamental to advancing our shared economic, cultural and political prosperity, and I will continue to work with colleagues from all legislatures and Executives throughout British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly area to strengthen bonds between the inseparable nations and territories of the British Isles—England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man, the Bailiwick of Jersey and the Bailiwick of Guernsey—not forgetting Alderney and Sark.

Today, we must focus more on bringing together the four home nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and on reversing the constitutional backsliding in the British internal market. I have great sympathy with the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (*Jim Allister*) when it comes to that area of policy. Despite that, the inseparability of the mainland and Northern Ireland remains clear in so many facets of national life: blood, culture and King, to name but a few.

I commend Their Majesties the King and Queen for their outstandingly successful visit to Ulster recently. I praise the good people of Northern Ireland for providing such a heartening welcome and demonstration of local pride. I am sure that Their Majesties will treasure those memories for years to come. The Crown has also received a wonderful reception in the Republic of Ireland in recent years. Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II most notably visited Dublin for a state visit in 2011 and spoke Irish to the assembled dignitaries. That was a characteristic example not only of her exemplary good humour and reconciliatory nature, but also of the warmth and good will between all our peoples.

The Republic of Ireland is our friend, but we can be much closer and fully realise that we are, in all spheres of national operation, one family who share a unique group of islands. Indeed, Ireland could do much more work, alongside her British brother and loyal northern neighbour, in recognising that shared heritage and advancing the shared values and goals on the global stage, and emulating countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. I hope that one day, perhaps soon, the

people of the Republic of Ireland might choose to take their rightful place in the family of the Commonwealth of Nations, taking our deep neighbourly relations to the next level, to the benefit of both partners—and, I believe, having a bounteous benefit for global politics.

I also take this opportunity to send our greetings to the good people of the British overseas territory of Montserrat, who also celebrate St Patrick's day. St Patrick is also their patron saint, and they have the most wonderful celebrations on 17 March.

In my constituency, there are many people with heritage connected to the island of Ireland. There are several Roman Catholic churches and community groups in my constituency and throughout the London borough of Havering, which continue to cherish and celebrate the history and family connections with Ireland and celebrate the feast of St Patrick's day as a marker of this proud heritage. Although I have much sympathy with and support for the Anglican Church of Ireland—I have huge respect for it, as the Irish member of the Anglican communion—it is only right that I acknowledge the wonderful Irish Catholic community in my constituency.

I pay special tribute to St Peter's Catholic primary school on Dorset Avenue, in Romford, and to its headmistress, Mrs Jenny Waterfield, whom I have known for more than 20 years. I pay tribute to her for her leadership of this wonderful school and wish her well for what I believe is her impending retirement later this year.

I give a special note of thanks to the Roman Catholic church of St Edward the Confessor, and especially to Father Dominic Howarth, who has led his parish from strength to strength, most notably in the church's splendid architectural improvements, which have provided a beautiful space for worship for the whole community in Romford.

We also have the wonderful St Patrick's Catholic primary school and the church of Corpus Christi, along with the Collier Row Catholic Club, all of whom serve the community in Collier Row and the whole of north Romford. St Patrick's school welcomed me one year for my birthday, on 17 March, where I was absolutely thrilled to take part in the school's St Patrick's day celebrations, hearing the children sing Irish songs and watching them take part in traditional Irish tap dancing.

In Hornchurch, which is also partly within my constituency, our community is served by St Mary's Catholic primary school and St Mary Mother of God Catholic church on Hornchurch Road. I am always delighted to visit the church's annual Christmas fair and other celebrations throughout the year. I cannot forget the Iona social club—our Irish club—on Hornchurch Road, which is always at the heart of social gatherings and is a truly welcoming place for members of the whole community.

Although I have already mentioned the Anglican Church of Ireland, of which I am a great supporter, it would be remiss of me not to further underline the great contribution of the Anglo-Irish and Ulster Scots in Romford, of whom there are many. Like St Patrick, they originally came from the mainland to Ireland, and now they have come home. They remain my steadfast supporters and are some of the most loyal people in the kingdom. I have to admit that there is limited Orange tradition in my constituency—although I am wearing an orange tie today, which is no coincidence—but I do

often frequent a popular orange establishment there: The Orange Tree public house, in the village of Havering-atte-Bower.

We must do more to mark St Patrick's day on the mainland and encourage invigorated relations between all on these British Isles. With such deeply rooted blood ties between our islands, and with all that that entails culturally and politically, we must not let our relations dwindle. Rather, we must raise them to new heights and stand shoulder to shoulder like never before, to greet shared opportunities and challenges alike. I wish a belated very happy St Patrick's day to one and all.

2.4 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) on securing this very important debate. I am proud to be one of its supporters.

In Brent East, I think I have the largest Irish constituency in the whole of the UK, of which I am very proud. I do ensure that I go and have a Guinness every year, no matter where I am. I don't particularly like Guinness, to be honest. [*Laughter.*] I know! Once, when I was in Ireland, I asked for blackcurrant in my Guinness, and they wanted to throw me out of the pub—it was like a cardinal sin. I learned my lesson there. I also found out that I might own a little part of Kilkenny castle, being from the Butler family. If anybody watching this debate wants me to claim part of Kilkenny castle, I will happily come along and do that.

When my father and mother talked about when they came to this country, they spoke about the coldness they felt when they arrived. They were not just talking about the weather. They were talking about what they encountered when they went to try to rent a property and saw signs that said, "No blacks, no Irish, no dogs." It was in the face of that kind of injustice that my parents formed very strong links with Irish friends. They were all faced with the same kind of discrimination, and from that, relationships grew. We see that relationship in Brent especially, which has a large West Indian community, too.

The West Indian and Irish communities are very close. They share a love of fairness, music and laughter. This year's St Patrick's day celebration in Brent was held at the Learie Constantine centre, and was celebrated with the Montserrat high commission—the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) also mentioned Montserrat. That celebration is probably still going on, to be honest. They were having such a good time. It does show that unity is strength, and that when we are the majority, the people who seek to divide us cannot win, no matter the rhetoric that they care to use. It is important that we stand together.

The Irish concentration in my constituency is around Cricklewood, Kilburn and Wembley. We have heard today from other Members of the House that lots of Irish women came here and worked in the hospitals, on the buses and in caring roles, and that was no different in my constituency. A lot of the Irish men who came here worked in the construction industry, and in Brent we have one of the largest building materials merchants in the world—MP Moran. It has been going for more than 50 years, since it was founded by Mick Moran. It is a very successful business, of which I am very proud.

[Dawn Butler]

We have other Irish people in Brent who make us very proud. Colum Moloney, who was there at the celebration last week, was Brent's first Irish mayor—and boy, did we have a good time when he was mayor. I think he is the only mayor I found it a little hard to keep up with. We have Mike McGing, the director of the Brent Irish Advisory Service. *The Irish World* is actually based in Brent, and has been there for many years. We lost a wonderful businessman, Tony McGovern, who died last year. We had a nice visit last year from Ireland's first female President, Mary Robinson, who came to Brent. If anyone has not got the message by now, Brent is the place to be. Our next mayor, Ryan Hack, will be one of our youngest, and he is also proud and Irish.

Some of my best memories especially in the trade union movement are of singing Irish songs that last forever and ever. It is a beautiful thing to sing an Irish folk song into the wee hours of the morning. One of my mentors, Mary Turner, was an Irish dinner lady in the GMB who spent her whole life talking about free school meals and making sure that children do not go hungry in schools. I know she will be looking down on us and feeling very proud that a Labour Government and Mayor of London have been able to support and deliver that.

I wish everybody listening a belated very happy St Patrick's day. It is a chance for us all to recognise the history of our commonality and what makes us human, and to ensure that we continue to be united as a society.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Chamber seems empty without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), but I call the next-best Jim: Jim Allister.

2.10 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Since this debate is not just about St Patrick's day but about Northern Ireland affairs, I am surprised that I am the only Member of the House from Northern Ireland participating in it. That is a pretty poor situation.

Adam Jogee: I gently put it to the hon. and learned Member that he ought to correct himself slightly. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) is also from Northern Ireland. A number of colleagues who represent Northern Irish constituencies have sent apologies for having had to go home, no doubt to tend to their constituents. I put it on the record that they have made that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is in Westminster Hall this very minute. He has double-booked himself, as he would.

Jim Allister: I am aware that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is in residence at his second home. I am, however, the only Member present who represents a Northern Ireland constituency, if that satisfies the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee).

Of course, St Patrick is a very important figure historically. No doubt over the generations he has been even more greened than he ever was, but I do find it a

little rich in irony that St Patrick, being a Brit, is celebrated with such enthusiasm by the Irish. I think it is important, in talking about St Patrick, to recognise and remember that his primary contribution was in bringing the Christian message: the message that fallen man needs reconciliation with God, and that can come only through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was his essential message to Ireland and elsewhere.

It is also right, of course, that there are many intertwining relationships between the various parts of Ireland and the various parts of Great Britain. One can think of some of the standout indications of that, not least in the currency of the second world war, when the ports of Northern Ireland were so vital to the battle in the Atlantic and to defending our freedoms. Indeed, Northern Ireland welcomed the first American soldiers to be encamped, and they ran to many, many thousands in those years.

At the same time, sadly, the Republic of Ireland held to a strategy of non-involvement and neutrality. Therefore, it is always right to remember that in Great Britain's greatest hour of need—the United Kingdom's greatest hour of need—it was in fact the people and country of Northern Ireland who came swiftest to its aid. Whereas the Government of the Irish Republic formally, and quite shockingly, expressed regret at the death of Hitler, it was from within Northern Ireland that the contribution was made that the then Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, so generously recognised.

Of course, the relationships are multifaceted and it is easy to be cosy and sentimental about those relationships, and there is a place for that, but I do have to say to this House that there is also a dark side to the relationship, because the undoubted source for much of the initiation, conduct and carrying forward of the brutal IRA terrorist campaign of the 1970s, '80s and '90s was the aid and assistance given from the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, the historical records show that the Provisional IRA was first armed by those associated with the Irish Republic—even in government. Those are factors that I, representing constituents who lost family members at the hands of the IRA, cannot easily forget, and nor should we.

We talk about co-operation, and co-operation is good, but it is also a salutary fact that at the peak of those terrorist campaigns we did not have the co-operation we needed. Between 1969 and 1981 there were 81 extradition applications for wanted terrorists in respect of terrorist deeds committed in Northern Ireland—81 applications to the Dublin authorities—and only one was granted. Of course, the truth was that many of the cross-border terrorist attacks were carried out from the Irish Republic, among them the most infamous, that of the greatest loss of military life: the attack at Warrenpoint, where the bomb that killed all those Parachute Regiment and other regiment soldiers, was triggered from the Irish Republic. That was but a reflection of what happened time and again. When co-operation was sought, there might have been nice words but there was very little action, as indicated in the matter of extradition. So I think we have to inject into our reflections upon that relationship some of the cold realities that cost the lives of British citizens in Northern Ireland. That cannot not be written out of our history.

If we are to debate Northern Ireland affairs properly, it is surely impossible to ignore the incredible constitutional situation that Northern Ireland is now in: namely, that although I stand in what is called the sovereign Parliament

of the United Kingdom, there are 300 areas of law pertaining to Northern Ireland in relation to which neither this Parliament nor the devolved Parliament can make the law, because those powers, covering much of our economy, have been surrendered to a foreign Parliament, the European Parliament.

In pursuit of that, we now have the obscenity of an Irish sea border, shortly to be reinforced with the insult of a parcels border. A granny cannot send her new grandchild in Northern Ireland a teddy bear without registering it through the processes of the Irish sea border. Businesses in my constituency—small engineering businesses or craft industries—depend on supplies that come by parcel from their age-long suppliers in GB, but those parcels will now be subject to the demands of the foreign EU border. Those that send them must be a member, at cost, of the trusted trader scheme; they must make a customs declaration; and they must record what is moving, where it came from and where it is going. And yet this is said to be a United Kingdom. It is a United Kingdom sadly partitioned by a border in the Irish sea.

The point I am coming to is that much of that is at the behest of the authorities in the Irish Republic. It was the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic who pushed, cajoled and forced the EU into its irrational demands. At the beginning of the protocol negotiations, the EU was prepared for—indeed, it originated the idea—mutual enforcement to control the movement of goods. Sadly, it was Taoiseach Varadkar who saw the opportunity of partitioning the United Kingdom and who insisted on the border being pushed to the Irish sea, where the IRA could never push it in its 30 years of terror. It was the Dublin Government that made those irrational demands and repudiated the very thing that made that unnecessary: namely, mutual enforcement.

So yes, there is lots of nice fuzzy sentiment about how the Irish Republic and the UK have good relations in many areas, but the reality is that there has also been a malevolence to the detriment of Northern Ireland.

Seamus Logan: I may be getting on a bit now, but I do not recall some of the accusations that the hon. and learned Member is making about the role of the Irish Government in the negotiations that followed the Brexit vote. Will he clarify, for the purposes of the record, whether many Unionist elected representatives, some of whom sit in this Chamber, encouraged their supporters to vote for Brexit in June 2016? Did they not?

Jim Allister: They did, but they did not get Brexit—that is the fundamental issue. The question on the ballot paper was, “Do you want the United Kingdom to leave?” It was not, “Do you want GB to leave and to leave Northern Ireland behind?”, but that is what we got. We were left in the single market, under their customs code. Never forget that their customs code decrees that GB is foreign—a third country—so its goods must pass through the EU border because Northern Ireland is treated as EU territory. That was not on my ballot paper, and that was not what I voted for, but that is what the last Government left us, and that is what this Government seem unprepared to do anything about, even though it is not what they brought about.

So yes, let us celebrate the international relations that we would expect between neighbours, but let us not get so bleary-eyed that we do not recognise the realities and

the legacy of the history. We are talking about the wonderful relationship with the Irish Republic, but who is taking the United Kingdom to the European Court of Human Rights? It is the Government of the Irish Republic, over a legacy Act that this Government are not even pursuing. In any relationship, people look for two-way co-operation. They certainly do not look to try to exploit a situation to achieve the disassembly of part of the neighbouring country. Sadly, that is what is happening in respect of the Brexit negotiations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Liam Conlon to make the final Back-Bench contribution.

2.26 pm

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on securing the debate, and on all his efforts and leadership in championing the Irish in Britain and advocating for co-operative relationships with Northern Ireland for many years. Lá fhéile Pádraig sona daoibh—happy St Patrick's day.

St Patrick's day is no longer a day but a season. It starts sometime in early March, around the time of my birthday, and carries on for a full month. I think today's debate marks the end of it. I have “green fatigue” at this stage of the month, where I do not want to see any more St Patrick's paraphernalia, and certainly no Guinness, for quite a while. However, it has once again been a fantastic season, celebrating the best of the Irish community in Britain.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am the proud chair of the Labour Party Irish Society, and have been for the past five years. We represent the Irish community in Britain and champion strong co-operative relationships between Ireland and Britain, and Northern Ireland as well. Someone touched on the Good Friday agreement, and two years ago I was proud to open the Mo Mowlam film studio for cinematic arts at Ulster University in Derry. She was one of many great figures from our party who contributed to that peace agreement, which is in the DNA of the Labour party and I am very proud of that.

Many hon. Members have had a lot to say about Guinness as the sponsor of choice for St Patrick's day refreshments, but Jameson is also available and Tayto crisps are worth noting. Tayto are more than a crisp: they are a way of educating people about Ireland and Irish politics. A lot of people do not know that there are two types of Tayto, one from Northern Ireland and one from the Republic of Ireland—or, as I call them, the Nordie Tayto and the Free Stayto. That is always a good way of explaining things to people.

As I said in my maiden speech, I am proud to be London-Irish. That is the community that I grew up in and the community I want to pay tribute to today. I am also proud to represent Beckenham and Penge, the only constituency in London with a Gaelic place name, as “penge” means “edge of the woods”. We have a fantastic Irish community. All four of my grandparents are from Ireland: two grannies from the south and two grandads from the north. One granny was particularly proud and I was wondering what she would have done if she had still been alive when I was elected. I know for a fact that she would have gone to 9 am mass and then to 10.30 am mass, to make sure that everyone knew that her grandson had been elected as an MP.

[Liam Conlon]

A couple of years ago there was an exhibition at the London Irish Centre curated by the national charity, Irish in Britain, that for the first time that I can remember really told the story of the London-Irish community over several generations. The London Irish did as much as any community to build this great city. Irish navvies dug the underground, and Irish construction workers rebuilt our city after the war. I know that we have a fantastic construction industry in London, with so many Irish people involved, and today we have the founder of and members from the London Irish Construction Network, including Sean Daly and Frank O'Hare, here to watch the debate.

As was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, waves of thousands of young Irish women came to staff our hospitals at the birth of the NHS in this country. Those women, known as the Angels of Mercy, were often overlooked but essential to the NHS. I spent a lot of time in NHS hospitals as a teenager, especially the Royal London hospital and the Royal National orthopaedic hospital. My Irish dad would often look after me, and we would often encounter an Irish nurse. Before I could get treated, they had to establish how they knew each other. It would begin with, "What county are you from?", then, "What town are you from? Do you know so and so?" Once they had made that connection, we were free to get on with our day.

The Irish in Britain have maintained that relationship with the NHS ever since, and I am really proud that there are more Irish staff in the NHS today than staff from any other European country. Even if we think back more recently to the global health emergency of covid, it was an Irish woman, Professor Teresa Lambe, who co-developed the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. It was then Margaret Keenan, an Irish woman from Enniskillen living in Coventry and a former NHS nurse, who became the first person in the world to have the vaccine. The Irish connection to the NHS is really deep and strong, and our community is incredibly proud of it.

However, the exhibition also charted the history of how the Irish community was received here, which, as has been touched on, was not always easy. Alongside the Windrush generation and the West Indian community—it is important to remember that there has been a lot of solidarity between those communities—it was often treated with suspicion and subjected to discrimination, including through signs that read "No blacks, no dogs, no Irish".

However, the London Irish community and the Irish community across Britain today is a community transformed. It is confident in the contributions it makes to every aspect of life in Britain—economic, political, social and cultural. The Irish community help to make our country the great place it is to live. I extend that beyond London to the home counties as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), who is here today but cannot take part in the debate, has long been a champion of Irish contributions to Reading football club and to the Reading Irish Centre, which I have been to and which does incredible work to support the Irish community in Reading.

As well as celebrating the contributions of the Irish community in Britain, I will touch on a campaign I started in the last few weeks to secure justice for

13,000 survivors of Ireland's mother and baby homes living in Britain. We often need to remember the reason why lots of people left Ireland and decided to come to Britain. For some, it was for work or to be with friends and family, but in the case of thousands of women who were sent to those homes for the perceived sin of becoming pregnant outside marriage, it was to escape those institutions and the stigma that often came with having been in one.

More than 13,000 survivors live in Britain today, both women and the children who were born into the institutions. They were subjected to some of the most horrific mistreatment and abuse in those homes. Women were used as unpaid labour, and their children were often forcibly adopted. I have named my Bill "Philomena's law", after Philomena Lee, who I felt brought that story to a global audience in the film "Philomena", in which she is portrayed by Dame Judi Dench. We had an event on an evening two nights ago in a packed room in Parliament to which survivors came and told their stories. It was incredibly powerful to hear from them about the impact that that has on them many years later.

I hope the Government will listen to the proposals we are putting forward. At the moment, if the survivors accept the compensation payment they have been awarded by the Irish Government, but are in receipt of means-tested benefits, they will lose that compensation. I heard from survivors this week, and that has actually become an additional burden for many of these women, who are now often in their 80s or 90s, and some of them are very vulnerable.

I will go back to the Irish in Britain. We see the pride of the second-generation Irish community, of which I am part, and the growth of Irish culture and its importance right across Britain in the growth of the Gaelic Athletic Association. It is not just people of Irish heritage who get involved, but people from all communities and backgrounds who participate in GAA. There is also the Irish language; people are adopting Irish names. My cousin Jordan and his partner Annie had a baby a couple of weeks ago—a little girl—and I congratulate them. They have named her Fiadh, which is Irish for "wild"—I think she will take after her dad.

It is common that people are very proud of their heritage often several generations back. We have seen that in Irish music and culture, where for years the Irish community was subjected to discrimination. We are now in a period where we can turn on the TV on a Friday night and watch Graham Norton on BBC One and "Derry Girls" on Channel 4, which is a representation of how far the Irish community has come. We see it in trade unions and in the labour movement as well: there was a period a year or two ago when the general secretary of every single major trade union in this country was either first-generation or second-generation Irish.

There is no more visible transformation in the confidence of the London Irish community over time than in the growth of the Mayor of London's St Patrick's day parade. I was very proud to take part in that this month with our mayor, Sir Sadiq Khan. More than 50,000 people joined and participated in that parade, and London was awash with green.

To sum up, what makes the Irish community so special for me is that it is an inclusive and welcoming community. At the entrance to the exhibition at the London Irish Centre two years ago, there was a plaque that read:

“Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine”, which means “In the shelter of each other, the people live”. It is an Irish proverb that sums up what makes our community in Britain so special and sums up neatly the Irish contribution to making our country the great place it is to live. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme for securing this debate, and I thank everyone who has taken part in it.

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

2.36 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank other hon. Members and the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for what has been a really lovely debate. This is my first time participating in this debate, and I have been quite surprised by how genuinely lovely it has been and by the outpouring of love for the Irish community both across these isles and in the Republic of Ireland. That has been really lovely to hear.

I was slightly concerned that we would get through the debate without mentioning anything about Irish music, so when the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) started talking about Irish music I was frankly relieved. Music was such a big part of my life when I was growing up. I discovered Irish music largely in a bar in France over many, many late nights when I lived there for a while. It went on late, or maybe early—I do not know; it was 1 o'clock or sometimes 3 o'clock in the morning when it finished. The sound of the fiddle and the joyful music was really amazing, and I have kept up that love of Irish music. I thank Ireland for giving us that music and for making it so enjoyable.

I was also slightly concerned because the debate is about Northern Irish affairs as well as the wonderful things about St Patrick's day—I also enjoy partaking of some Guinness. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) then spoke up and started saying something that I wanted to say. While there are some amazing things about Ireland and our relationship with it, there are also things that perhaps are not working quite as well as they could. In a debate about Northern Irish affairs, we should acknowledge that. In that spirit, without wishing to take away from some of the loveliness of this debate, I have a few things to say along those lines. I hope hon. Members will forgive me, but they are important to raise.

I will start by talking about something very current; it happened earlier on this week. I pay tribute to the police and to schools for their swift and professional response to a hoax that forced nine schools in Northern Ireland to close this week. Teachers, parents and pupils can frankly do without the disruption and anxiety that such hoaxes cause. They have other things that they need to concentrate on—the importance of education must never be underestimated—so I am glad that things were able to return to normal quickly.

Northern Ireland did not vote to leave the European Union. Some 56% of its population wanted to stay, yet the decisions taken by the Conservative Government in implementing Brexit have caused nothing but problems, whether along the border, inside Stormont or with trade. While Northern Ireland enjoys access to the United Kingdom's and the European Union's markets, the Conservatives' Brexit deal—a botched deal, I am

afraid—has been a disaster for the economy, hitting small businesses, farmers and fishers particularly badly. Although we welcomed the agreement of the Windsor framework, that deal is just a sticking plaster—one that only exists to fix problems caused by the Conservative party. What is really needed is something much more comprehensive and stronger.

For Northern Ireland—as for Scotland, Wales and England—a closer relationship with our European allies will bring nothing but positives, but in our opinion, the Labour Government are failing to take a pragmatic approach to the UK's relationship with the EU. An easy step forward would be alignment on sanitary and phytosanitary standards and securing a veterinary agreement, which the Liberal Democrats are calling for as part of our plan to fix what we believe is the UK's broken relationship with Europe. As such, we call on the UK Government to take the following two steps: to use the provisions within the UK-EU trade agreement to secure a veterinary agreement, and to enshrine alignment with EU SPS standards in domestic law. The EU already has two veterinary agreements in place, one with New Zealand and one with Switzerland. Such agreements are not particularly novel and certainly not impossible to achieve, so it is difficult to understand what is holding the Labour Government back.

Fixing our relationship with Europe is the most important way to boost our economy and accordingly provide funding to fix public services, yet Labour continues to rule out even simple steps, such as those I have outlined or, indeed, a youth mobility scheme. Such a scheme would not be a return to free movement, as the Prime Minister has suggested; it would be a way to support our young people to develop the skills and experiences they need to help grow the UK economy as a whole. Ulster University's economic policy centre has published a report that looks at what future skills employers will need, and at the potential supply gaps. Northern Ireland needs more than 5,000 additional workers a year in order to grow its economy, so a youth mobility scheme between the UK and the EU is the perfect way to fix that problem. These proposals would go a long way towards reducing the friction caused by the Brexit deal. In a world in which the Labour Government talk endlessly about the tough choices they need to take, a youth mobility scheme feels like an open goal—we just need Labour to lace up its boots and kick the ball into it.

However, we are also calling on the Government to negotiate a new trade deal with the UK with a new customs union at its heart, which would tear down red tape and boost our economy. Boosting the economies of both Northern Ireland and the whole of the UK means more revenue to fix public services that desperately need fixing, especially in the context of power sharing only having been restored just over a year ago, following two years without a functioning Executive during a cost of living crisis. The Liberal Democrats' four-step road map provides a path for the UK to rebuild its ties of trust and trade with our European neighbours. Ultimately, Liberal Democrats want to see the UK back at the heart of Europe once more, setting the agenda from within rather than battling the constraints from without.

Turning to the welfare cuts that were announced last week and deepened further yesterday, it is hard to overstate how strongly opposed Liberal Democrat Members are to those cuts and, importantly, how concerned we

[*Marie Goldman*]

are about what they mean practically for those impacted. We agree that we have to bring the welfare bill down and support more people into work—it is right for people and for our economy—but the emphasis should be on supporting people into work. We will not achieve that by slashing support for disabled people, some of whom will never be able to work, while others need the personal independence payment precisely so that they can continue to work.

These cuts will have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland, and particularly on those still living with the legacy of the troubles, including victims with catastrophic injuries and those suffering from trauma-related mental health issues. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) has been highly vocal on this issue, describing the cuts as “cruel and cowardly” and highlighting that balancing the books should not come at the expense of the most vulnerable. Limiting the eligibility of these people will do nothing to get more people into employment.

Liberal Democrats have long said that the best way to bring down benefit spending is to fix health and social care, and fix it quickly. That involves investing in preventive health measures by properly funding mental health support, especially for young people, and reforming social care—surely that should be the priority. However, when it comes to healthcare reform in Northern Ireland, the spanner in the works remains political instability. Since devolution began in its most recent form 25 years ago, Stormont has been without a functioning Government for almost 40% of the time. It has had prolonged collapses—in 2000, from 2002 to 2007, from 2017 to 2020, and most recently from 2022 to 2024. It is the people of Northern Ireland, no matter what community they are from, who bear the brunt of a malfunctioning Government. This never-ending cycle prevents the transformative action that is necessary to get Northern Ireland’s public services and finances in order.

There is also the cost of maintaining a divided society, estimated in 2016 to be at least £833 million annually. That cost stems from duplicated services, additional policing and security expenses, and missed opportunities for investment and tourism. Those unnecessary costs are a drain on the Executive’s already stretched budget; it would be far better to spend that money on improved healthcare, easing the pressures caused by the cost of living, and essential services.

Earlier this year, the hon. Member for Lagan Valley held a Westminster Hall debate on the reform of political institutions in Northern Ireland, in which she outlined the ways in which reforming those institutions will allow Northern Ireland to become more prosperous. Addressing the financial burden of division could unlock substantial funding for public services. We echo her calls for an updated assessment of the societal and financial costs of division, and a commitment from all parties to tackling those costs. That would ensure that money is spent where it is needed most, and that we could deliver a more inclusive, united and integrated community for everyone. Northern Ireland cannot afford to keep paying for a divided system in which essential services struggle.

In closing, I underline that the Liberal Democrats are entirely committed to fairness, sustainability, and a shared future for Northern Ireland. We call for real

action on welfare support, movement back towards our European neighbours, and a focus on tackling division and addressing issues in political institutions in order to boost public spending. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches have a positive vision for a more prosperous, inclusive and forward-looking Northern Ireland—a vision that I hope all Members of this House will share, regardless of their views about how to get there.

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

2.46 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It has been an enormously enjoyable debate. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). From the perspective of Conservative Members, he is one of a depressingly large wave of new entrants into this place, but he has definitely marked himself out as one to watch. He produced a tour de force—a wide-ranging review of the historical community ties between the nations of the British Isles.

The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) gave us a very interesting history of St Patrick. I certainly learned more from his speech than I was able to find in my Wikipedia search in preparation for this debate—that is an admission. The hon. Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins), who is, I think it is fair to say, a proud trade unionist, and other Labour Members highlighted the strong connection between people of Irish descent and the trade union movement—so though that movement has not all been good, some of it has been.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) called with great force and, in my submission, quite rightly for a bank holiday to celebrate St Patrick. If the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme put forward a proposal to celebrate both St Patrick’s day and St George’s day as bank holidays, I would be one of the first to support him. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford also mentioned the now defunct order of St Patrick, and his campaign to reinstate it. That sounds like a sensible thing to do. He made reference to the green of St Patrick. From my research on Wikipedia, I learned that St Patrick’s colour was actually blue, not green. Green is a development of the most recent centuries, so we might have to do a bit of work there.

The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) celebrated—boasted about, frankly—having the largest Irish diaspora of any UK constituency. She highlighted, as did others, the huge contribution that people of Irish descent have made to the local economy and the local community. I will skip to the hon. Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon), who spoke of the Tayto diaspora and celebrated the London Irish community. He made an eloquent plea for support for his campaign on Philomena’s law.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) rightly described the significant contribution of Northern Ireland to this nation’s fight for freedom in the second world war, but he went on to recognise some darker aspects of the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and of the east-west relationship, and I do not think he was wrong to do

that. If we are to have a mature relationship built on trust and respect, we need to recognise each other's weaknesses, as well as being sentimental about our shared history. We should be clear-eyed and recognise the failings of others, as well as ourselves, in our shared history. While I do not agree with everything he said, there were points when I thought, "Yes, you are quite right. We should be clear-eyed about this."

That takes me to St Patrick. His day, 17 March, is forever linked in my family with my father, Patrick Mayhew, who was half-Irish. It was a red letter day in my family's calendar. Wherever we were in the world, we would always ring up or get in touch with my father to wish him a happy St Patrick's day. St Patrick was, in fact, a Briton. I knew that, but I did not know until I prepared for this debate that that he was captured by Irish pirates and taken forcefully as a slave to Ireland. Whatever his experience there, he cannot have hated it too much, because he then voluntarily returned to bring Christianity to Ireland and to drive out the snakes. That is an early example of cross-border cultural mixing that has been to our mutual benefit.

The latest census suggests that more than 400,000 Irish-born people live in the UK. Ireland is, of course, our closest neighbour by geography, by culture, by family connection and by friendship. That has led to a historical interlinking of our economies—an interlinking that can be developed further. As of 2023, some £78.8 billion of trade flowed between our nations. The United Kingdom is Ireland's largest trading partner, and Ireland is the sixth-largest trading partner of the United Kingdom.

We cannot pretend, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim rightly pointed out, that there are not continuing economic and political challenges in the relationship between our countries. I therefore welcome the close political co-operation, east-west and, increasingly, north-south. Speaking from a personal perspective, I recognise some of his comments about the difficulties of dealing with the Irish state back in the 1980s. In those days, I well recall the then Attorney General expressing considerable frustration at extradition applications being refused because of typing errors and grammatical inconsistencies. That is just a little historical note that I wanted to add to the account given by the hon. and learned Member.

We had a UK-Ireland summit as recently as 6 March, and it was noticeable that the Taoiseach said:

"we make the greatest progress when our two governments work together, particularly to support peace, prosperity and reconciliation on this island. Rooted in our commitments as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, I am confident that today marks a new chapter in the Irish British relationship."

That is what this debate, among many others, is doing. It powerfully supports a bringing together of our two nations, and a focus on and recognition of our shared history and future. May St Patrick inspire us all to further friendship and co-operation across the British Isles.

2.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): It is my pleasure to respond to this debate, which establishes the point that St Patrick's is a season that goes on beyond St Patrick's day. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for recognising the importance of allocating time to debate St Patrick's day

and Northern Ireland affairs, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), who is from Dublin originally, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), who is on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, on securing the debate. As he said in his opening tour de force, he has relatives from Northern Ireland and his wife is from Northern Ireland.

Like them and so many people across the United Kingdom, I have roots on the island of Ireland, as two of my grandparents are from Northern Ireland—they are from Eglinton and Newcastle, County Down—and I am married to a London Irishman. I also represent 2,500 Irish-born constituents, and over 3,000 Irish passport holders, in my constituency of Putney.

The link between our isles is found in St Patrick's life as well. There is a stained-glass window of St Patrick just outside the Chamber, as he is the patron saint for Ireland and Northern Ireland, but he came from either Wales or Scotland—Scottish MPs claimed that he came from Scotland in a recent debate. His story is well known, and the good news that he brought to the island 1,500 years ago is celebrated by so many people from all communities across the island of Ireland—and by people from around the world, who also celebrate the contribution of people from Northern Ireland and Ireland to their community.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon for highlighting the contribution of people from the island of Ireland to so many constituencies, the work of many Irish centres—including in west London, Luton and Reading—and people's personal memories of St Patrick's days past. The order of St Patrick has been mentioned, as has the contribution of NHS nurses. A recent book about NHS nurses begins with a nurse from Ireland going to Putney, where she receives a warm welcome and begins her nursing career. People from the island of Ireland have made important contributions to construction, music, culture, politics, hospitality and business.

Like many hon. Members, I have attended many St Patrick's day events across London and Belfast this month, including the Anglo-Irish event at Stormont, the Champ event here in Parliament, and the debate organised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) last Tuesday. I also attended the Mayor of London's St Patrick's day celebrations in Trafalgar Square, which saw thousands of people taking to the streets and, whatever their background, becoming Irish for a day. I thank the Mayor, Sir Sadiq Khan, for putting on that event.

Meanwhile, the Secretary of State has been in the United States to champion Northern Ireland to the US Administration and Congress, as well as to wider Irish America. He is using his platform to promote Northern Ireland as a great place to live, study, work and do business. Last week, the Government took that further by hosting the first ever St Patrick's day reception in No. 10, where we welcomed leaders from the business community, the voluntary sector, the arts and entertainment, and had a Guinness bar.

More broadly, I have had the pleasure of travelling to Northern Ireland for many years. At first, I did so in a personal capacity, but I have been able to mix business with pleasure since my appointment as Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I like to pack as much as

[Fleur Anderson]

possible into my trips, and I have clocked up 26 visits and over 140 engagements there since July last year. Every visit reinforces the sense that Northern Ireland is exciting and thriving. Through its small and medium-sized businesses, world-class education system, active community sector, and thriving hospitality and tourism businesses, it is leading the way for the United Kingdom in so many ways.

As many other Members have said, our relationship with the Irish Government is key to supporting businesses and communities in Northern Ireland, and that is what the Secretary of State and I have prioritised. Ireland is our closest geographical neighbour and our sixth-largest trading partner. Our commitment is clearly illustrated by the Prime Minister and Taoiseach-led UK-Ireland summit, which took place in Liverpool earlier this month—the first of its kind. Building on our co-guarantorship of the Good Friday agreement, the summit established new co-operation in the areas of trade, security, climate and technology—co-operation that will benefit people across the islands right up to 2030. A new UK-Ireland youth forum was also started. I look forward to continuing our engagement through other Good Friday agreement forums, including the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which has been mentioned.

I can think of no better example of our family ties working to best effect than the culmination of the shared UK and Irish efforts in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday agreement. In these times of conflict around the world, the Good Friday agreement remains a globally respected success in conflict resolution. Ceasefires can be negotiated, peace can be won and a route to maintaining that peace through politics can be found. Political courage and public support for that courage are essential. Although there remains more to be done, I am pleased to say that since the signing of the agreement Northern Ireland has become, and is becoming more and more every day, a more reconciled place.

The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and I are deeply committed to safeguarding political stability in Northern Ireland. Many Members across the Chamber know all too well the importance of having a stable devolved Government in Northern Ireland. Through the “Safeguarding the Union” Command Paper, we are delivering on UK promises in respect of Northern Ireland. We are implementing the Windsor framework and are working towards an SPS veterinary agreement, a matter that was raised by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman). Most recently, we have established Intertrade UK, and the East-West Council is meeting shortly. We have digitised the *Belfast News Letter* and rolled out new training materials for civil servants to ensure that they have a full understanding of the significance of the Good Friday agreement and successor agreements. The Secretary of State and I will continue to deliver this work with all of the community.

Transforming public services is a priority for our work with the Northern Ireland Executive. We have recently announced £129 million of public service transformation funding, to be spent predominantly on health but also on special educational needs and other projects. We are sharing expertise, best practice and success stories, and it is on this work beyond funding

that Governments can work together to ensure that the Executive seizes every one of the opportunities to transform public services. Legacy is also a priority. It is a strongly felt issue that touches the lives of so many. The UK Government consider co-operation with the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government essential to finding an agreed way forward.

Northern Ireland is a unique and very special place. The warmth of its people, the creativity of its youth, the prestige of its industry, the charm of its landscape and the potential of its economy know no bounds. It is a privilege to be the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and this Government and I will continue doing all we can to best improve the lives of each and every person who calls Northern Ireland home—from Kilkeel to Coleraine, from Belleek to Bangor and from the causeway to Clogher.

3.2 pm

Adam Jogie: I am grateful to all colleagues who have taken part in this debate. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell), for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) and for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for their interventions.

I am grateful to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for taking part. I am sorry that he did not like my speech. I have not been called “fuzzy” or “bleary-eyed”, but I have been called warm, so I shall take that. He gave a speech very much in the spirit in which he tends to speak, and I am sure his colleagues up at Stormont miss him very much indeed.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), who gave a very good speech. He shared some stories, and I suspect there are a few more that we will hear some other time. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) showed herself to be the tenacious champion that we know she is for the Irish community in her constituency.

The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) ought not to do away with his inner Irishness—blood is thicker than water. He made a very strong case for the restoration of the order of St Patrick, and auditioned very well to be one of its first recipients. My father shares a birthday with him on 17 March, so we will be friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) made a very good speech sharing the story of the Irish in her part of the world. She did say—I have written it down—“Brent is where it’s at,” but I do not think she has yet been to Newcastle-under-Lyme.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), for his contribution and for putting a target on my back, which is a great way to get my colleagues on this side of the Chamber to be my friends. I thank him none the less, and I pay tribute to his late father, who was of course Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I thank the Minister for her remarks; I also thank the Liberal Democrats spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), who perhaps merged two speeches from this week in her contribution, which we welcome none the less.

This has been an excellent debate. I look forward to all hon. Members coming together for a similar one in March 2026, as we celebrate Northern Ireland and the relationship between our United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered St Patrick's day and Northern Irish affairs.

Modern Slavery Act 2015: 10th Anniversary

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee on 25 March 2025, on Modern Slavery Act: ten-year review, HC 758.]

3.5 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con) [R]:
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the tenth anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

It is an honour to open this debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and thank all right hon. and hon. Members and Friends who supported the application for it. I also want to put on the record my gratitude to the many parliamentarians and former parliamentarians who got us to the point at which we were able to have a Modern Slavery Act 2015.

First and foremost is the noble Baroness May, without whose leadership we simply would not have achieved what we did, but she did that on the back of support from so many parliamentarians who had gone before her, starting, of course, with Anthony Steen. As special adviser to the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee and to the Home Affairs Committee, and as the driving force behind the Human Trafficking Foundation, he has been ever-present and omnipresent in this field. He was very ably supported by Peter Bone, who set up the first all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, which I am now very proud to co-chair with the noble Baroness Butler-Sloss, another true legend in this area.

I pay tribute to Frank Field, who was a wonderful advocate and with whom I worked so incredibly closely both as a Minister and as a Back Bencher. He led parliamentary efforts as the first chair of the Speaker's advisory committee on the Modern Slavery Act and how we implement it here in Parliament. In addition, I pay tribute to the noble Lord Randall, who supported Anthony Steen and others and now chairs the Human Trafficking Foundation; Maria Miller, who worked on the review of the Modern Slavery Act, along with Baroness Butler-Sloss and Frank Field; Lord Coaker, who chaired the Select Committee before me; and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) who, through his social justice work, was a real advocate. The final person I want to pay tribute to, who is so sadly no longer with us, is James Brokenshire. He was my predecessor as modern slavery Minister and he really did start the work to get us to the point where we had a Modern Slavery Act.

I cannot quite believe that it was 10 years ago. I think I might be the only person in the Chamber who was here at that time, but 26 March 2015—it was 10 years ago to the day; it was a Thursday—was the very last day before Parliament prorogued for the 2015 general election. We had been working on the Bill. It had undergone every kind of proper scrutiny and was an exemplar for how legislation should be done: pre-legislative scrutiny, a draft Bill and work done with the Select Committee and others. It also had cross-party support.

As is always the case with any comprehensive piece of proposed legislation, there were areas where changes were looked at, and there was quite a lot of ping-pong between this place and the other place. As the Minister,

[*Dame Karen Bradley*]

I spent far more time than I ever expected standing at the Bar and hoping that by being there I could convince their lordships to support the Government's position. We had two real sticking points. One was on the treatment of those in the United Kingdom who were on an overseas domestic worker visa; the other was whether every child victim should have an independent child trafficking advocate.

I pay tribute to the noble Lord Bates, who was the Lords Minister at that time. His powers of diplomacy and skill in navigating the other place are legendary. He got us to the point at which we were the final piece of legislation to get Royal Assent in that Parliament. I remember being in one of the offices in Marsham Street, where we all sat with bated breath. Although we knew that we had got through it, nobody quite believed it until "La Reyne le veult" was finally announced and the Modern Slavery Bill became an Act of Parliament. As well as those parliamentarians, I pay tribute to all the officials in the Home Office who worked so hard. It was a real mission for them, and it would not have been possible without an incredible team effort. I thank everybody who got us there.

It is unbelievable to me that 10 years on, I am still asked, "What is modern slavery?" I sometimes feel slightly cross that I still have to explain it, but it is important that we keep reflecting what it is. It is slavery, plain and simple. We all understand what slavery is. It is slavery happening today. It is a financial crime; it is invariably for financial gain. It is the exploitation of one human being by another human being for financial gain. It is a coercive crime, and it is happening globally. There are estimated to be 50 million victims globally and more than 100,000 victims here in the UK. I hate to say this, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I can assure you that it will be happening in your towns, villages and cities. It will be round the corner, happening to people you come across in your everyday life.

I urge everybody who is listening and everybody who is here—they are here because they care about this, and I am grateful to all of them—to educate wherever they can. One of the things I am proudest of is the posters—many Members here will not see them because they are male—in women's toilets at airports or stations that say, "Are you a victim of slavery?" We came up with that in the Home Office because we realised that a victim of slavery who is with the perpetrator in the queue at the immigration line at the airport has nowhere to go to get help, apart from the ladies' lavatory, where their perpetrator will not follow them. As the Minister will know, the perpetrators are very often male, although as we heard in our evidence session on Tuesday in the Home Affairs Committee, there is always at least one woman on every indictment. Women are perpetrators as well, but we needed to find somewhere to get those women the support they need.

This is a crime that is happening everywhere. I have to make the point that it is not a migration crime. There is a laziness in the language used around trafficking, particularly by media commentators who talk about human trafficking when they mean people-smuggling. People-smuggling is a consensual crime. Those people are victims of a crime, but they are almost victims of fraud rather than being coerced into doing something

against their will. It is very much like the difference between someone who gets sick from taking drugs because their drink has been spiked against their knowledge and someone who takes illegal drugs they have bought and is sick. There is a policy response to each of those cases, but it has to be different. The policy response for victims of trafficking cannot be confused with the policy response for victims of the crime of people smuggling. People-smuggling is a crime that we need to tackle, and it is right that Governments control their borders, but we must separate the two. That should be done at law enforcement level, at the Home Office and at other policy Departments. These two issues cannot be confused.

What did the Act do? I have a copy of it with me. It is the first time I have looked through the Act for quite some time. I am getting goosebumps but also feeling slightly nauseous at what we went through to get there. I am incredibly proud of it. It introduced the new offences of trafficking and exploitation. I pay tribute to Caroline Haughey KC, who came before the Committee on Tuesday and who helped to write those offences. The offences were very carefully drafted to ensure we could get the maximum number of prosecutions, and they were written with a view to juries being able to understand them.

There is a push at the moment to change the trafficking definition to not include movement. The reason we have an exploitation offence and a trafficking offence is that a jury will think of trafficking as involving movement. That is why there is also an exploitation offence that does not involve movement, so that prosecutors can get successful prosecutions. I am not sure that that change is necessary. The maximum sentence for these offences was previously 14 years, but the Act changed that to life imprisonment, which was a really important move.

Protections for victims have improved. For example, we introduced a statutory defence, to ensure that victims come forward, which is incredibly important. Civil protection orders were also introduced, as were measures to enable law enforcement to more easily access the financial assets of perpetrators, which also included reparation orders. This was done because the only way to break this crime is to break the business model. There were also new duties on public agencies.

The Act introduced the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Independent child trafficking advocates are included in the legislation, although it took a long time for us to get them there. The other piece of landmark legislation was the "transparency in supply chains" measure in section 54. This had not initially been in the Bill. For example, it was not there when I stood at that Dispatch Box and closed the debate on Second Reading, but it was introduced during the passage of the Bill. This was the measure that everybody wanted to see included. Importantly, though, it was not a stand-alone measure; it was part of a modern slavery strategy that had been published the year before. It was based on the "four Ps" approach to tackling crime: pursue, prevent, protect and prepare. There was so much in the modern slavery strategy beyond what was in the legislation. The legislation was landmark, but it was only a very small part of what was being done.

In 2015, when the Modern Slavery Bill was enacted, it was world-leading. We were the first country to have a consolidated Modern Slavery Act, the first country to

have transparency in supply chain legislation, and the first country that had this as a priority for Government. But the world has moved on. As we all know, criminals always move more quickly than the legislation. When we introduced the legislation, county lines were not a phenomenon. Although the offences in the Act are very appropriate for the perpetrators of county lines offences, the protections for victims simply do not fit the crimes that are perpetrated in county lines.

The issue of small boats was not a phenomenon. It simply was not there when we introduced the Act. However, I do want to make it clear that there is very little evidence that the people travelling on small boats are victims of trafficking—this was seen in the Home Affairs Committee. They are victims of the crime of people-smuggling. The problem is that the measures taken to stop the small boats have a chilling effect on those who are genuine victims of the coercive crime of human trafficking. That can mean that they do not come forward and that they will not provide the evidence that is needed to stop the perpetrators. That makes it harder to detect the crime and to give the protection to victims. This is a real opportunity for traffickers. Somebody may have paid the people smugglers to get them into the UK, but when they get here, they cannot legitimately work and they cannot find the support that they need. They are also in debt, and that indebtedness and the inability to work legally means that they then become victim of traffickers. But, as I have said, that was not a phenomenon we knew of at the time.

Orphanage trafficking is another issue. It is a global issue that we are only just getting to terms with in the United Kingdom. We do not feel that the issue has affected us, but in reality more than 5 million children, who are not orphans, are currently living in orphanages. They are living in orphanages that have been set up to raise money. They have tourists visiting them and gap year students working there. They are there for the financial gain of those who have set up these orphanages.

Australia has led the way in tackling that issue. I wish to pay tribute to Senator Linda Reynolds, who is standing down from the Australian Parliament in the next few days. She has been a real leader on this. At the Inter-Parliamentary Union, she has passed resolutions that have been adopted. I hope the Minister will look favourably on amendments that I might bring forward to the Crime and Policing Bill, or to a private Member's Bill, that try to get the issue of orphanage trafficking into our legislation. The people who want to support the orphanages do so with the best of intentions—they want to help the poor children—but this is actually a fraud. These children are not orphans. More than 5 million children from south-east Asia and South America have been taken away from their families and are being used to raise money for fake organisations.

When we brought in the section 54 measure on transparency in supply chains, although California had such a measure, it was the first time that a national Government had introduced one. Quite deliberately, it was a light touch provision—we had to prove that it would work and be effective—but the time has come for it to be tightened. I am disappointed that on Tuesday we were unable to pass the amendment on the use of Uyghur labour in the supply chain for solar panels and so on.

The US has the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act 2021 and its hot goods provisions, whereby items cannot even enter the US market unless the importer can prove that there was no slavery in the supply chain. I urge the Government to look at what we can do on similar measures, because they would be simple wins for the Government that would improve the situation and make it clear that we do not stand for slavery. We will not become green in our energy production on the backs of the poorest and those who are being exploited.

What am I asking the Minister today? First, when will we have a new modern slavery strategy? We desperately need one, as the current one is 11 years old. Will she commit to strengthening supply chain measures? It has been a big disappointment to me that many Queen's Speeches and King's Speeches have included promises of new modern slavery legislation on supply chains, but it has never come forward. Will she commit to that?

I have concerns about the Fair Work Agency in the new Employment Rights Bill, because it takes the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and puts it into a new agency that will not sit underneath the Home Office. Vital work was done by the Gangmasters Licensing Authority and then the GLAA, which was brought in for the right reasons—we all remember the Morecambe bay cockle pickers disaster. We need to ensure that there is proper Home Office oversight of that agency and that it focuses on abuse and exploitation, not just on ensuring that employment rights are met.

We cannot continue with two classes of victims as we have at the moment. We need to ensure that everyone who is a victim of modern slavery can access the support that they need. Could the Minister review the national referral mechanism? I welcome the extra caseworkers, but 831 days on average for a decision is not good enough—she and I both know that. I urge her to do whatever she can, and I will support her every step of the way to make it clear that the national referral mechanism needs to make those decisions more quickly. We heard great evidence about this on Tuesday in the Select Committee.

The UK has a duty to put victims front and centre of everything we do in response to this crime. If we do not put the victim at the heart of our policy response and everything we do, we will simply fail to address this issue. But we also need to lead the global effort. We did lead it, and the time has come for us to get back there. We are looked at—people are desperate for the UK to lead on this. They know what we have done in the past and they desperately want us to do it again. That means working in multilateral organisations such as the United Nations. In particular, we need to ensure that sustainable development goal 8.7 is enacted around the world.

Will the Minister make this issue one of those priorities? I know the Government have their missions, and I am sure that I could squeeze it into safer streets or something like that. I could find a way to shoehorn this in, but without that support and leadership from the very top, this matter will not get the urgency it needs. It is the biggest human rights abuse globally. It is happening everywhere, including in the UK. Let us be clear: the highest number of victims in the NRM are UK nationals; it is not a migration crime. We need to ensure that it has the support and the thrust behind it with the leadership that I know the Minister can give it. I urge her to ensure that the whole of Government do the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As the only female MP to be sanctioned by the Chinese Communist party for highlighting Uyghur slave labour in supply chains, I will join the right hon. Lady in paying close attention to the Minister's response.

3.24 pm

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) on securing the debate. However, I do not thank her for giving me that familiar feeling of dread—I am discovering that we often get it in this place—when the speaker immediately before makes almost identical points to those I had intended to make. Perhaps my speech will now be a little shorter. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to my position as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Uyghurs.

We are having this debate towards the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Across the Uyghur region, Uyghurs will be imprisoned for observing the fast. When they are imprisoned, they will be forced to eat—often, to eat pork—and they will be forced to drink alcohol. Where once they might have gathered for iftar in mosques, they will find those holy places are now piles of rubble.

I have lost count of the number of times I have spoken in the House about the crimes against humanity that are taking place in the Uyghur region, but the right hon. Lady made the really important point that those crimes against humanity exist alongside a framework of financial crime. Uyghurs suffer because their suffering is profitable. Of course, there is an ideological element and a religious element to it, but it makes the Chinese regime a lot of money, so when we see women being sterilised and raped, children being stolen and millions of people in labour camps, we can never separate that from the mass slave labour that is going on.

Earlier this week in the Chamber we were discussing the role of Uyghur slave labour in the green energy sector, but it is really important to note that it is far from limited to that sector. We spoke a lot about the proportion of solar raw materials infected by Uyghur slave labour, but that is also true of electric vehicles and cotton. We all remember the remarkable scenes recently at the Business and Trade Committee when Shein was simply unable to give convincing answers about whether its products contained slave labour materials from the Uyghur region. It is also increasingly clear that the agricultural sector is exposed to this, particularly in tomatoes and peppers. We see household names such as Kraft Heinz, Nestlé and L'Oréal implicated in the use of agricultural products from Xinjiang that we believe have been made with forced labour.

This week's debate about solar energy and slave labour had a sense of *déjà vu* for many of us who have been working on Uyghur slave labour for a long time. We can look back to the Health and Care Bill under the last Government and how they were under similar pressure. We will continue to have this debate every time issues of public procurement are raised in the House until we fix our modern slavery legislation. As the right hon. Lady was talking about the legislation, I was thinking of how it is similar to me: 10 years ago, it was fresh and perhaps a thing of beauty, but now it is tired and showing its age. *[Interruption.]* I thank the House for the “Noes”

there; that was reassuring. We have to update the modern slavery legislation, not least because much of the rest of the world—ironically, inspired by what we did 10 years ago—has moved to update its protections against slave labour goods.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the United States and the due diligence directive and forced labour regulation in the EU.

On forced labour goods coming into the UK, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 is simply not designed to deal with that issue. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands spoke about the things that have changed in the last decade. Few of us would have imagined that industrial slavery involving millions of people—thought to be a relic of the 19th or early 20th century—would have become so prevalent in the experience of Uyghur Muslims. Neither would we have envisaged how difficult it would become in Xinjiang to do any sort of due diligence. That is what leads many of us to the argument that there must be a presumption that goods from that part of the world have involved modern slavery.

Because of the Uyghurs, we know the Modern Slavery Act is not working. Almost every day, a cargo flight arrives into this country from Ürümqi, the ground zero of slave labour for Uyghurs. Section 54 requires companies with a turnover of more than £36 million to produce a statement on slave labour. Looking back at the last 10 years and seeing one in 10 companies choosing not to do that without consequence, it is clear that one of the Act's major failings was the lack of a penalty.

I also want to talk about justice. We know that the workers who are exploited in places such as Xinjiang will not find justice in their own jurisdictions. Under the Modern Slavery Act, neither can they get it here. It is time to say that if a company operates in the UK and is implicated in such human rights abuses within its supply chain, there should be an opening for the victims of that to seek justice in the UK courts. For those who have tried to do that in other cases—some of which are live, so I will not raise them—it has taken years and real legal struggle to get them heard. In order to be a disincentive for companies doing the wrong thing, that needs to be made easier.

As we are talking about the behaviour of companies that operate in the UK, after the behaviour of Shein and the spectacle of the evidence given to the Business and Trade Committee, allowing that company to register on the stock exchange here would be unthinkable. It would send a signal that this is an economy that is willing to be based on the competitive advantage that comes from not paying workers.

On the subject of justice, I want to mention the organisation Hope for Justice and particularly my constituent Euan Fraser, who has been a source of real help and advice to me since I was elected. He makes the point that back in 2018, when the Government did their last study of the economic and social impact of modern slavery in the UK, it was costed at £4.3 billion. Might the Minister be able to refresh that and give us a new insight? Will she also be willing to meet Hope for Justice to discuss its proposals for independent modern slavery advocates? They are individuals who can work with survivors and ensure that their legal entitlements are realised, not just on things such as getting justice on

slavery, but on housing, immigration and, importantly, compensation, so there is more of a disincentive for companies.

To conclude, as the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands said, we are trying to rebuild the British economy, but we cannot do that at the cost of being complicit in the destruction of an entire people. On this 10th anniversary, it is high time to modernise the Modern Slavery Act.

3.33 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for securing this important debate. As Members, we are all united by our desire to do as much as we can to tackle the scourge of modern slavery.

My constituency is known for many things, but perhaps less well known for its connection to one of the greatest battles for human dignity: the abolition of slavery. More than 200 years ago, William Wilberforce, a champion for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, lived in Wimbledon. Just as Wilberforce rejected inhumanity in his time, we must renew our commitment to eradicating that injustice in ours, and though his efforts were huge, we stand here on the 10th anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act, aware that the fight is far from over.

Whether in the form of human trafficking, domestic servitude, or criminal, forced or sexual labour, modern slavery pervades our society, treating people as commodities for criminal gain. The introduction of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015 was a watershed moment, hailed as innovative and world-leading, echoing the UK's leadership in abolishing the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century. The Act was designed to protect victims, prosecute offenders and prevent exploitation at its roots.

Of the nearly 50 million people around the world estimated to be trapped in modern slavery, some 120,000 of them are thought to be resident in the UK. In 2024, over 19,000 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the Home Office through the national referral mechanism—a 30% increase on the previous year. Horrifyingly, 31% of all referrals last year were children.

The Act introduced several key measures, including section 42 to establish the role of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to encourage best practice in the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of modern slavery and to support victims. However, for a staggering 18 months through 2022 and 2023, while we had three Conservative Prime Ministers, we had no Anti-Slavery Commissioner. During that time, engagement between the modern slavery unit and key non-governmental organisations declined. The Government's ministerial strategy groups—once critical to tackling modern slavery—were disbanded. It is for that reason that the Lib Dems advocate for Parliament to have a power to appoint an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner should the post remain unfilled for three months.

We need to do more than simply ensure that the commissioner role is not left vacant. Challenges persist in the effectiveness of the commissioner due to inadequate resources and limited capacity. Despite the current commissioner's efforts since inheriting a "dormant office", the Department remains underfunded and under-resourced. Without appropriate funding and resources, the commissioner's ability to fulfil their legal obligations is clearly compromised.

The Modern Slavery Act was praised for introducing provisions aimed at greater transparency in supply chains, with the goal of protecting workers and compelling large commercial organisations to eliminate modern slavery from their operations. Section 54 requires companies supplying goods or services and operating in the UK with a turnover of £36 million or more to produce an annual slavery and human trafficking statement. Though welcome, section 54 only mandates businesses to report on their efforts to address forced labour in supply chains; it does not require them to act. In fact, simply reporting no action seems to be all they need to do to comply with the Act. Despite the Secretary of State's authority to seek injunctions on non-compliant organisations, none have been issued.

In 2022, 29% of eligible organisations failed to submit a modern slavery statement. Additionally, the number of statements recorded the following year dropped by almost 50%, indicating that businesses are deprioritising compliance. While previous Governments have expressed their intentions to strengthen section 54 by introducing mandatory reporting requirements and specific penalties for non-compliance, no changes have been implemented to date.

Too often, victims are hidden in plain sight. It is sobering to think that many of us may have encountered them without even realising. Recently, for example, the care sector has become a focal point for modern slavery. The inclusion of care workers and home carers on the shortage occupation list made them eligible for the health and care visa. From 2022 to 2023, the number of health and care visas granted skyrocketed, reflecting the sector's increased reliance on foreign workers. But alongside that growth came a disturbing increase in exploitation, with over 600% more care sector modern slavery cases reported. Evidence given to the Modern Slavery Act Committee last year reported that by the end of 2023, an alarming 21% of the 1,300 NHS suppliers were identified as being at "high risk" of modern slavery.

The types of exploitation vary, but one common theme is the charging of illegal recruitment fees. Victims are often forced to pay as much as £30,000 for visa applications and supposed training courses—amounts so large that workers often have no choice but to stay trapped in abusive conditions. The care sector continues to grapple with systemic issues, including low pay and poor working conditions, which are exacerbated by fragmented regulatory oversight spread across agencies such as the Care Quality Commission and the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate. That lack of co-ordination hampers effective enforcement.

The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority holds modern slavery investigation powers in England and Wales, and receives referrals from the CQC, but its remit does not specifically cover the care sector. Despite prioritising the sector, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority struggles with insufficient funding and a low inspector-to-worker ratio, and falls below international standards. As a result, proactive inspections are rare, while many workers fear potential reprisals from reporting exploitation.

The 2022 report of the former special representative of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe highlighted the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority's effectiveness in preventing and investigating labour exploitation and protecting vulnerable workers,

[Mr Paul Kohler]

but stressed its need for greater financial support to fully realise its capacity. The Liberal Democrats have consistently called for a powerful new worker protection enforcement authority to safeguard those in precarious work through intelligence-led enforcement and a firewall that separates labour standards enforcement from border control.

The UK's current immigration system exacerbates the vulnerabilities of migrant workers. The previous Home Affairs Select Committee described a "de-prioritisation of human trafficking in favour of attention on irregular migration"

under the policies of the previous Conservative Government. I warmly acknowledge the fact that the Border Security, Asylum, and Immigration Bill seeks to repeal many of the modern slavery provisions of the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

I will conclude where I began. Today, we inherit not only Wilberforce's legacy but his responsibility. Modern slavery may adopt new forms, but its cruelty remains the same. It thrives in the shadows of all our communities, in the exploitation of the vulnerable and in the complacency of indifference. Let us pledge not only to celebrate how far we have come, but to redouble our efforts, as there is still far to go. For in remembering Wilberforce's endeavours, we must find the courage to shape a future in which his campaign to entirely abolish slavery finally achieves its aim.

3.41 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): As a child I was taught that 200 years ago we abolished the transatlantic slave trade. As a young adult, I learned that that had not marked the end, and that modern slavery was a booming global industry. Then, as I became a young father, I learned through the excellent work of Hope for Justice that there were slaves right here in the UK—hidden even within my own city. And I learned that many of those slaves were children, not unlike my own. I felt a hint of the desperation that I would feel if one of my children had been trafficked into slavery—how I would pray that there would be someone to rescue them, someone who would not rest until slaves had been found and released. I realised that, for somebody else's child, I had to be that someone.

Fortunately, I was not alone, and 10 years ago this place once again passed legislation to end slavery in our nation. It recognised our duty to eliminate slavery from our supply chains, and it introduced a key revelation to policing: that someone presenting as a perpetrator might in reality be a victim. The world has continued to change, however: our protections have weakened and the challenge has grown. It is estimated that there are 122,000 victims of modern slavery in the UK, yet fewer than 20,000 were referred to the national referral mechanism last year.

Detecting modern slavery is hard. It is a crime in which the victim is intrinsically hidden—often as invisible and elusive as the perpetrator. The policing challenge is unique. Furthermore, victims of modern slavery are often forced to break the law or are camouflaged among legitimate yet exploited workers who are themselves insecure, transient and unrepresented. We are combating highly organised and effective international criminal networks—they are agile, opportunistic and embedded in our communities.

Our system is vulnerable. It has been too easy for children to disappear. Siloed public services are too ineffective in recognising and responding to potential cases. Our systems are divided, and the traffickers have conquered, yet there is hope. Once local authorities are trained in what to look for, they begin to identify victims and, working with partners, can disrupt this crime. If we ensure clearly defined and resourced roles, and are empowered to work across multiple organisations and departments, we can ensure that these complex crimes, which intersect multiple agencies, can be detected. We can ensure that victims become survivors, and that perpetrators are convicted. We need to work across Government to deliver that.

To eliminate slavery, we must no longer tolerate exploitation of any kind. This Government have taken great steps in improving workers' rights, and that must continue. We must be responsive and fast, keeping up with the highest international standards in law and human rights. The Council of Europe's convention on action against trafficking in human beings provides a framework that could be adopted broadly. Similarly, we must ensure that the requirement for businesses to audit their supply chains has teeth. The Modern Slavery Act required large businesses to publish details of the actions that they were taking to identify and tackle exploitation in their supply chains; we now need checks, and penalties for failure to effectively keep supply chains free from slavery.

Like survivors of stalking, domestic abuse and sexual abuse, survivors of modern slavery need access to independent advocacy. We must embed that in our national response, together with long-term holistic support. That is crucial both for survivors' recovery and to reduce vulnerability to further harm or re-exploitation. We cannot treat this problem as business as usual. The world is becoming increasingly unstable and unpredictable. International conflicts and climate pressures are making people vulnerable and providing the perfect conditions for traffickers. That is visible in the English channel, but that is just the tip of the iceberg; what is hidden are the tens of thousands of victims living in the fear and despair of slavery right here in our towns, cities and rural areas.

We are taking firm and decisive action to protect our borders, break criminal gangs and clear the backlog of immigration cases. I recognise the point that the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) made about the distinction between people smuggling and human trafficking, but the sectors overlap. The action being taken is a good start, and I recognise the impressive impact that the Minister and our new Government have already had through our investment in hiring an additional 200 modern slavery case workers, but that is smashing the iceberg only above the surface. To solve the problem, we need a response that matches the scale of the hidden challenge. Modern slavery is a complex crime that cuts across all aspects of Government and society, and our response must match it, cutting across the whole of Government.

I put it to this House that we may already have a golden opportunity. This Government have already committed to a fresh approach to governing—one of collaboration, partnership and agility. We are also undertaking a historic and ambitious programme of local

government reorganisation and devolution of power from Westminster to our regions. We have already seen programmes tested and proven that provide a model that we can deploy through local government.

The Human Trafficking Foundation has worked with nine local authorities that have appointed a designated modern slavery co-ordinator. Those co-ordinators have deployed training in local authorities, improved partnership working, increased the quality and quantity of referrals to support, and delivered prevention strategies. The work of these modern slavery co-ordinators has been remarkable.

Dame Karen Bradley: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving way. I am intervening on him so that I can put it on the record that I am a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation. I realise that I did not say that in my opening statement, but I want to be clear about it, and to say that I support all the work that the foundation does.

Tom Collins: I thank the right hon. Lady for that clarification.

In 2023, there were 218 local authorities that made referrals using the national referral mechanism for adults. The nine authorities with a designated modern slavery co-ordinator position accounted for 18% of those referrals. That figure rose to 20% in 2024. They trained thousands of local authority staff and partners and increased confidence rates in reporting modern slavery from around 45% to close to 99%. Critically, these measures led to prosecutions. We can learn from that, and devolution is a ripe opportunity to deploy the lessons.

It is clear to me that the Government can no longer delegate responsibility for modern slavery to a single Department; we need to build both passive and active immunity into every area. Our modern slavery response must saturate our work at both national and local level. Alongside that collective duty, dedicated roles with cross-organisational links and clear ownership are key.

A national strategy that factors in local partnership responses would be transformative. An example of this can be seen in the devolved decision-making pilots, in which multi-agency teams, led by a local authority, made national referral mechanism decisions for children. This approach was over four times faster than the Home Office at making decisions, and it encouraged information sharing across agencies and local partnership working to keep children safe. The success of devolved decision-making panels demonstrates the effectiveness of co-ordinated local efforts under a national framework. I welcome the Minister's commitment in the recently published action plan to rolling out these panels. Local authorities already have duties to disrupt modern slavery. With a clear cross-cutting partnership approach, facilitated by clear, dedicated local leadership, we could start to build real immunity into our communities.

We have embraced the mission to deliver a decade of national renewal. A decade of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 has allowed us to begin the abolition of modern slavery. We have the tools, but we must not rest. Rather, we should recommit ourselves to the most ambitious goal of ending slavery in our nation and our supply chains. We can see what needs to be done. We have begun; now we must deliver the collaboration, commitment and resources to do it.

There are people in our country who are utterly hidden, isolated, fearful and hopeless, but they are not alone. Today I urge all in this House to recommit with me; we will not rest, but will instead forge on, and will do what it takes, and what the evidence has taught us to do, in order to find slavery out, prosecute the perpetrators, break the networks, and march on until every person is seen and slavery is finished.

3.51 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I warmly welcome this debate. I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for securing it and opening it, and for her work on this topic. As we have heard from Members from all parts of the House, while there is something to celebrate in the fact that this legislation is here, there is still much more work to be done to achieve the goal of eliminating slavery entirely. I will take this opportunity to raise two issues with the Minister—issues on which there is work to be done that could strengthen our action on modern slavery and our policies.

The first issue relates to checks and balances, or review processes. In any administrative decision-making process, it is really important that there are opportunities for decisions to be reviewed by people with expertise, yet in December 2022, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman), disbanded the multi-agency assurance panels, which played a crucial role. They brought together people with expertise in policy and in tackling modern slavery to review cases in which applicants had been rejected, in order to ensure that the decisions in those cases were sound.

Members from across the House may have received the same briefing as me from a coalition of dozens of organisations working on modern slavery. I was shocked and surprised to read in that briefing that 70% of reconsidered negative decisions were overturned, so there is clearly an issue with the decision-making process, and clearly a vital role for review mechanisms such as the multi-agency assurance panels in checking that decisions are sound. I would very much welcome the Minister responding to this point in her summing up, and perhaps saying whether the Government will consider reinstating those important panels.

My second point is about the vulnerability of people on temporary work visas to labour exploitation. Preventing labour exploitation in the first place is key. This issue relates particularly to people on overseas domestic worker visas, but it also applies, as the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) said, to those in the care sector, which is growing, and to agricultural seasonal workers. The core of this problem is that when the temporary work visa is attached to the employer, there is a strong disincentive for the employee to speak out and report labour exploitation, because they will suffer punishment for doing so. That means that the problem remains hidden, and it makes it much more difficult for people to come forward.

Sensible reforms that could tackle the problem have been proposed by those working in the sector. For instance, if those work visas were renewable so long as the employment continued, the individual would have a degree of security. However, that would have to go alongside a provision under which, if the employer was subject to an enforcement mechanism for exploitation,

[*Ellie Chowns*]

the employee was able to remain here and could seek alternative employment and an alternative sponsor for their visa. I understand that that is being done in Australia, where there is now a mechanism for bridging visas to be provided. That ensures a measure of justice in the system, and that those who are subject to exploitation can escape it and find new employment with a non-exploitative employer.

Those are the two issues that I wanted to bring to the Minister's attention. I look forward to hearing her response.

3.55 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for securing the debate; I know she is a great champion for these issues.

The Global Slavery Index estimates that 122,000 people are living in conditions of slavery in the UK, and over 19,000 victims were referred to the national referral mechanism in the last year alone. My constituency of Congleton is absolutely beautiful, and most of it has a low crime rate by national standards, but this problem is so widespread that it will be occurring in my constituency, because it is occurring everywhere. The figure of 122,000 people is significant; that is roughly one and a half times the number of people in my constituency.

We often talk in this Chamber about violence against women and girls. That subject is extremely important, and I will talk about it in the context of modern slavery, but of those who were referred to the national referral mechanism last year, 72% were men. The people most common referred were UK nationals. Children constituted about 31% of referrals. In 48% of those cases, the referral was for criminal exploitation, and about 78% of those referred were boys. It is crucial that we keep up the pressure to reduce and remove violence against women and girls, but it is critical that we are aware of how much violence there still is in society against boys and men.

There are lots of different ways in which modern slavery occurs in the UK, and its diversity makes it more difficult to tackle. For men, it often occurs in the agricultural and building sectors, and in takeaways. The growth in the takeaway sector in the UK means that large numbers of takeaways are operating from warehouses, where the workers are completely unseen. Many of them are earning incredibly little. If people can order a takeaway for less money than it would cost to cook the same meal at home, the chances are that that has come about through modern slavery.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about industries such as takeaways being sites of modern slavery. In my local council, East Lothian, there has been a pilot scheme looking specifically at the takeaway industry, and at what regulations local authorities can put in place to allow them to enter premises to see what kind of modern slavery is taking place. It is an interesting pilot, and I wanted to draw her attention and the attention of the House to it.

Mrs Russell: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing that to my attention; I am very interested to hear about it. I am pleased to report that the overwhelming majority of

takeaways in my constituency remain physical premises that also operate as restaurants, but I am aware that that is not necessarily the case in the whole of my local authority area, and certainly not across the whole country.

I was shocked when I found out about the large number of children, especially boys, who are being referred, and about what is happening. Often, older gang members find vulnerable young boys, some as young as 10 or 11, and ask them to "look after" some drugs for them for a little bit—"Could you just hold them for me, very briefly?" Those gang members will then arrange for those boys to be viciously beaten up. Those boys will then be told that they have lost the drugs and now owe the gang members a whole load of money, and they will be put to work as county lines drug dealers from an incredibly young age. It is an absolutely horrific means of exploiting young boys, particularly vulnerable children, and we need to be as aware of it as we are of the way in which grooming gangs operate around girls.

I will move on to how this issue particularly affects women and girls. I will say one thing: I really, really wish that men—it is predominantly men—would stop using prostitutes. Could they just stop? The number of women being brought to the UK under false pretences and believing that they will do a different form of work, then being put to sex work against their will, kept in physically confined situations that they are not allowed to leave and having their passport taken away from them is really significant. The other thing that happens is that some women come here knowing that that might be an element of their work. If they then complain about it or want to stop, they are told that their children back home will be harmed if they do, so they are unable to go to the police when they are being systematically raped. I say to men: please, please stop using prostitutes.

I know that Cheshire police are taking all these issues very seriously and doing their best, but the best way to stop us having a market for criminal activity is for people to stop buying criminally traded goods, whether that is vapes, tobacco, drugs or women.

The final element of human trafficking I will talk about is in the care sector. Many people in the Chamber have heard me talk about this topic before, so I do not want to labour it, but the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority licensing scheme does not extend to the care sector, so agencies and sponsors are seizing opportunities to exploit other people for their own financial gain. A lot of people in my community receive care paid for either by the local authority, and therefore by the taxpayer ultimately, or with people's life savings. They would be absolutely horrified if they realised the number of people doing that work who had been trafficked here in the first place.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the various organisations working in this area, one of which is Unseen, which talks about regularly speaking on its helpline to members of the care profession who have paid somewhere between £11,000 and £30,000 to get here, when they should not be paying anything other than their own travel expenses. Some 4% of victims have been threatened with either direct personal harm or harm to their family members. Actual, physical harm was reported in 2% of the cases that came to that helpline. Nearly half of victims described confinement or restricted movement.

The list of things that have gone on is genuinely, absolutely horrendous. I suggest that when the Fair Work Agency takes over the GLAA's responsibilities, we ensure that licensing is brought into this sector or otherwise look at how the visa regime can be changed, so that people can transfer between employers, and how we can generally stamp out the level of exploitation in the care sector.

I thank everyone who has participated in this debate. I know there is a lot of strong feeling across the House that we can and should do a lot better for vulnerable people in this country.

4.3 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), both for securing this debate and for her legacy in this field. As the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, her ongoing commitment to the issue is palpable, and I look forward to working with her on it in the years ahead.

We are 10 years on from the Modern Slavery Act. While I am not in the habit of praising the Home Office under the previous Conservative Government, I am not so nakedly partisan that I cannot break that habit on this occasion. It is true that the UK's Modern Slavery Act was world leading. Its Scottish counterpart, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, which is also 10 years old this year, was equally groundbreaking. While we recognise that, we must also admit that although the Act took us two steps forward, we have undoubtedly gone one step back.

The terms "modern slavery" and "human trafficking" strike fear into our hearts and capture our attention. They sound like the stuff of a TV drama, and frequently they do involve the most horrific, vivid crimes in society and the worst of humanity, but we must not let that fool us into thinking that modern slavery only happens at the extremes, or only in the big metropolitan city far from us—it happens everywhere, in every community and every constituency. As we have heard from several hon. Members today, it affects men as well as women; its victims are children as well as adults; it affects British people as much as foreign nationals, and indeed more than foreign nationals; and it is labour exploitation as much as it is sexual exploitation.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): On my hon. Friend's point about modern slavery happening everywhere, Carlisle is the most northerly city in England. On 3 October 2018, officers from Cumbria police, the National Crime Agency, and investigators from the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority freed a man who had been kept in captivity on the outskirts of Carlisle for 40 years. He was vulnerable because of his learning disability, and had variously "lived"—been kept—in a horse box and in a disused caravan. When he was found, he was in a damp, rotten garden shed with neither heating nor lighting. The window did not close, the water poured through the door, and his makeshift bed was congealed with vomit.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that someone could be kept in such a circumstance for 40 years on the outskirts of one of England's cities should shame us all, and that we should recommit ourselves to ensuring that every single person who might still be in that circumstance is found and freed in the same way that that gentleman was?

Chris Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for making that really important point. I remember reading about that case; it is one of the most horrific ones, but there are so many horrific cases of modern slavery. It is taking place on every high street in Britain, and we have to be completely vigilant about finding it everywhere.

Today, I want to talk about the public policy response to this appalling crime. Obviously, it is a dramatic, wicked crime; we have the blandly named national referral mechanism as our tool, and to be honest, that tool is currently all but broken down. In the words of the Home Secretary when she came to the Home Affairs Committee before Christmas, the NRM

"has become a bit stuck".

There are huge delays in victims getting a decision on the national referral mechanism. We heard evidence this week that the mean waiting time is 831 days. That is beyond unacceptable: it is systemic dysfunction.

To be clear, that is not just a number; it has a real cost. The real-world implication of that number is re-trafficking. Women who are trafficked for sex and then come to the state for help end up back in the hands of their traffickers because of our delays. Children who are locked in houses and forced to farm cannabis in appalling conditions, who then manage to escape and come to us for help, end up back with their torturers because of our sheer incompetence. We should not be congratulating ourselves today on the passage of historic legislation; we should be hanging our heads in shame at what is happening on our watch. I hope that today, the Minister will set out a clear plan to clear the backlog, and will also recognise that doing so will not be some huge step of progress, but will just get us back to the baseline that we should be at.

I draw the House's attention to the child trafficking pilot that has been running for the past five years; I am so glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) referred to it. I should probably declare an interest, as I was involved in setting up its Scottish iteration, but it is worth our attention, because it has devolved decision making in the NRM to a panel of local stakeholders—people from social work and from education, the police, psychologists and others who know the child's case—and empowers them to adjudicate whether that child is a victim of trafficking or not. It has been extremely successful, with decisions taken more quickly and with higher quality, because the people who know that child's case are better placed to make a decision than an official in Whitehall.

Before coming here, I worked on preventing human trafficking for five years. I know that the issue is complex and difficult, but I also encountered some of the most effective public servants I have ever seen in my time, such as the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance in Glasgow, led by Bronagh Andrew, which cares for women trafficked into Scotland for commercial sexual exploitation; and Joy Gillespie, who advocates for survivors of trafficking in Scotland. The most impressive programme I have seen in five years of anti-trafficking is this pilot in Glasgow. The Minister and I have corresponded on the pilot previously, and I strongly encourage the Government to look at rolling it out more broadly.

I make two final points about the steps that the new Government are taking on modern slavery. First, on labour exploitation, the Employment Rights Bill—a

[Chris Murray]

landmark piece of legislation that I could not be prouder to support—scraps the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and establishes the Fair Work Agency, as many have said. That is all to the good, but the Fair Work Agency has a mammoth task enforcing the minimum wage and employment rights across the whole workforce. Are we sure it will have the focus and resource to tackle modern slavery, too? Will it have the right relationships with the police, because that will be critical to ensure enforcement? We must remember that this crime is everywhere and in every community.

Moreover, when the FWA is up and running, the Home Office will lose sponsorship of the GLAA, and the responsibility will be subsumed into the Department for Business and Trade. Is that the right place for modern slavery responsibilities? From my experience, I remember the GLAA being significantly under-resourced. In order to inspect all of Scotland's fisheries, agriculture and farming, it had only one inspector. That clearly was not enough. Will we have more now? What plans do the Government have in place to ensure that modern slavery is not deprioritised?

Secondly, on the panoply of new developments that we have had as the new Government have hit the ground running, there have been some that I have been particularly pleased to see. Not only is there the new Fair Work Agency, but cuckooing will be made a specific offence; grooming will be an aggravating factor in child sex offender prosecutions; and a range of new measures will be introduced to halve violence against women and girls. I could not welcome those steps more, but is there a coherent strategy to ensure they are being fully deployed to tackle modern slavery? Are we marshalling the power of Government to target these new measures at the perpetrators of these crimes?

When can we expect to see that robust modern slavery strategy? I ask that because this issue needs ministerial grip. Without clear ministerial direction, law enforcement cannot put resources into it. Without law enforcement prioritising the resources, there are no investigations. Without investigations, there is no justice. We should think of the woman who came to the British state and asked for help, only for our administrative incompetence to mean she is back in the hands of her traffickers, being pimped out to be raped multiple times every day. We have failed her once already. We need a strategy to ensure that we do not do so again.

Will that modern slavery strategy take account of new developments in modern slavery in the last 10 years? I am pleased that the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) and others mentioned the exploitation of visas in the care sector, but we are also seeing that with student visas, the EU settlement scheme and elsewhere. Will the new White Paper on legal migration be fully modern slavery-proofed so that we do not allow new routes to open up? I note that the Scottish Government have finally got around to refreshing their human trafficking strategy. I would argue that is a long overdue step, but it is also a good opportunity to ensure we get coherence across the whole UK.

As we mark 10 years since the Modern Slavery Act was passed, it is clear we still have our work cut out for us. I, for one, am willing to work with anyone inside or outside this Chamber to get it done.

4.14 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Members who have spoken today, all of whom have given such powerful speeches. Just two days ago, it was 218 years since William Wilberforce cajoled this Parliament into leading the way on combating slavery. The Abolition of Slave Trade Act was passed, to a standing ovation, on 25 March 1807. The Act made it illegal to trade and enslave people across the then British empire. Twenty-six years later, another groundbreaking piece of legislation, the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, ended the use of enslaved labour. However, slavery clearly did not stop, which is why we are talking about it today.

Modern slavery is just that: a modern version of the slavery we have always known. Slavery is right here, right now. It does not belong to the distant past or to a far-away country. As we have heard, the majority of the people referred to the national referral mechanism are British, and they are often men or boys. As a Parliament, we have to recommit to tackling slavery.

As we have heard, modern slavery has spread its tentacles into so many aspects of our lives. It is estimated that there are 50 million victims of modern slavery worldwide, including 122,000 in our country—the size of the population of Blackpool or Cambridge—so we have to renew our leadership to tackle modern slavery. In my own constituency of Bournemouth East, there will be women working in nail bars who are enslaved. There will be men working on building sites who are enslaved. There will be mostly women working in people's homes as domestic slaves, and there will be many other types of servitude going on. The figures that are reported are the tip of the iceberg. These people are hiding in plain sight, and we need to get the message out that modern slavery is a priority of this Government, this Parliament and this country.

In my professional life before becoming an MP, I supported victims of modern slavery by finding them and getting them to safety quickly. I was the chair of an anti-slavery network for five years, and I led a mental health, domestic abuse and homelessness charity that had run a modern slavery service—it pioneered an independent trauma advisory role that got support to around 50 victims and survivors of modern slavery. I worked alongside fantastic colleagues on a report into the nature and extent of modern slavery in Oxford, which used an interesting methodology, beyond the typical reporting of stats from the police force. It worked in a case-based way with providers of support, and found that 123 modern slavery crimes were recorded in the Thames valley area in the five-year period that the report looked at. However, after drawing in the voluntary sector, there were believed to be between 319 and 442 cases of modern slavery, showing that what is reported is not always a true reflection of what is happening, and that our third sector organisations and networks are so important in trying to tackle modern slavery and support victims.

It is worth saying that the need to tackle modern slavery has never been greater. Although this anniversary marks a decade since the Modern Slavery Act, it is also the case that we have seen a decade or more of austerity. I say that because some of the people who are enslaved will have grown up under austerity and seen their Sure Start centres and youth centres cut. They will have seen their schools being able to provide less and less, and seen insecure work, low pay and zero-hours contracts

for their parents. They will be living in homes that have not been properly regulated. They have grown up with significant vulnerability. When people grow up with significant vulnerability, they are so susceptible to enslavement—I have seen it with my own eyes.

Given the Government's agenda on renters reform, reforming employment rights and making sure that we have investment in our public services, my hope is that we will repair the fabric of society and our public services so that no young person has to fall victim to modern slavery. In my own part of the country, we have seen the number of cases reported to Dorset police going up over the last nine years. There were 65 in 2023 and 108 in 2024, so we clearly need to take action.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will bring the voices of modern slavery victims into this debate. I want to talk about three cases in which my office has supported victims. In one case, a person was identified as a potential victim of human trafficking and entered into the national referral mechanism. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) said that it is quite a bland name for a bland service, and he could not have described it better. The NRM is broken and needs serious reform. This individual's case has been given a "reasonable grounds" decision, but they are still awaiting a "conclusive grounds" decision. It is no wonder, given that we have such long waits for decisions.

Mrs Russell: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to extend the time limit for challenging "reasonable grounds" decisions? That limit has been reduced to 30 days, which is not long enough to get help from a legal aid lawyer, given the lack of legal aid funding.

Tom Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Particularly in the short term, as the Government are working so hard to get a grip on that delay, that could be a really helpful temporary measure to remove some of the anxiety of victims and some of the difficulties that support services encounter in trying to get more and appropriate support for victims.

The individual I was just talking about was promised that they would be able to work, but they were instead forced to arrive on a visitor visa. After three months in the UK, they became homeless and experienced severe mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts, for which they are currently receiving medication. They owe a large sum of money, with interest, to the agent who facilitated their travel to the UK, and the agent has warned them not to return home. They have claimed asylum in the UK, but it is a life in limbo.

In a second case, a former constituent was trafficked into the UK while pregnant for forced prostitution. She has now been recognised as a victim of modern slavery and granted asylum. In a third and final case, another female constituent asked for help in seeking accommodation following her escape from an abusive marriage. She has been receiving support from the Liberty Project run by the Bournemouth Churches Housing Association, which provides a shelter for women escaping modern slavery in my constituency.

Why have I mentioned these three people? It is not merely because their voices deserve to be heard in this Parliament, but because all of us as MPs have had contact with victims and survivors of modern slavery.

All of us know from first-hand experience about the pressures and difficulties in the system, and we bring that into how we try to improve the system. I think that is important for the public to know, because I do not think they often know about the casework aspects of what we do, and how it is so important in informing what we do when bringing forward legislative change.

I mentioned the Liberty Project run by BCHA, which is a fantastic organisation working across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. It provides safe house accommodation and frontline support to potential survivors through their reflection and recovery periods, and here I want to make a plea to the Minister. BCHA, like so many organisations, provides trauma-informed, person-centred approaches. It is so critical for such organisations to have the funds they need to walk alongside victims who have gone through the worst experience of their lives, so that they do not have a requirement to tick boxes, but can sit and listen to people and work with them to recover in the ways they need; to reach a point in their lives where they want to be, whether that is in work, training or education. I commend our third sector organisations for what they do, and I ask for additional Government support to prop them up. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is such a firm advocate for the third sector and for victim support, from her lifetime of working in the sector.

I want to talk about goods coming into our country that are infected with slavery, picking up on the comment by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall). I may now refer to him as the "fresh and beautiful" Member, as that is how he described himself—you were not in the Chair for that reflection, Madam Deputy Speaker, which explains why you look so surprised.

Bournemouth airport in my constituency is one of two major airports in the UK—the other is Cardiff—where goods made by forced labour, particularly in China, are coming into our country, and we must get a grip of that. I commend Bournemouth's *Daily Echo* for its reporting, which has shone a light on this, and the work of colleagues in this House and the other place in trying to expose this horrible activity. We need to stop goods infected with slavery from coming into our country, and I will be calling on the Government to do more on that.

Since coming into office nine months ago, the Government have done a fantastic amount of good work. I have mentioned the reforms to the rented sector, the reforms to employment rights and the investment in our public services, which will prop up vulnerable young lives and reduce vulnerability to enslavement. I commend the commitment to combating cuckooing as a specific offence, our commitment to introducing a stand-alone offence of child exploitation, and the creation of the Fair Work Agency through the Employment Rights Bill. I also commend the drive to eradicate the decisions backlog, which will come in time as we have hired 200 additional Home Office staff to process modern slavery cases. I am also particularly pleased that the modern slavery portfolio is held by the Minister for safeguarding and violence against women and girls.

I want to close by talking about a really important contributor to the fight against modern slavery: the Co-operative movement. I want to do that by going back in time. In 1864, Manchester was Cottonopolis: the biggest industrial city in the world based on cotton.

[Tom Hayes]

Some 90% of the UK's cotton came from the Confederacy and the US civil war was happening at that time. It was also in 1864 that the Lancashire famine was happening and people were dying on the streets of Manchester. But the weavers wrote to Abraham Lincoln to say that they were on his side and that they supported his fight against slavery. At the time, they were working one-day or two-day weeks. That is why in Manchester there is a square called Lincoln Square, by the John Dalton Library, with a statue of Abraham Lincoln. In 1864 he wrote back to the people of Manchester, thanking them for their

“heroism unknown in any age and any country”.

People in Manchester in 1864 bonded together to fight slavery, despite the cost to their own lives.

This country has been a compassionate and kind country, working hard in our communities and at Government and Parliament level to tackle modern slavery, but we are now at an inflection point. As we heard from colleagues, the world is more unstable, the risks of modern slavery are greater, and we need to tackle this issue with UK leadership on the world stage. I thank Baroness May, who 10 years ago did so much to lead the way. I commend the work of the Government, who I know are committed to leading the world on this matter too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.26 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) for securing the debate, and for all the work she did in government to give us the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which we commemorate and build on today.

It means a lot to contribute to a debate on landmark legislation that affirmed our country's commitment to eradicating this cruel and insidious crime. Slavery is one of the greatest affronts to the fundamental British principle of individual liberty: the principle that no human being should be enslaved. It is sad that we need to have a debate to remind ourselves of that: sad that some of my Nigerian ancestors might have thought debates on the nature and extent of slavery should never have had to happen again; sad that we are having them in the modern day; and sad that, as we have discussed, at least 120,000 people in the UK are victims and survivors of modern slavery.

It is hopeful that Parliament committed, via the 2015 Act and in many other ways, to confronting the shocking reality that slavery had not been consigned to the history books after all. It is hopeful that Parliament acknowledged its moral duty to protect those who are among the most vulnerable in our society; those who are coerced, manipulated and abused in conditions that no human should ever endure. It is hopeful that Parliament set out clear legal definitions, strengthened law enforcement capabilities, and demanded corporate supply chain transparency and action. It is hopeful that since the Act's passage, many victims and survivors have been identified and supported, with great co-ordination between

law enforcement agencies, NGOs, local authorities, the voluntary sector and more. It is hopeful that we have seen milestone convictions of traffickers, and that more survivors have been given a voice and a chance to rebuild their lives with dignity and hope.

We should be so proud of all those who have played a role in that hope: proud of politicians such as the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands, Baroness May and many others; and proud of statutory authorities, such as Sussex Police in my patch and our local authorities—and of course their equivalents across the country—for the role they play in combating modern slavery. We should be proud of those civil servants who work across Government behind the scenes to make Britain a leader in the fight against modern slavery. I know one of those civil servants particularly well, and I will not embarrass or compromise her by naming her, but I know she is watching, and I hope that the likes of her know that their backstage efforts are just as critical as the work done by those who are front and centre.

I am also proud of our voluntary sector for their very direct role in helping victims and survivors of modern slavery to rebuild their lives with dignity and hope. In particular, I pay tribute to Eastbourne's Bramber Bakehouse, led by the amazing Lucy Butt, which uses the medium of baking to empower women survivors of modern slavery to rebuild their confidence, develop their skills and take a step towards a more fulfilling future.

Most importantly, I pay tribute to the resilience of those victims and survivors of modern slavery whom this Act, and all of us gathered in this Chamber, along with many others who cannot be here, are committed to fighting for. I am particularly inspired to read about Aisha—that is not her real name—who Lucy and her team at Bramber Bakehouse have supported. Aisha is a survivor of human trafficking and subsequently lived in a safe house. She said of that time:

“Every day you just wait in the safe house. Days turn into months. You can't work and it's really isolating. I felt really sad. I had no purpose.”

When Bramber Bakehouse offered her a place on its programme alongside other women survivors, Aisha wanted to see the best in this but was deeply suspicious about why anybody would pay for her to get on a train to go and bake. Her support worker encouraged her to give it a go. She said:

“Getting the train felt like a big deal. I had to get ready, I had to be on time. I had my ticket. I suddenly felt independent and that I was getting away from it all. I had never baked before... I realised that I could do this. I could actually make something that looked and tasted amazing. It was therapy without therapy”.

Throughout the programme, Aisha spent time identifying her future goals and practising interviews, and in particular, she remembers discussing how to see her weaknesses as strengths. I am delighted to say that, several years on, Aisha has secured paid employment in a profession that she enjoys, and on the side she supports campaigning against modern slavery, giving a survivor's perspective and campaigning for change. I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Aisha and everyone whose stories she represents.

A decade on from the passing of the Act, we owe it to the likes of Aisha to redouble our ambition to root out modern slavery and ask ourselves, is what we are doing now enough? Based on what every Member has said in

this debate, we know in our heart of hearts that the answer to the question is no—what we are doing now is not enough, and we must do more.

In particular, the Liberal Democrats believe that we must reverse the challenges to modern slavery protections represented by the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which I know the Government are making progress on, and ensure that all legislation is compatible with the UK's international law obligations, including the Council of Europe convention on action against trafficking in human beings. We must create more safe and legal routes to sanctuary in the UK, taking power out of the hands of the people smugglers who, as the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands said, go on to force so many of those who survive the dangerous crossings into lives of servitude.

We must ensure that county lines exploitation is properly recognised as a form of modern slavery. Before coming to this House, I dedicated my career to supporting young people who were involved in gangs and crime and saw this kind of stuff up close. According to Unseen, one in five people has never heard of county lines exploitation—

Tom Hayes: The hon. Member is making a really important point about county lines. Last week, I visited Vita Nova in Boscombe to see a performance about county lines, which has been taken into schools to raise children's awareness about the risks and about what it looks like. Does he agree that we could be rolling out more education about what county lines is to schools, so that children are better prepared to resist it?

Josh Babarinde: I could not agree more with the hon. Member. It is critical that we educate children about the risk factors and what to look out for, and also educate the folks who are spending time supporting those children—whether they be parents, guardians, carers, teachers or others—to better identify this and then be able to tackle it before it escalates into something that is completely irreversible.

We must also ensure that our rightful pursuit of a low-carbon economy is not done on the backs of the slave labour of the Uyghurs. This echoes the powerful call of my constituent Dorit Oliver-Wolff, who survived the Holocaust. She has written to the Prime Minister, telling him how her father was sent to Siberia for slave labour and never returned. Dorit has since committed to spending her time saying, "Never again," and we must fight to ensure that that is the case. This debate will help to get us there.

4.36 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): On Tuesday 8 July 2014, the then Home Secretary and later Prime Minister, and now the right honourable Baroness May of Maidenhead, stood at the Dispatch Box to present the Modern Slavery Bill, as it was then, on its Second Reading. She spoke powerfully of those

"tricked and coerced into a horrendous life of servitude and abuse: women forced into prostitution, raped repeatedly, and denied their liberty; children groomed and sexually exploited for profit; vulnerable men conned into brutal and inhumane work in fields, in factories and on fishing vessels; people forced into a life of crime;".

She talked of sexual violence, beatings, humiliation, hunger and mental torture. As she rightly said that day, modern slavery

"is an affront not just to those it affects, but to the collective human dignity of all of us."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 2014; Vol. 584, c. 166.]

The way that some people treat and exploit their fellow human beings is, sadly, nothing short of disgusting, and such behaviour has no place in Britain. Those were not just words. She acted, too, bringing forward this legislation—the first of its kind in Europe—which received Royal Assent a decade and a day ago today.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) on securing this debate today. She has a long and proud history of campaigning on this issue. Indeed, she was the Home Office Minister for preventing abuse, exploitation and crime at the time of the passage of this Bill and has done considerable work, including with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, on stamping out this revolting practice. Now, of course, she continues to put her expertise and dedication to protecting the vulnerable to excellent use as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

My right hon. Friend makes some powerful points about the need to keep this legislation world-leading, as she has done repeatedly in this House and elsewhere. She speaks, for example, of orphanage trafficking and the work that has been done in Australia to tackle it. It is horrifying that an estimated 80% of children living in the world's orphanages have at least one living parent but have been separated from their families, sometimes forcibly, to be exploited and used to raise money for corrupt orphanage directors. I imagine the Minister, who is also known for her commitment to the victims of these appalling crimes, will want to work with her to ensure that our laws protect the vulnerable as well as they possibly can.

I would like to pay tribute to Baroness May, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands, and to former members of this House who campaigned on this issue, including, but not limited to, Anthony Steen, Baron Randall and the late Frank Field. I thank everyone who has contributed to today's debate.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) spoke authoritatively and movingly about the deeply upsetting plight of the Uyghur people and the role that slavery shamefully plays in that. I am happy to take this opportunity to reassure him that he is neither tired nor showing his age, but his points about the need to keep our laws up to date were well made.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) does great credit to the proud history of his constituency in fighting the evil of slavery. He was right to speak of the complexities of the British state and the challenges that they pose in tackling modern slavery. In the same vein, the hon. Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) was right to mention the need for co-ordination across Government and the role that local authority empowerment and responsibility can play in that.

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns)—I hope she will not mind if I take a moment to admire her jacket—asked about decision reviews and visa flexibility. She and I have somewhat different views on those subjects, but I am sure that the Minister will address her questions. The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) spoke of the shocking role that the vile drugs trade can have in trapping our young people into cycles of vicious exploitation, and the horrors of forced prostitution—a form of institutionalised rape.

[Katie Lam]

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) was gracious in his acknowledgement of the hard work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands and the previous Government. He should be proud of his work to prevent human, including child, trafficking.

Finally, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) touched on several of the points that we have heard this afternoon, including the exploitation of young boys, and rightly reminded us again of our long history of kindness as a country.

As we reflect on the Modern Slavery Act and its impact, we must ensure that our national compassion and generosity is not exploited by the cynical and the sinister. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) has said, the Modern Slavery Act's noble intentions are sometimes sadly abused by foreign criminals, who rely on suspect claims under the Act to avoid deportation. He has talked of cases that he witnessed at the Home Office of immigration lawyers submitting "copy-and-paste claims for different clients"

with no attempts made to change the details. He has discussed how, in many instances, very little proof is needed, allowing illegal migrants and foreign criminals to offer plausible-sounding stories in lieu of real evidence. That applies even in cases where migrants have previously explicitly denied that they were victims of modern slavery.

The number of modern slavery claims has gone from around 3,000 in 2015 to over 19,000 in 2025. Three quarters of those making claims are not UK citizens. The most frequent referral route for modern slavery claims is now through the immigration system. By the end of 2022, of those migrants who arrived illegally in the UK by small boat each year and were subsequently detained for return, between half and three quarters were claiming to be victims of modern slavery. In 2023, it was reported that 1,068 Albanian convicts living in Britain were awaiting deportation, among them sexual predators, violent thugs and drug dealers. Of the group, nearly a third—345—actively claimed to be modern slaves, hoping to escape removal.

The abuse of the Modern Slavery Act, where it does happen, is not just a perversion of the Act's noble intentions but an insult to this country's compassion and a deplorable diversion of vital resources from real victims. We must set an appropriate threshold for supporting evidence to ensure that the system rightly prioritises the true victims, rather than struggling under the weight of claims designed to frustrate immigration proceedings. Many of the claims made under the Modern Slavery Act are genuine pleas for help from those in the most frightening and shocking situations of abuse. We must ensure that the Act is kept up to date to protect them.

4.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): I begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend—I do not wish anyone to think that she has crossed the Floor; she is just my friend—the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) on securing this debate. As has been commented, this topic is very close to my heart, as it is to hers. Her passion and insight came through very clearly as she spoke, and I am grateful to her and everyone who has contributed.

Like her, I have a long-standing interest in these issues. They have been a feature of my work since before I came to this House. In fact, I spent many hours in meetings in Marsham Street as somebody running one of the support services in preparation for the Bill. It is truly something to be celebrated.

When the Modern Slavery Act was passed, it was a hugely significant step. I commend the right hon. Lady on her role in making that happen, alongside the then Home Secretary—now Baroness May of Maidenhead—and all the parliamentarians who have been mentioned. I am not a politician who generally gets carried away about legislation—I care about outcomes, rather than words on a page—but that really was a landmark moment, as much for the message that it sent about our determination to fight modern slavery and exploitation at home and abroad as for the measures that it introduced. The 10th anniversary of the Act gives us an opportunity to reflect on the progress that we have made and the significant challenges that remain.

The UK was once at the forefront of the fight against modern slavery, and I would very much like to see us in that role again. Before I come on to how we make that happen, I will tell a story, because many people have talked about victims in their constituency, and about misconceptions about victims of modern slavery. Like many people, I support many victims of modern slavery in my constituency. I invited a young woman who had been a victim of sexual exploitation and modern slavery to an event that I was taking my son to, because she was feeling particularly down. When she was getting into the car, I warned my son that she was a victim of modern slavery and human trafficking. After spending a full day with her, my son said to me, "But Mom, I don't understand. She was British. I didn't think you could be a victim of modern slavery if you were British." There are many misconceptions about who is using our service, and we have to ensure that it is right for all of them.

Victims are waiting too long for conclusive grounds decisions, and we know how detrimental that is to their wellbeing and recovery. That is why I have made clearing the decision-making backlog a personal priority. Our new staff started arriving in December, and I gave them the task of eradicating the backlog by December 2026. In a few short months, we have hired more than 100 new staff, and as of last month, the backlog is half the size it was at its worst in 2022. That is what real effort looks like—not endless talking, not empty commitments, not apathy, but concrete, focused action to deliver results for victims and survivors with compassion and care.

We have taken meaningful steps to decouple the issues of immigration and modern slavery, and I am pleased that modern slavery has returned to my portfolio as the safeguarding Minister. I can confirm that the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will repeal the modern slavery provisions linked to the duty to remove in the Illegal Migration Act 2023. That will ensure that there is no blanket ban on irregular migrants seeking modern slavery protections. On the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), by no means does that mean that anybody can claim to be a victim of modern slavery. For a start, people cannot refer themselves into our system for modern slavery; only Border Force, local authorities, the Salvation Army and the police can make referrals, and it is up to those agencies to ensure that referrals are made appropriately.

Our manifesto recognised the need to strengthen the response to serious exploitation. The new offence of child criminal exploitation has been included in the Crime and Policing Bill, alongside preventive orders, to provide greater protection to children who are being exploited by criminals. We will also strengthen and streamline domestic labour market enforcement through the creation of the Fair Work Agency, which will provide a more cohesive response. I heard the concerns about the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority moving into that agency. All I can say to hon. Members at the moment is that by no means does the creation of the Fair Work Agency mean that my responsibility as Minister in charge of modern slavery is removed from scrutiny of what happens in the Fair Work Agency. It will just make more work for me in a different Government Department. I understand the concerns on the subject, but the Fair Work Agency will have greater powers and resource to do work that so many people have talked about today. On Monday, I launched new statutory guidance on transparency in supply chains, which provides practical and comprehensive advice for businesses, so that they can go further, faster, in their fight against modern slavery.

We are collaborating with our international partners, too. I recently travelled to Romania to strengthen our joint approach to tackling these awful crimes. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) that while I was there, I met a woman who had been trafficked to my constituency from Romania, via Paris and London, into prostitution. I therefore very much lend my voice to what my hon. Friend said about wishing people would just stop sleeping with prostitutes, because that is exploitation of those women. The stories that they told me in Romania were absolutely harrowing. We are also working on a joint action plan with Vietnam; I will be able to share more information on that in due course.

Those are all important steps that we have tried to take in the eight months we have been in office, but there is so much more to do. To support that, we have developed the modern slavery action plan in collaboration with the non-governmental organisation sector and criminal justice partners. The plan sets out the first steps of our ambitious vision for tackling modern slavery at its root and reforming the whole system. It reinforces our commitment to working across Government, civil society, businesses and international partners to prevent exploitation, protect victims and pursue those who are responsible for such heinous crimes.

To answer the question about whether the NRM is stuck, not working and needs reform, we will soon launch a public consultation on how the Government can improve the process of identifying victims of modern slavery. If I do nothing else, the reform of the NRM is something that I feel fairly certain I can commit to. It is not working; the system does not work. I say to the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands: NRM reform? Yes, please. Let us take part in the consultation; no doubt her Committee will.

On there being a two-tier system of protection for victims—the right hon. Lady also talked about this—that is an absolute reality that I recognise. I have seen that directly from my work. The issue mentioned by more hon. Members than any other is transparency in supply chains and the need to go further. As I have said, we are

doing whatever we can in the meantime, in lieu of new legislation, to ensure that we are improving the systems that we have, and making reporting better and more transparent. However, I hear the calls very clearly.

Like the right hon. Lady, I have been waiting for a piece of modern slavery legislation. It has been promised in every speech, whether King's or Queen's, but is yet to come. With regard to that, nothing is currently off the table for Members who want to work with the Government on that. I make special mention of the Uyghur Muslims, who have been mentioned time and again in this House, and the real need for us to act robustly, especially as we see other countries advancing in this space, so that our country does not become a flooded area—a place where things can happen that cannot happen in the European Union, or among our partners in the US.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), who is looking great—it seems like we all have to say that—and other Members mentioned Hope for Justice. Hope for Justice is very much part of the core group of those we take advice from in the Department, and I speak to Euan regularly. I have met the victim navigators that many people referred to, and saw the absolute value of them. Many people mentioned devolved decision making. I am completely convinced, as a policymaker, that we should seek to expand devolved decision making as regards children—that is far more preferable.

On the review panel, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) said that 70% of decisions to turn down cases are overturned, which somewhat suggests that there is no need for a review, because the review system already overturns the decisions. I am not without sympathy on the point about the review panel; it is not something that has been particularly raised with me by the sector experts I work in concert with, but I will take that away.

As for temporary workers and domestic visas, I am very much alive to the issue of domestic worker visas, and the way that domestic workers have been forced through the NRM potentially unfairly and incorrectly. I am also quite alive to the idea that we have a visa system in our country that allows incredibly rich people to bring domestic workers with them. I have a busy job, and I cook my own dinner. As a feminist, I have a keen eye on the whole system of domestic work servitude.

I think I have answered all the questions asked of me. It pleases me that there is still huge enthusiasm in this place for pushing the issue forward, as there was 10 years ago. That will only ever be rivalled by the enthusiasm in the other place. I am glad that I am not the Minister speaking on this exact subject in the debate there tomorrow, because the Members there are a fierce force. I expect progress to be made on this issue, and I look forward to working with everybody here on all the issues. I hope that people feel that we are open to suggestions, and to working together, as I think we were when we first got there on the legislation.

4.57 pm

Dame Karen Bradley: I start by referring to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which I failed to do in my opening speech. I am worried that I may have just talked about things that I have an interest in without referring to that interest, so I have done that now. I also pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker,

[*Dame Karen Bradley*]

because you were a member of the Bill Committee, and were an integral part of delivering this legislation; we were there together, going through this.

It has been a fantastic debate. I thank everybody who has taken part, and I will briefly try to mention all of them. I say to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) that things of beauty are many and varied, but his commitment to the cause of the Uyghurs cannot be doubted, and I look forward to working with him on the matter. The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), who is an active member of the Home Affairs Committee, spoke well about his previous constituent Wilberforce. He also mentioned the resources for the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, and I again pay tribute to all those who have held the role: Eleanor Lyons, who is in the role now, Kevin Hyland and Dame Sara Thornton, who have done amazing work.

The hon. Member for Worcester (Tom Collins), who is an active member of the APPG, spoke movingly about the human reaction, and noted that we cannot take the emotion out of the issue. The points that the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) made about immigration status were so important. Immigration status is such a vulnerability, and we need to be careful. If the Minister wants to get rid of overseas domestic workers visas, she has an advocate in me.

My neighbour the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) and I share many of the same issues. We share a border, and criminals cross that border, so we need to work together. She is also an active member of the all-party group. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray)—another active and excellent member of the Home Affairs Committee—really knows what he is talking about. I want to talk to him about independent child trafficking advocates, because we want them rolled out everywhere.

The final Back-Bench contribution was from the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), who talked about his great experience. It is wonderful that we have so much experience in this House.

I thank everybody for taking part. The voices of the victims have come through in the debate, and we must never, ever forget them. I want to work across the parties on this issue, as we always have, to keep delivering for those victims. We owe it to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the tenth anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Double British Summer Time

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

5 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Spring is in the air, and it is almost time for a familiar ritual. On Sunday, the clocks will go forward by an hour, and our evenings will become lighter overnight as British summer time begins. Frankly, each time the clocks go forward and back, it is a bit of a faff. I think we have all looked in confusion at the clock on the car dashboard, trying to remember how on earth to change it. I understand that clock mechanics will be carrying out the task of adjusting the time on more than 2,000 clocks across the parliamentary estate, including on Big Ben—no mean feat! I have to say that I am always a lot happier with the spring clock change than with the autumn one, which plunges our communities into longer evenings of darkness.

Is this the right time system for today? I think it is time to talk about time. It was in 1907 that the first serious proposal for daylight saving time was made in Britain. Angry at the lack of daylight during summer mornings, a campaigner by the name of William Willett self-published a pamphlet called “The Waste of Daylight”. Although he did not live to see his proposal enacted, British summer time was first established during world war one by the Summer Time Act 1916, which is still in force today.

However, it is the experiment during the second world war—British double summer time—to which I would like to turn today. As Britain faced peril, Winston Churchill took the decision to move the clocks two hours in advance of Greenwich mean time in the summer and one hour in advance of GMT during the winter months. Why? To save energy. The crisis at the time meant that bold ideas were required. We needed to think outside the box.

Today we face a different emergency—the climate crisis—but one for which the same prescription could really help. I believe that we should learn the lessons of wartime Britain and move to double summer time: one hour ahead of GMT in the winter and two hours ahead in the summer months. We know that we must cut our emissions and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. We have a Labour Government who are seizing the moment, through Great British Energy—our new, publicly owned clean energy company—and by retrofitting homes to help families to save money on their energy bills and reduce emissions as the warm homes plan accelerates.

Another immediate, practical and effective way to cut emissions could be to make better use of the daylight that we have. By choosing Churchill time, we can reduce our energy use and lower our carbon footprint. When it is lighter in the evenings, households and businesses switch on lights and heating later. That small shift, spread across millions of homes, adds up to a significant difference. Researchers at the University of Cambridge found that an extra daily hour of sunlight in winter evenings could save £485 million in electricity bills each year. They calculated a saving of 6 GWh of energy per winter day. It would reduce carbon dioxide pollution by at least 447,000 tonnes each year, which is equivalent to more than 50,000 cars driving all the way around the world.

Evidence from Queen's University Belfast shows that Churchill time would reduce evening peak energy demands by up to 10%—roughly 5 GW of electricity taken off the grid during the busiest time of day—offering significant reductions in energy costs and emissions. All that is great news for the planet. Lighter evenings mean more time spent outdoors, in parks or on walks. They mean more time visiting cafés and pubs on our high streets, giving local businesses, particularly in the hospitality and retail sectors, a much-needed boost. When the sun sets at 4 o'clock, people rush home; they do not linger in our town centres or high streets or stop for a coffee. When the sun sets at 5 pm or 6 pm, we change the rhythm of our days. We create opportunities for commerce, connection and community. That would especially be the case in autumn half term.

In 2011, the British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions claimed that lighter evenings would increase tourism earnings by between £2.5 billion and £3.5 billion and would bring increased tax revenues and have a positive impact on the UK's balance of payments, particularly from overseas visitors. This week, the Tourism Alliance told me that there is a real case for Churchill time to boost tourism in the so-called shoulder seasons, helping more visitors to enjoy everything our amazing country has to offer all year round, which means jobs and growth.

Some will ask, "What about the mornings? Don't we need light in the mornings?" Those are fair questions. However, the evidence tells us that the cost of dark evenings is higher than the cost of dark mornings. Studies show that road collisions increase by 19% in the two weeks after the clocks go back in October. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents points out that during the working week, accidents are always higher in the afternoon/evening peak than in the morning peak. For much of the winter, during that most dangerous afternoon/evening peak, about an hour and a half is currently in darkness. This change would more than halve that.

Similarly, the AA estimates that around 100 lives a year would be saved by reducing accidents in the dark evenings. Brake, the road safety charity, told me ahead of this debate that with five people killed on our roads every day, more strategies that reduce road deaths and injuries can only be a positive thing.

Changing to lighter evenings could prevent hundreds of accidents and injuries every year. That is not just statistics; it is lives protected, hospital beds freed up and families spared tragedy. The result would be fewer injuries, less pressure on our emergency services and reduced strain on our national health service.

Sunshine cheers us up, too. According to the NHS, a lack of sunlight may lead to lower serotonin levels, which is linked to feelings of depression. Getting outside has many mood-boosting benefits.

"Surely the health, the refreshment, the happiness of such a gift cannot be overestimated!"—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1916; Vol. 82, c. 305.]

That is what the then hon. Member for Blackburn said in this place back in 1916 when debating daylight saving time. Lamenting the waste of daylight, he asked your predecessor, Madam Deputy Speaker, if there could

"be a more wasteful, more unhygienic, more senseless proceeding"—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1916; Vol. 82, c. 304.]

I will not go quite that far.

Simply put, I believe that we should make the most of what we have. I urge the Minister to consider letting us spring forward to a greener and brighter future.

5.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) for securing this debate. I am grateful for her insights and remarks on this important topic, which, as she explained, impacts on everyone's lives in one way or another. She described the clocks changing as a bit of a faff, which I think we can all appreciate. She then went on to discuss the reasons she advocates for this change in great detail. In my remarks, I will go on to explain why there are also potential negatives to what is being proposed.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, seasonal clock changes were first proposed in the early 1900s to extend daylight hours for recreation, to improve health and to save on lighting costs. At the time, clocks were set to Greenwich mean time all year round, resulting in early sunrises and sunsets in the summer. The idea gained traction during the first world war because of the need to conserve coal, which led to the adoption of changes in 1916. Biannual clock changes have continued ever since, with a brief deviation from the pattern during the second world war, when double British summer time was introduced, and between 1968 and 1972, when the clocks were put forward but not back as part of an experiment. I think those were also the first four years of my parents' marriage, an experiment that thankfully has lasted much longer. It was eventually discontinued, however, due to inconclusive results regarding its effect on road casualties.

About 70 countries worldwide currently adopt some form of daylight saving. British summer time is the UK's version of European summer time, which follows the same pattern by changing the clocks twice a year by one hour. This synchronisation allows for smooth transactions in trade, travel and communication across Europe.

The Government are aware that the issue of daylight saving has, at times, attracted extensive public and political debate, with suggestions to adopt British double summer time. British double summer time was introduced for a short period during the second world war, as I have mentioned. By extending daylight hours into the evening, it reduced the need for artificial lighting, thereby conserving fuel. Introducing British double summer time would result in clocks remaining one hour ahead of Greenwich mean time in the winter and moving two hours ahead in the summer.

By observing British summer time, the UK maintains a one-hour difference with European countries throughout the year. This would not be the case under British double summer time. Using Germany as an example, the time difference with it would vary between winter and summer. In winter, both the UK and Germany would be one hour ahead of GMT, resulting in no time difference. During summer, the UK would be one hour ahead of Germany.

The Government believe that the current daylight saving arrangements represent the optimal use of the available daylight across the UK. Changing the current arrangements would impact all citizens in the UK and

[Justin Madders]

Northern Ireland and would require public consultation and assessment of the impact on businesses across all sectors of the economy.

As my hon. Friend has mentioned, there would of course be benefits to moving to double British summer time. We know that darker hours exacerbate mental health conditions, particularly seasonal affective disorder. The shorter days and reduced natural daylight, as a result of clock changes, can worsen symptoms according to the charity Change Mental Health.

We also know that there is evidence that enforced clock changes can disrupt sleep health, especially in a forward direction such as that which currently occurs in March—and will be happening again in three days' time. However, we also know from the British Sleep Society that natural daylight in the morning is critical for alignment of our internal body clocks. Moving to double British summer time would cause darker mornings, especially in winter.

We are also aware of some evidence that abolishing clock changes would reduce road accidents. Analysis from the RAC Foundation and Road Safety Analysis shows that between 2012 and 2017 there was a 2% increase in road accidents over the two fortnightly periods when the clock changes took place. In terms of energy use, keeping to GMT plus 1 during the winter months might be expected to reduce overall energy use, as people use less artificial light in the evenings. However, the effects are likely to be small in magnitude, and may even be uncertain—there might be no effect at all.

The most significant effects are likely to be associated with lighting demand as demand switches from the evening to the morning. While there might be some benefits, there would be a risk of the UK energy system being affected by the time zone choices of neighbouring countries with which it trades gas and electricity. For example, the time difference between the UK and France means that peak demand is staggered across the two countries and allows for interconnectors to play a role in meeting peak demand throughout the year. This results in lower energy generation required in Great Britain and lower prices for consumers. If the time difference were to change, that could have impacts across the energy system, including on the benefits assumed from interconnection.

There might also be road safety impacts. Advancing the clock in spring creates a short-term disruption in sleeping patterns, which can cause fatigue. This can lead to inattention, poor decision making and delayed reaction times, all of which are contributing factors to road traffic accidents. Summer time arrangements have led to concerns about the disrupted biorhythms of animals, with respect to changing milking and feeding schedules, although of course these impacts are expected to be reduced due to the deployment of new equipment, artificial lighting and automated technologies.

The approach to daylight saving is a complex area, given the importance of just-in-time supply chains to many industries. Many sectors and businesses, example in the aviation industry, would need considerable notice of any such change.

There have been examinations of all this in the past. Following a call for evidence, the House of Lords report "Clock changes: is it time for change?" found

that the abolition of seasonal changes of time in the UK in any circumstances would require adjustments in sectors ranging from transport to energy and software development. Such adjustments would bring some transition costs, which could be burdensome for industries when scheduling, especially internationally, which would be a concern, particularly for aviation. In that report, the European Union Committee concluded that it did not receive compelling evidence to suggest that the current system of seasonal changes is problematic for the UK, while noting that there is a lack of contemporary studies on the subject.

Moving to double British summer time would create a time border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, if Ireland maintained its current approach to time. That non-alignment could cause problems for transport, particularly aviation, tourism, trade and business in general, with higher impacts if there was only a part-year alignment. This view is not only held by UK industries and representing bodies; it was also reported in EU and non-EU countries' responses to a 2018 European Commission consultation.

In the UK, seasonal changes of time facilitate lighter evenings for over half the year and reduce morning darkness in winter. The latter effect is particularly pronounced in northern parts of the UK, especially Scotland. Double British summer time in the north of Scotland would mean no daylight in the winter before 10 am, while in the rest of Scotland sunrise would be at 9 am. Opponents of change point out that in Scotland children would have to travel to and from school in darkness. As pointed out by the Scottish Government in their written evidence to the Lords Committee, farm vehicles and other large vehicles would spend more time on the roads during the hours of darkness, further adding to the risks.

In 2012 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published a review of the scope, quality and robustness of available evidence regarding clock changes. The review found that there are challenges in looking at the overall picture of the impacts that might occur across a range of issues, including energy consumption and road traffic accidents.

To conclude, this Government will always listen carefully to any arguments that are put forward around how to mitigate challenges and provide support, particularly in areas such as mental health. We appreciate the concerns raised about the potential impact of clock changes on mental health and road safety, and we will always welcome views on how we can enhance our existing measures and initiatives.

As set out in our "Get Britain Working" White Paper, the Government are committed to expanding access to NHS talking therapies for adults with common mental health conditions such as depression, including seasonal affective disorder. This Government treat road safety with the utmost seriousness, and we are committed to reducing the numbers of those killed and injured on our roads. My ministerial colleagues at the Department for Transport are developing the first road safety strategy in over a decade, and will set out more details in due course.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard again for securing the debate. She has raised some interesting points, but the evidence

for the case for change is not overwhelming. However, I will take this opportunity to remind everyone that the clocks go forward on Sunday, and it is also Mother's Day.

Question put and agreed to.
5.17 pm
House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 27 March 2025

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Prevention of Drug Deaths

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the prevention of drug deaths.

I thank all Members for being here at this well-subscribed debate. With that in mind, I will try to work to a certain timescale to ensure that everyone gets in, as I understand that there are nine speakers. Preventing drug-related deaths is an issue that touches communities across all four nations of this United Kingdom.

It is a pleasure to see the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) in her place, and I look forward to her response. I said to her beforehand that there is another debate in the main Chamber, but even I cannot be in two places at the one time; it is impossible. This is the priority, and that is why I am here.

Over the last decade, drug deaths have increased by 85% in England and Wales, 122% in Scotland and 42% in Northern Ireland. It is an unacceptable situation by any measure. Northern Ireland has the second highest drug-related death rate in the UK, nearly five times the European average. Each one of those deaths represents a profound tragedy. The tragedy is not just the person who dies; it is also the families who are affected.

I stress that each and every one of those deaths is preventable, and the situation demands urgent action. Recent data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency paints a deeply concerning picture. Drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland have risen again, albeit after a slight decrease in previous years. Behind the numbers are human beings—fathers, sons, mothers, sisters, daughters. Those are the people affected. Most alarmingly, young adults aged between 25 and 34 are dying at the highest rate. Even more stark is the fact that people in our most deprived communities are five and a half times more likely to die from drug-related causes than those in our least deprived areas.

My constituency of Strangford has not been immune to this crisis, but we have managed to stay resilient in the face of it by maintaining lower drug-related death rates compared with any other area in Northern Ireland. That is no accident; it reflects the dedication and compassion of local drug treatment service providers who, despite limited resources, tirelessly support our most vulnerable citizens. I put on the record my sincere thanks to them for their perseverance and expertise. Without their dedicated efforts, countless more lives would have been lost.

Frontline drug treatment providers in Strangford speak passionately about the daily challenges they face, and there are three key areas I wish to highlight as priorities for action. First, drug treatment service workers in Strangford stress the urgent need to integrate mental health support with drug treatment services. Drug misuse

often masks deeper issues of trauma, anxiety or depression. In Northern Ireland, with our 30-year conflict, history has left a lasting impact on the current generation.

The problem is pervasive across the United Kingdom, however. Research indicates that 70% of people in community drug treatment have reoccurring and co-occurring mental health needs. An investigation into coroners' records of people who died from drug poisoning found that a mental health condition was noted in at least two thirds of those cases, yet only 14% of the individuals were in contact with mental health services. A quarter had a history of suicide attempts, rising to 50% among those whose deaths were classified as suicide. Mental health is the No. 1 issue when it comes to drug deaths across this great United Kingdom.

The healthcare system and local authorities share a clear responsibility to provide comprehensive support. Far too many who suffer from both mental health issues and substance misuse are excluded from vital services. It is deeply concerning that mental health services often turn away individuals because of their substance use—I put it on the record that I think that is wrong—while drug and alcohol treatment services cannot accommodate those who are deemed to have mental health conditions that are considered too severe.

The cycle of exclusion disproportionately impacts people with serious mental illnesses, leaving some of the most vulnerable trapped between providers and unable to access the care they desperately need. The hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden) made a similar point three years ago in a Westminster Hall debate that I attended. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place, and I understand it is her third Westminster Hall debate as responding Minister. What progress has been made since that debate was held three years ago?

The other critical barrier is stigma. Stigma surrounding drug use isolates people, silences their cries for help and deters them from engaging with essential services and reintegrating into society. That compounds mental health struggles and prolongs their suffering. Let us not stigmatise drug users; let us help them—that is my big request. It is crucial that we challenge harmful attitudes in our communities, in our health services and, indeed, in the Houses of Parliament, among hon. Members and the Government, who have a responsibility. Addressing stigma means recognising that addiction is a health issue and not, as some people might think, a moral failing. I am not being disrespectful to anyone, but that is how I look at it and I hope that others will too.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing the debate. The last Government published a paper on this subject, “From harm to hope”, but it fell short of the vision set out by Dame Carol Black for how we get on top of the significant harm that people experience. Does he agree that alongside a public health approach to substance misuse, we need harm reduction units so that people who are drug users can access the care and support that they need to make their first contact with professional services?

Jim Shannon: I suspect that the hon. Lady and I agree on many things, and on this point we are also on the same page. I will come to Carol Black's report and some of its recommendations. The hon. Lady has pre-empted me, but I thank her for setting the scene.

[Jim Shannon]

A 2022 YouGov poll found that two thirds of Britons believe that Government do too little to address addiction in our society. I respectfully believe that the Minister and the Government have an obligation to do something about this, because 66% of the nation want something to happen. Perhaps more tellingly, 49% of Britons—almost half—see addiction as a mental health issue that calls for compassionate, health-centred responses. That is very clear. In contrast, only 19% think that addiction should be treated as a criminal matter. That is something to think about. Without addressing the stigma underlying mental health conditions, we cannot hope to tackle drug dependency and its harms effectively. We must end harmful practices; we must ensure that integrated support is available to everyone who requires it; and we must ensure that our mental health care and drug treatment service systems are properly equipped and working with a joined-up approach.

That brings me to my second point, which will be quick, because I am conscious of time. Current practice is ineffective. It prevents services from planning ahead, denies them the security necessary to retain their staff and undermines the long-term progress of their clients. I am not being disrespectful to anyone—that is never my way of doing things—but before this Government came into power, the previous Government took an approach that involved short-term stop-gap budgets. We need something long term, with the continuity necessary to recruit and plan strategically. That is what we should focus on.

An National Audit Office report notes that short-term funding causes

“delays in commissioning services and recruiting new staff”,

leading to service gaps and workforce instability. Those workforces are on the frontline—on the coal quay, as we call it back home—the first person you meet, the first person you see and the first person you need help from. This instability, described by the NAO as a

“de-professionalisation of the treatment workforce”,

damages the quality of care. The NAO identified under-spending of £22 million, with 15% across the treatment and recovery stream. We really have to fix that.

Dame Carol Black’s review called for improved funding and rebuilding of the decimated drug treatment workforce, following the 40% real-terms reduction in funding that we witnessed from 2012 to 2020. She referred to disjointed approaches, struggling staff, increasing costs and decreased funding. Given those challenges, it is no wonder that services are unable to provide the quality that is needed. We must shift to a model in which people feel welcomed and cared for in drug treatment services; in which interventions foster engagement and trust between clients and key workers; and in which we uphold promises to reduce harm, lessen pressure on the health and justice system and ultimately strengthen our communities, helping those whom we represent.

Harm reduction is an essential lifeline for individuals and communities across Northern Ireland, and indeed across this whole great United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, it is evidence-based and compassionate, and it places people at its very heart, meeting them exactly where they are by providing accessible, low-barrier support services. Harm reduction saves lives by preventing overdoses,

reduces the spread of infectious diseases—that happens with those who use needles—and significantly improves both physical and mental health outcomes. Harm reduction does not enable drug use; it enables the saving of lives, the restoration of dignity and the reconnection of people to their communities. That has to be our goal, through the Minister.

The harrowing statistics that I have laid out demand that we revisit the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which is now more than 50 years old and has never been formally reviewed. It is time we had a long, hard look at where we are and where we need to be, and moved forward with professional and compassionate methods. The Act restricts many harm reduction interventions that international evidence has shown to be effective, but that we cannot fully implement here. We must ask, in the face of an ongoing and real rise in drug deaths and the undeniable potential for more, whether this legislation remains fit for purpose.

Before the election—I say this respectfully for the record, because hon. Members will know it is not my form to attack anyone—the Prime Minister indicated on the campaign trail that he would not make changes to the drug policy. The point I want to make is that I think it is time we did. I have the utmost respect for the Prime Minister, but I think it is time we had more flexibility and meaningful change to adapt to a changing drug market.

In recent years, the UK has seen a surge in synthetic opioids, a dangerous and highly potent substance peddled by unscrupulous organisations that rob families of fathers, brothers and children. They must be stopped, and we need a drugs policy in place to do just that. It has become clear that simply classifying substances in higher categories or imposing longer sentences is not enough. If it is not enough, we must look at a different way.

Nitazenes, which are up to a thousand times more potent than morphine, have already claimed the lives of hundreds in the UK, and their presence in the illicit drug supply is rising. According to the latest drug-related death statistics, opioids were the most common drug associated with drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland, and I believe those figures are replicated on the mainland as well. If we do not act now, the statistics will only become more devastating.

Dame Carol Black’s review on drugs made some progress, so let us not be churlish. There have been advances and steps in the right direction, but have they gone far enough? I do not believe they have, and others will probably confirm that. The Government recently legislated to expand the provision of the lifesaving drug naloxone, which is used to reverse opioid overdoses. I welcome those changes and understand the need for them, but they are not enough. I am sorry to say that, but we really need to have a new look at the issue. We are falling behind our international partners in tackling the crisis, failing to safeguard our constituents and allowing criminal organisations to profit immensely from their illegal drug trade.

Harm reduction should not be controversial. It is simply about saving lives and mitigating the harms associated with drug use. Historically, the UK led the world in harm reduction, with Liverpool being the birthplace of efforts to reduce drug-related deaths and infectious disease. Every 90 minutes in the UK, someone dies a drug-related death, meaning that during this

debate, at least one life will be lost. Only 10 years ago, the figure was one death every two and a half hours. The situation is becoming incredibly serious. We must act now if we are truly committed to ending the crisis, and we must go beyond the medical and behavioural solutions that some have suggested.

Another related issue is the serious concern of death by suicide. The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), who had an Adjournment debate on Monday night, referred to suicide in his constituency. In Northern Ireland, 70% of the suicides are by men, and the majority of them occur in deprived areas. The very thing that the hon. Gentleman talked about in his Adjournment debate is happening in my constituency and across the whole of Northern Ireland. A new standard, BS 9988, has been drafted by people with expertise in the policy area, and comprehensive guidelines will be brought forward to support organisations in developing an effective suicide prevention strategy.

Those are some of the things that I wish to say. I am coming to the end of my speech; I am conscious that nine people wish to speak, and I want to give every one of them the chance to make their contribution.

In Strangford, a local drug treatment service and prevention programme has been designed specifically for the friends and families of people who use drugs. It provides a vital space in which they can support each other, learn from each other and realise that they are not alone—it is important that people are not alone, thinking that the whole world is against them and that they have to try to get through it themselves. It also trains the loved ones in naloxone administration so that they can save a life if necessary, and discusses the risks of drug use and how to mitigate them. Most importantly, it brings the community together in a team effort so that they can put their arms around people. That shared purpose enables them to care for those they hold dear and support them through the challenging journey of addiction. I am told that the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

I tell that story because, despite the darkness of what this debate is about, we also have to see that a light can shine and take us to somewhere we can be better. That is what I want to do. As a country, we must do the same and act collectively with compassion and purpose.

Drug-related deaths are not inevitable; they result from choices made—I say this with respect—in this House. The United Kingdom has the expertise and evidence, domestic and international, to act decisively. We have a moral obligation to safeguard our communities, reduce pressure on our strained healthcare system and spend money responsibly.

I call on the Government and the Minister—the responsibility for responding to this debate is on her shoulders, but I know she will not be found wanting—to prioritise the lives of our most vulnerable citizens, protect the healthcare system, act preventatively against drug-related deaths and commit to a fully funded, evidence-based harm reduction approach. This debate can be the first step in moving us forward, and if we do that I believe we will have done an honourable job on behalf of our constituents.

We must discuss the very difficult issue of drug deaths across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They are too high, and

they have to come down. We need a new strategy and a new way of looking at it. I have suggested some things from my constituency that we can do in Northern Ireland, and I very much look forward to hearing other hon. Members' contributions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. There is a lot of interest in this debate. I will not set a firm limit on speeches, but I suggest that an indicative three minutes should get most people in, but probably not all. I remind Members that if they want to speak, they have to indicate that they wish to do so.

1.47 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my good and honourable friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), on securing this really important debate. Not for the first time, I find myself agreeing with what he said.

Drug deaths are at a record high. They are mainly from opioids, but deaths from cocaine have risen by almost a third. As the hon. Gentleman said, synthetic opioids such as Fentanyl and the nitazenes present an increasing and alarming threat, which has not been properly quantified. We have seen the growth in the number of deaths across the Atlantic, and I suspect the problem is much bigger here than we think.

There is no doubt that this is a public health crisis. Sadly, the north-east of England has the highest rate of drug deaths in England—three times higher than London. In the latest stats, released in October 2024, the north-east recorded 174 deaths per million, compared with an England average of 90. Too often, in the communities I represent, I have seen people turn to drugs because of deprivation and despair. Once addiction takes hold, it often leads to crime. It is no coincidence that drug deaths are highest in the areas of greatest deprivation. The data is clear: communities struggling with poverty and inequality are those hit hardest by addiction.

This is not a new problem—certainly, it is complex—but it is being exacerbated by disinvestment in harm reduction and drug treatment programmes. If we are serious about tackling this problem, we need to do something different. To some, a tougher crackdown may seem the obvious response, but we have more than 50 years of evidence showing that punitive drug policies do not work. The war on drugs has failed, not just in the UK but globally. We cannot simply arrest our way out of this crisis. That is why today I want to offer a different perspective, which moves beyond outdated, one-size-fits-all approaches.

Abstinence-based recovery is one path, but it is not the only one. If we truly want to reduce drug deaths and support recovery, we must reduce harm, reduce stigma and invest in treatment provision, with protected, ringfenced and sustained long-term funding. That funding could support solutions such as opioid substitution treatment, which saves an estimated 1,000 lives annually; medically supervised overdose prevention centres, like the Thistle safer consumption facility in Glasgow; heroin-assisted treatment; and increased availability of drug testing. Those measures are crucial in addressing the current crisis and saving lives.

[Grahame Morris]

As chair of the drugs, alcohol and justice all-party parliamentary group—supported by treatment providers Via, Waythrough and WithYou—I recently had the honour of chairing a meeting at which Professor Sir Michael Marmot, the leading expert in health inequalities, laid out the stark reality. He told us:

“Social injustice is killing on a grand scale.”

He made it clear that areas of the greatest deprivation suffered the deepest cuts during austerity, exacerbating addiction and its consequences. I encourage the Minister and all Ministers to consider how we as a nation can adopt the Marmot principles—principles that foster a fairer, more equitable society in which everyone is given the best possible start in life and we work to prevent “deaths of despair”.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to mention a dear friend of mine who is no longer with us—the late Ron Hogg, who was the police and crime commissioner in Durham. He was a true pioneer of drug policy reform. He was bold, compassionate and unafraid to challenge the status quo. He introduced heroin-assisted treatment and diversion schemes at a time when they were far from popular, but popularity was not his goal. He was seeking to reduce harm, save lives and ease the burden on our criminal justice system.

The evidence is clear: investment in treatment works; harm reduction saves lives; and tackling stigma is essential. We must stop seeing addiction solely as a criminal justice issue and instead treat it as a public health emergency.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Short speeches mean that more colleagues get in.

1.52 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the important issue that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has brought before us today. The UK’s outdated drug laws, intended to protect citizens, have deepened harm and opened the door to criminal gangs. That has led to a state in which in 2023 there were nearly 7,000 deaths from illegal drug use—a tragic failure to shield vulnerable people from the dangerous reach of the illegal market.

The so-called war on drugs, championed by successive Governments, has not halted the supply of harmful substances. It has neither reduced addiction nor prevented disastrous impacts on families and communities. The emphasis on enforcement has allowed underground networks to thrive, and ultimately neglected the fundamental public health challenges at hand.

We have clear evidence that we need to switch to a new approach, under which compassion and an understanding of addiction as a medical issue guide decision making. I have seen at first hand the impact that that switch can make, having recently visited the safe consumption facility in Scotland and two that are well established in Norway. That allowed me to see how such facilities not only save lives but help communities. They allow addicts to access services and get the care and support that they need. By offering a clean and monitored environment for those who are dependent on drugs, those centres have reduced open-air drug use in

surrounding areas, helped more people to step on to the pathway to treatment and support, and saved the lives of users.

So, it is with the lives of users and our communities in mind that I urge the Government to focus attention on three vital reforms. First, transfer the policy lead from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Care, ensuring that addiction is tackled as a health condition and not merely as a criminal matter. Secondly, invest in robust, evidence-based addiction services that make help readily available and eliminate waiting times. Thirdly, replace criminal penalties for simple possession with civil penalties where appropriate, empowering treatment options over punishment.

By enacting these reforms at a national level we can send a clear message, putting people’s health first, saving lives and restoring dignity to families and communities that have borne the brunt of drug-related harms. Most important, we will begin to break the cycle of ineffective criminalisation, offering hope and a genuine path forward to those struggling with addiction.

1.56 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Dr Murrison, to serve under your chairship. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this vital Westminster Hall debate.

With your leave, Dr Murrison, I will begin by paying tribute to Christina McKelvie, MSP and Scottish Government Minister, who sadly died earlier today. Christina was taking leave for cancer treatment. She was the Scottish Government Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy in the Scottish Parliament. Our thoughts are with her partner, Keith Brown MSP, and her family.

In my West Dunbartonshire constituency, drug-related deaths increased this year. Figures released in August 2024 from National Records of Scotland showed that in Scotland 1,172 people died due to drug misuse, which was an increase of 121 deaths on the previous period. In the West Dunbartonshire local authority area, which is a very small one, the rise was from 20 to 26, comprising the deaths of nine females and 17 males. Opioids, including heroin, morphine and methadone, were implicated in 80% of those deaths. I pay tribute to Alternatives, a West Dunbartonshire community drug service. Its staff and volunteers do incredible work to tackle drug addiction, offering support across my constituency, as does the West Dunbartonshire Drug and Alcohol Partnership. Of course, as the hon. Member for Strangford said in his opening remarks, there are a person, a family and a story behind every statistic, and it is very important to remember that.

People in the most deprived areas of Scotland are more than 15 times as likely to die from drug misuse as people in less deprived areas, and I suspect that the same is true for Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government and the UK Government need to do more.

The “Evaluation of the National Mission on Drug Deaths” report, which was released last month, found that only one in three alcohol and drug partnership co-ordinators believed that Scottish Government leadership was effective. The report makes it clear that those who understand the drug deaths crisis best do not have faith in the SNP Scottish Government’s leadership. So, the

SNP must listen to frontline workers and work with them to deliver the funding that this essential mission needs, properly fund local government, and reverse the cuts to our local health and social care partnerships, which fund and support the frontline organisations across West Dunbartonshire, such as Alternatives, and across our country.

1.59 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate.

This issue is of great concern to me and my constituents in Brighton Pavilion. Between July 2023 and June 2024, more than 160 people attended A&E at the Royal Sussex County hospital in Brighton because of drug-related overdoses. There were 46 drug poisoning deaths in my constituency in 2023.

Every drug death is a preventable, devastating tragedy. The organisation Anyone's Child: Families for Safer Drug Control amplifies the voices of those who have been directly impacted by drug policy failures, and it is now calling for the legal control and regulation of the drug market. For the past 12 years, drug deaths have increased each year in the UK, while the supply and trade have only become more violent, toxic and exploitative, especially for children. We should declare a public health emergency. Policing, stigma and criminal records cannot adequately address this crisis, but compassionate care, stability in housing and employment, and access to treatment can.

Preventive treatment is patchy across the country. Funding is inconsistent, and there have been inappropriate targets and cuts to public health budgets. When a person is defined as a criminal for using drugs, they will be deterred from seeking drug-related services and support. The reality is that people are using and supplying drugs, and instead of keeping them safe, Government policy stigmatises and criminalises them. The Government's punitive law and order approach is having terrible consequences for marginalised communities that experience violent over-policing—especially black people, who are four times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched, mainly for drugs, despite this being completely disproportionate to drug-use patterns.

Like others, I urge the Minister to outline positive steps to take drugs out of the hands of organised crime and put them into the hands of health professionals through legal regulation. I want the Minister to outline steps towards significant and sustained increases in funding for drug treatment services, and towards removing legal barriers to harm reduction interventions, including drug consumption facilities like the one in Glasgow mentioned by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister). I want to see steps towards the evidence-based decriminalisation of drug consumption and a longer-term road map towards legal regulation.

We have the evidence on how to address this crisis and save these lives, but do we have the will?

2.2 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing a debate on this serious and important topic.

Across England and Wales, there has been a 113% increase in drug-related fatalities in the last decade, and the impact of illegal drugs costs the Government around £20 billion a year. The number of deaths has been rising steadily since 2012, in line with the austerity measures introduced by the previous Government that resulted in a reduction in funding for treatment services. The National Audit Office reports that, between 2014 and 2022, real-terms funding for drug and alcohol treatment in England fell by 40%.

Deprivation leads to more drug deaths, but even in Wolverhampton West, which is not as deprived as some areas in the north-east of England, the number of drug-related deaths has risen sharply since 2021 to reach levels above the national average. What funding will be made available to deal with drug addiction? Public Health England recently found that 50% of those dying from opioid use had not been in contact with any support services in the previous five years.

We need a holistic approach to the problem of drug misuse that invests in our mental health services, reduces levels of deprivation and encourages those who use drugs to engage with services. Reducing the number of drug deaths would be incredibly cost-effective, resulting in a reduction in drug addiction and crime associated with drug usage. Dame Carol Black, who has already been mentioned this afternoon, found that every £1 invested in harm reduction and treatment services produces a £4 return to the health and justice systems.

We must continue to support and fund the amazing work of organisations that focus on the issue of drug abuse. Wolverhampton Voluntary and Community Action provides a service user involvement team in my constituency and throughout Wolverhampton. The SUIT is a peer-led service, led by people with first-hand experience of drug and alcohol abuse. It supports not only addiction recovery, but mental and physical health, wellbeing, homelessness, employment, welfare and housing, and tackling the stigma and discrimination around drug use. We need to invest in and support such organisations.

2.5 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this crucial debate.

The statistics are harrowing, as other Members have said, but how have we got here? A decade-long disinvestment in drug treatment services, approaches more fit for scoring political points than actually solving a problem, a complete disregard for the expert guidance provided by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and an utter lack of expediency. Given those factors, it is little wonder that we have ended up in this position.

My work as the unremunerated chair of the Centre for Evidence Based Drug Policy has shown me that there are practical measures that can make a real difference. Diamorphine-assisted therapy, or DAT, has a robust evidence base for helping people who have not responded to other treatment modalities reduce their illicit drug use.

A DAT clinic in Middlesbrough demonstrated extraordinary outcomes: a 97% attendance rate, an 80% reduction in street heroin use, and a drastic drop in criminal activity—from 541 offences before treatment to just three in the same period following treatment. Those outcomes translated into an estimated £2.1 million saving across the health and criminal justice sectors, in addition to the lives saved.

[Charlotte Nichols]

Tragically, the clinic was closed due to fragmented, unsustainable funding—yet another example of short-term thinking undermining long-term gains. The enhanced drug treatment service in Glasgow, which offers a similar model, has estimated that its services have resulted in a 50% to 70% reduction in health service costs.

We are not alone in calling for these changes. A 2023 report by the Home Affairs Committee made it clear that harm reduction must play a far greater role in UK drugs policy. Its recommendations offer a pragmatic road map, and the Government must act on them if they are serious about reducing drug-related deaths. Most of the interventions require only minor amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which, after more than 50 years, appears increasingly unfit for purpose.

Currently, the 1971 Act blocks the establishment of safer drug consumption facilities and overdose prevention centres, and the distribution of vital harm-reduction paraphernalia by qualified drug treatment services. That includes safer inhalation pipes, which remain illegal under section 9A, even though corner shops can legally sell dangerous, poor-quality pipes with no health oversight, under the guise of ornaments.

A pilot is currently taking place in parts of England, with police support, and shows promising early results, including reductions in high-risk practices and increased awareness of the harms associated with drugs and how to reduce them. There are a number of services in my constituency that I am very proud of, but, to save the House's time, I will not detail them. One of those is Change Grow Live, and I give massive credit to its work.

When stigma shapes policy, we see punitive laws, fragmented services and inevitably soaring mortality rates. When compassion and evidence shape policy, we see reduced deaths, safer communities, diminished profits for criminal organisations and better returns on public investment. This is not just a moral imperative, but a public health necessity.

2.9 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing such an important debate.

We have seen some of the worst outcomes on drug-related deaths in Europe. In England and Wales, there was an 85% increase in drug deaths between 2013 and 2023. Meanwhile, spending on drug and alcohol services decreased by around 40%. In Stoke-on-Trent, spending on treatment for drug misuse fell by 21% between 2019 and 2023.

Preventive services must remain at the heart of our approach. As we have heard, an independent review reported that for every £1 spent on treatment, £4 is saved by reducing demands on health and justice services. In Stoke-on-Trent and Kidsgrove, residents have been concerned about young people inhaling butane gas, aerosols and nitrous oxide. However, there is currently no public measure of deaths associated with these substances in England and Wales. The absence of a public measure of mortality makes it difficult to understand the depth of this problem. Another key local concern is monkey dust, which is the colloquial name for synthetic cathinones. The use of monkey dust in our town centres and parks worries people, and cracking down on its use is critical to our safer streets mission.

I want people like my mum and dad to feel safe when they are out and about. The community safety team at Stoke-on-Trent city council does excellent work in this field. It does regular walks of our towns and parks, alongside the police and drug service teams, offering support directly to those who need it.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has suggested a series of interventions to tackle the rising use of monkey dust. This includes expanding trauma-informed treatment for vulnerable people and encouraging stronger collaboration between housing, health and justice services.

We know that drug dependency is linked to deprivation, and that in the most deprived areas, men are six times more likely and women almost five times more likely to die from drug use. In Stoke-on-Trent, our annual rate of drug deaths was 10.8 per 100,000 between 2020 and 2022, which is double the rate for England. In Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, fantastic community organisations such as Walk Ministries and Expert Citizens work tirelessly to address the issues on the ground. I also thank the Stoke-on-Trent community drug and alcohol service for its critical work.

Finally, it is a devastating fact that Stoke-on-Trent has one of the highest rates of infant mortality anywhere in the country, and we know that parental drug use is linked to sudden infant death syndrome, as reported by the national child mortality database. More must be done to address the impact of drug harms on children and families. I therefore close by asking the Minister to consider the merits of a cross-departmental strategy to address the impacts of parental drug use on infant health and mortality.

2.12 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing a debate on this important subject. I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) about Christina McKelvie. I served in the Scottish Parliament with Christina for some 10 years, and she was, perhaps ironically, a real lover of life and a force for good.

I will focus on the Scottish Affairs Committee's ongoing inquiry into the operation of the safer drug consumption facility in Glasgow, which is the first of its kind in the UK. My contribution will be entirely factual, as I do not want to prejudice the inquiry in any way, or to pre-empt any decisions the Committee may make. It is an important issue and relevant to this debate.

To give some context to the rationale for the safer drug consumption room: Scotland has the highest number of drug deaths in Europe by some margin. The data tell us that some 1,172 people died in 2023 alone, which was up by 121 on the previous year. Much of the action that can be taken to address this problem comes under the powers of the Scottish Government, but that, of course, does not include issues arising from the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

The Scottish Government have introduced a variety of measures, but I am speaking specifically about the safer drug consumption space. There are now some 200 such facilities in 12 countries around the globe, and the Scottish Parliament's information centre explains that:

“Several long-term evaluations indicate that attendees of SDCFs engage safer injecting practices and reduce public injecting, leading to significant declines in HIV and Hepatitis C transmission and fewer ambulance callouts for overdoses.”

The idea of such a facility in Glasgow was first raised more than 10 years ago, but a variety of issues, including the reluctance of the then Lord Advocate, meant that the pilot facility opened in Glasgow only in January 2025, following considerable public engagement and after the current Lord Advocate provided a statement of prosecution policy. Although the possession of drugs remains a criminal offence, the Lord Advocate has indicated that it would not be in the public interest to prosecute users of the facility for simple possession offences, subject to certain limitations. I stress that this applies only to the facility.

Last month the Scottish Affairs Committee visited the Thistle, as the Glasgow facility is known, and we saw for ourselves what was on offer. Users have access to a shower and can receive treatment for wounds and other health issues associated with their addiction. Discrete spaces where users can inject are also available, and staff can offer clean needles. Users bring their own drugs, but staff can give advice when they become aware that a particularly strong or pure drug might be in circulation, so that users are aware of potential dangers. Clients can choose to stay at the centre for a time after injecting. So far, two overdoses have occurred on the premises, but they were dealt with either on site or in other locations, and both individuals made a recovery. Staff can also signpost clients to other services.

Since the Thistle opened in January, there have been over 140 unique service users, more than 1,000 visits, more than 700 injecting episodes managed on site, and the prevention of some 700 to 800 items of drug-related litter in public spaces in the vicinity of the centre. Eighty per cent of the clients are male.

The Thistle is a pilot scheme and will be carefully reviewed and analysed over the next three years to ascertain whether it has helped to reduce bloodborne viruses and other drug-related harms and death. It has become clear to the Committee that the staff working at the Thistle are dedicated, committed, welcoming and non-judgmental. I encourage Members to look out for our report when it is published.

2.16 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. I associate myself with the comments regarding Christina McKelvie MSP.

I stand here today to address a crisis that has devastated lives, families and communities across Scotland. It is a crisis that demands our attention, our compassion and, most importantly, accountability. I am speaking about the tragic rise of drug deaths in Scotland—a problem that for far too long has been exacerbated by failures in leadership and policy, particularly under the SNP Scottish Government.

At a constituency visit to the Patchwork Recovery Community in Kilmarnock a few weeks ago, I was starkly reminded of the enormity of the crisis during conversations with people who shared their thoughts about and experiences of the deaths of family members and friends due to drugs. They expressed the deep suffering and loss of those individuals.

The Scottish Government must start to deliver a genuinely joined-up approach to tackling the drug-deaths crisis, and ensure that every single person struggling with drug issues can get the care, support and treatment they need. For too long, the SNP Government have failed to address the crisis in a meaningful way. Despite Scotland's long-standing recognition of its drug-death problem, the Scottish Government's approach has been too slow, too reactive and too piecemeal. While other countries have taken bold action to tackle opioid crises and improve access to treatment, Scotland's response has been inconsistent and insufficient. This stems from drastic cuts to public services over the last decade.

Glasgow is at the centre of the drugs epidemic, with the highest rate of drug-misuse death in Scotland in the 2019-23 period. The Thistle facility in Glasgow is the UK's first official consumption room for illegal drugs. It is being appropriately scrutinised by the Scottish Affairs Committee as to its effectiveness in protecting Glaswegians who are impacted by drug abuse.

The SNP's approach to harm reduction is inconsistent. There remain gaps in the availability of crucial services such as detox, rehabilitation and mental health support. It is no secret that drug addiction is often tied to underlying mental health challenges, yet too many people struggling with both have nowhere to turn for help. The lack of funding for rehab services and the slow pace of reform shows a Government who are not focused on the drug crisis or on prioritising the lives of their citizens.

Scotland's drug-deaths crisis is not just about the statistics: it is about people. It is about mothers, fathers, sons and daughters whose lives have been cut short because the response from those in power was inadequate. After 1,171 deaths, how many more lives need to be lost before real change happens? How many more families must be shattered before the Scottish Government take full responsibility for the tragedy?

The SNP has had years to make meaningful change, yet we continue to see preventable deaths and suffering. We can no longer afford to ignore the crisis. We need urgent action from the Scottish Government. It is time for a comprehensive, compassionate and co-ordinated approach to tackling drug deaths that prioritises the health and wellbeing of those affected. We need better access to treatment, more rehabilitation services and a focus on addressing the root causes of addiction.

Scotland demands better from the SNP Government. The families who have lost loved ones, the communities that are hurting and the individuals who are still fighting addiction deserve better. They deserve a Government who are willing to act decisively without hesitation to save lives.

2.19 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, as the prevention of drug-related deaths affects many in all our constituencies across the country.

Drug misuse is a complex problem with many causes and impacts, but one thing is clear: the current rates of death are completely unacceptable. In 2022, there were 7,912 alcohol-specific deaths. In 2023, 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning were registered in England and Wales. That is the highest number since records began and a tragedy that has to stop. We cannot allow this crisis to continue unchecked.

[Leigh Ingham]

In last week's business questions, I spoke about how important community services are in supporting people with substance misuse issues. One example that stands out in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages is Chase Recovery, a truly innovative, community-based, peer-led rehabilitation programme. I recently had the privilege of visiting and saw at first hand the incredible impact the programme is having on the lives of those seeking recovery from substance misuse. It is not just a treatment programme but a lifeline for those who need it most. It offers a holistic, supportive environment where individuals can recover, rebuild their lives and develop new skills and confidence. Truly, I could not describe it as anything more than a really welcoming and supportive community.

During my visit I had the pleasure of meeting Paul and Cara, who run the organisation. They are incredibly passionate people who lead the programme with incredible dedication. Their drive and commitment to helping others is truly inspiring. They are making a difference every single day, and I have no doubt that the work they are doing is helping people to achieve long-term recovery and to rebuild their lives in a meaningful way.

Programmes like Chase Recovery prove how community-based, peer-led services can play a vital role in sustainable, long-term recovery, but those programmes need support from the Government to ensure that they can continue their vital work and reach even more people in need. It only takes one helping hand to change someone's life. I encourage the Minister to outline what the Government are doing not only on prevention but on community-led treatment.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): That was commendably brief.

2.22 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dr Murrison. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate.

As colleagues have said, 5,448 drug-related deaths in England and Wales is truly a public health crisis, and we need a response that meets the urgency of that crisis. When the last Labour Government came into power, we were approaching 2,000 drug-related deaths a year, and that was considered serious enough at the time to implement a new national drug strategy, with funding, and to set up a national treatment agency to provide evidence-based treatment. That was at almost 2,000 deaths a year.

The effect of that intervention was that drug-related deaths, which had been inexorably rising for a decade or more, levelled out and stopped rising. Thousands of lives were saved and improved. I know a little bit about that, because it was the privilege of my NHS career to manage NHS drug treatment services in the north-east of England for three years when that strategy and system were in place. A harm-reduction approach was key to treatment, as other colleagues have said.

Drug deaths are horrific, and so are the wider harms, including the impact on crime. The amount of acquisitive crime in this country that is driven by addiction is really significant. The Government are focused rightly on tackling crime as well as wider health themes. This is an intervention that meets a lot of the Government's missions.

The harms around children are also significant. Many children are taken into care as a result of parental drug use. A prevention approach would reduce costs for the state by ensuring appropriate drug treatment.

Treatment, particularly for opiate use, must focus on substitution therapies. It was disappointing that in the last decade ideology against opiate-substitution treatment trumped the evidence base for it. There are people who could still be alive today if it were not for that ideology. The scale of the treatment gap is significant. In Sunderland, in my constituency, adult mortality from drug causes is about twice the average in England, but around 60% of opiate and crack users are not in treatment today. That must change, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on that.

Under the last Labour Government, the policy and health landscape was rather different. As well as the policy urgency, there were clear national levers to pull, with a primary one being the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse. Since then, we have moved to a more diffuse system that is not at the centre of Government but commissioned by each council individually through the public health grant. The provider landscape has fragmented. Whereas NHS treatment services used to be the norm, now there is a significant pattern of commissioning—in some cases there is competitive tendering every few years. That has not helped to tackle this issue with the urgency it needs.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister. I do not think legislation is required to improve treatment. This issue requires clear political will and focus, and I hope we will hear a lot more of that from the Government today and in the coming months.

2.26 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I associate myself with the remarks from Scottish colleagues about Christina McKelvie.

Between 2010 and 2023, 333 people in Falkirk lost their lives to drug misuse. Our worst year was 2018, when 43 people died. Every one of those people was a family member—someone's child or parent—tragically or prematurely taken. Part of the reason why that number is so high is that Scotland has the greatest number of drug deaths anywhere in Europe. I want to use my speech to talk about where we have gone wrong and what we have started to get right.

Although I acknowledge that it was only one tool in the arsenal of public health responses, medication-assisted treatment such as methadone has been shown to reduce overdose deaths significantly. The abandonment of Scotland's 10-year drug strategy decades ago is a failure that should teach us the lesson of never returning to unscientific moralising drug policy. We should focus on real action and harm reduction. More recently, harm reduction policies such as naloxone distribution have saved lives by reversing opioid overdoses in Falkirk. The Falkirk Alcohol and Drug Partnership has taken incredible steps in encouraging the awareness and use of naloxone, and I pay tribute to its lead officer, Phil Heaton. We should go further on harm reduction.

Safer drug consumption facilities are proven to reduce overdose deaths in other countries. They have been piloted in Glasgow, as my hon. Friend the Member for

Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) explained. The sites provide medical supervision, sterile equipment and a gateway to treatment for those ready to take the next step towards recovery, instead of wrongly expecting people to go cold turkey, which does not work. Harm reduction saves lives.

Drug addiction is not a spontaneous phenomenon: it is deeply intertwined with social and economic conditions. People in Scotland's most deprived areas are more than 15 times more likely to die from drug misuse than those in the wealthiest areas. We need a holistic approach that looks at root causes: poverty and deprivation.

When looking at drug deaths, we must also think about demographics. Many of those dying today in Scotland first became addicted in the 1980s and 1990s, during the economic shock of deindustrialisation, and are maligned with stigma and a lack of support. The average age of drug-misuse death has increased from 32 in 2000 to 45 today. Now in middle age, the health of that generation is failing fast, making them more vulnerable to fatal overdoses. We need to look at the demographic changes and where we are failing.

Addiction treatment, chronic disease management, financial support for the disabled and mental health services are all essential factors. I acknowledge that this is not an easy issue for Governments to tackle. It is wrapped in dozens of policy points and often involves those Governments find it the hardest to reach. Most of all, it is an issue of injustice, of lack of opportunities and of general social failure. We need to listen to our communities and take real action.

2.29 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important debate. I am particularly pleased to see the Minister in her place, which shows the Government's recognition that this is a public health issue. Every drug-related death is a preventable tragedy. Every life lost represents not just statistics in a report, but families shattered, futures lost and communities left to pick up the pieces. As a Government and a society, we have a moral obligation to do better.

The reality is stark, and it has been laid out very well by Members across the House in the debate: drug-related deaths have reached record highs. They are not just the consequence of addiction but often the result of inadequate support, stigma—as has been mentioned by many hon. Members—and a failure to adopt evidence-based strategies. In 2023, more than 5,000 deaths related to drug poisoning were registered in England and Wales. That is the highest number since records began in 1993 and 11% higher than in the previous year. My local hospital, which is in Chichester, records hundreds of A&E attendances involving drug use.

For too long, the response to drug use has been focused on criminalisation rather than treatment. However, as hon. Members have said today, we cannot arrest our way out of the crisis. Those struggling with addiction need access to healthcare, not handcuffs. That means properly funding rehabilitation services, expanding mental health support and ensuring that no one seeking help is turned away due to lack of resources.

For me, it is personal. I have witnessed family members self-medicate with drugs when mental health support was unavailable to them. My own dear dad battled with

alcohol addiction throughout his adult life. Although it was a related cancer that took him in the end, the addiction had taken him away long before that. In fact, one of the many reasons that I am proud to be a Liberal Democrat is that we pledged, in our general election manifesto, to provide mental health MOTs at key points in our lives when we are most vulnerable to a change in our mental health. I often wonder if my dad would still be here today had he ever had the opportunity to tell a professional that he was struggling.

Across the world, we have seen that harm reduction saves lives. I would like to acknowledge the role that hard-working GPs, nurses, community pharmacists and other health professionals play in supporting access to medication and safe consumption spaces, which is taking an evidence-based approach and using it to prevent deaths. In Glasgow, as many Members across the House have mentioned, where drug deaths are at crisis levels, pilots of safer consumption rooms are now under way. I was pleased to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray), as well as other colleagues from across the House, have visited those centres. We should be looking at those models with open minds, rather than relying on outdated ideologies, because the goal is simple: we need to keep people alive for long enough to access treatment and rebuild their lives. As the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) said, the savings that we find across health and justice far outweigh the investment needed in those centres.

We also need a joined-up approach across the country, which lays out the most effective pilot projects so that they can be rolled out to other areas. In its February 2024 report, the Public Accounts Committee identified that there were delays in allocating funding from the 2021 drugs strategy to local authorities, and a continued lack of understanding about what works to prevent people from using drugs. It is unacceptable that there was a 14% underspend in the funding allocated to the strategy in 2023-24, when it is clearly desperately needed across the country to prevent deaths.

Of course, prevention must also mean cutting off the supply of dangerous drugs at the source. We need stronger action to stop organised crime groups profiting from misery. That includes tackling county lines operations, which exploit vulnerable young people and push deadly substances into our communities. It is not a partisan issue; we must work together across the House to ensure that harm reduction, prevention and rehabilitation are at the heart of our national strategy. At the end of the day, it is not about politics; it is about people and ensuring that families do not have to endure the heartbreak of losing a loved one to drugs. At its core, it is about saving lives.

2.33 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I pass my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Christina McKelvie. I know she meant a lot to many of the people in this room.

Members on both sides will recognise the vital importance of the topic before us today in relation to our health and wellbeing as a nation. Let us be clear: deaths across

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

the UK remain too high and in many cases, trends are moving in the wrong direction. Therefore, I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on bringing this important debate so we can talk about it further.

The Office for National Statistics notes that 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning were registered in 2023 across England and Wales—93 deaths per million people—but those headline figures tell only part of the story, of course, because behind each one is a tragedy for a family.

There is a significant gender imbalance in drug deaths. Of the nearly 5,500 deaths in England and Wales, 3,645 were men and 1,803 were women. There is also an imbalance among the English regions, as the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said. The north-east of England remains the region with the highest rate of deaths related to drugs—London has a third of that rate. What steps are the Government taking to understand the epidemiology of drug use? How are they using that information to develop policies to reduce drug use and drug deaths?

Another key demographic trend relates to age. ONS survey data for 2024 shows that 16.5% of people aged 16 to 24 reported using at least one drug in the year to March 2024, and approximately 150,000 in the same age bracket considered themselves frequent drug users. Education will clearly be a vital element of any strategy designed to prevent people from becoming addicted to drugs and going on to cause harm to themselves and their community. Education needs to be clear about the damage that drug consumption does to individuals and society, through antisocial behaviour, environmental pollution and serious organised crime committed by gangs. What steps are the Government taking to ensure schools and colleges provide effective, targeted education to young people? What conversations has the Minister had with education Ministers about that? What are they doing to extend that education to those who are lost to the system—those who are not attending school and are therefore at greater risk of developing addictions and being exploited?

As has been mentioned, we also need to understand the changing patterns of use around particular drugs. Fashions change, and we must confront today's challenges proactively, rather than yesterday's ones reactively. Deaths involving cocaine rose by 30% in a single year in 2023, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl pose another emerging risk. We know that such substances have caused catastrophic harm in other countries, where they are already a fixture of the drug supply chain. What lessons have the Minister and the Government learned from other countries' experiences with synthetic opioids? What steps are they taking to ensure the risk does not develop into the sort of crisis that we have seen in other countries?

Behind the statistics, there are people who use drugs and people in our communities who suffer the impacts. We need to look at both, and at the patterns of drug use. Inner-city areas suffering multiple forms of deprivation may face greater problems with substances such as heroin. As Members said, the Scottish Government recently opened the UK's first drug consumption room in Glasgow, with the intention to address that kind of drug use. Long-term evidence about the effectiveness of such rooms is not clear at this stage, so I am pleased that

the UK Government's position is not to implement the strategy more widely. Treatment must be evidence-based, compassionate and effective, and it must not be done in a way that undermines the law, risking more people thinking that drugs are safe or not risky.

Grahame Morris: That is the status quo, but should we not be challenging that and looking at the evidence from, for example, prisons? One might assume that someone who is incarcerated due to crimes resulting from drug addiction would receive treatment in prison and rehabilitated, but in practice they are actually worse when they come out, and Buvidal, a long-lasting drug that could be very effective, is not readily available. Does the shadow Minister have any views on that?

Dr Johnson: I completely agree that we need evidence-based policy, and that, in whatever policy area we are looking at, we should challenge and probe policies to ensure we are doing things in the right way. Drugs should not be available in our prisons. People should receive treatment if they have gone into prison due to a drug-related offence, or if it is a non-drug-related offence but they are a drug user, but they should not have access to drugs. Prisons are controlled environments, so we should be able to prevent that. The Minister might be able to update us on what the Government will do to reduce the amount of drugs available in prisons.

We must also look at the effects on the local area around drug consumption rooms. What effect does allowing people to use drugs have on the numbers for violent gang crime, acquisitive crime and drug use? The evidence needs to be looked at closely.

There are other contexts in which drug use causes problems. Media coverage in recent years has highlighted the problem of so-called middle-class drug taking in family homes or at dinner parties. That is a different pattern of use, with different problems, and may risk setting precedents and norms, particularly for young children who may witness it, that might have damaging effects in years to come. Such drug use may be occurring in middle-class homes, but it still fuels organised crime and violence elsewhere. What are the Government doing to address the nuances in different habits and social contexts of drug use, and how do those figure in policy development?

We should also think about the prevalence of drug use in contexts such as workplaces. Some workplaces, such as the police, use intermittent drug testing. Police can use stop and search powers to investigate misuse, but there are other opportunities to interrupt harmful behaviour. What is the Government's position on random drug testing in employment settings?

Regarding people in communities blighted by the effects of drug use, it is important to enforce the law as it is. In 2021, only 20% of drug-related offences recorded in Home Office data resulted in the user being charged or summonsed, and 34% of those offences resulted in an out of court or informal settlement. Some today have seemed to suggest that treatment and law enforcement are an either/or, but both are very important. Minimising the criminal offence could increase drug use, derisk the first trying of drugs among young people, embolden drug dealers and further harm neighbours who suffer drug-related harm. According to ONS data for 2024, 39.2% of respondents to the crime survey for England

and Wales said it would be very or fairly easy to obtain illegal drugs within 24 hours. How do the Government intend to reduce the availability of illegal substances?

The last Government implemented a 10-year drug strategy following the publication of the independent review of drugs undertaken by Dame Carol Black in 2020, and they committed an additional £523 million up to 2025 to improve the capacity and quality of drug and alcohol treatment services. This strategy set out aspirations to prevent nearly 1,000 deaths and deliver a phased expansion of treatment capacity, with at least 54,500 new high-quality treatment places for sufferers of addiction.

The present Government need to set out a coherent and viable plan for tackling the problems that the previous Government had begun to address. On 26 November last year, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Baroness Merron noted that the Government

“continue to fund research into wearable technology, virtual reality and artificial intelligence, all in a bid to support people with drug addictions.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 26 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. 594.]

That cost £12 million in the period from the election to 26 November. Will the Minister update the House on the evidence for the effectiveness of those measures? How do they intend to measure the value of the outcomes of that £12 million investment, and does she have any results on how effective they were?

Drug use continues to cause substantial harm to individuals and communities across the UK. The Government must commit to evidence-based interventions and plan the UK's drugs strategy in a manner that limits the opportunities for individuals to distribute or consume drugs, reduces the likelihood that young people will develop an addiction, and prevents communities from suffering the impact of ineffective policing and sanctions.

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. He raised a number of important points, and I agree that the rise in drug-related deaths across the UK is deeply concerning. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

We in the Department of Health and Social Care are aware of this issue, even on a personal level. Just last month, a homeless man known as Paddy died of a drug overdose just around the corner from 39 Victoria Street. Paddy was known to many civil servants and was noted for the gentle way he looked after his dog. His death, less than a 10-minute walk from this place, should remind us of the stark realities that many people face every day. It serves as a painful reminder that, while we in this Chamber discuss policies and politics, real lives are at stake on our doorstep.

Paddy's story is not an isolated one; it is a tragic reflection of the systemic issues that continue to affect vulnerable people in our society. His death has brought home most vividly to us that behind every statistic is a human being who deserves dignity, care and support. My family, too, has been affected by drug-related death. As I rise to speak, my cousin Stephen, who we lost in this way, tragically young, is at the forefront of my mind.

There is no doubt that illicit drugs have a devastating impact on communities across the four nations of the United Kingdom. Drug misuse deaths have doubled since 2012. More than 3,300 people died in England alone in 2023, the highest rate since records began in 1993. Drug and alcohol deaths are the leading cause of premature mortality in those aged under 50.

These deaths are preventable, and this Government are committed, through our health mission, to ensuring that people live longer, healthier lives. We recognise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) and others, including the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), pointed out, this is a public health issue. That is why I, as the Minister responsible for public health, am standing at the Dispatch Box today.

We are determined to make our communities safer, more secure and free from the violence caused by the illicit drugs market through our safer streets mission. Although the Opposition seem to have sent the shadow Health Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), here to speak almost entirely about criminal justice issues, I will focus most of my comments on the public health areas and write to her afterwards with some of the details that she raised.

We know that many people struggling with drug addiction are already at the sharpest end of inequality and often have multiple and complex needs. The links between homelessness, deprivation and people who have spent time in prison with addiction are profound. Tackling the blight of illicit drugs is an issue that cuts across our four nations. It is crucial, now more than ever that we work together and share learning to tackle the harms that drugs cause. My Department continues to work very closely with our colleagues in the devolved Governments, and I am grateful for that ongoing collaboration.

I also want to take this opportunity to put on record and add my voice to the condolences to the family and friends of Christina McKelvie. I look forward to meeting ministerial counterparts in the devolved Governments later this year to discuss how we can continue to work together to reduce drug-related deaths.

On the harms caused by drugs, the hon. Members for Mid Dunbartonshire and for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) raised some issues about the Home Office and public health. This is a mission-led Government and, although I stand here as a Public Health Minister, we will continue to work closely with the Home Office and the Department for Education—indeed, across Government—on the drugs agenda. I met my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention just last week to discuss this complex issue. Although we have no plans to decriminalise drug possession—prohibiting drug possession helps to reduce the availability of drugs and sends a clear signal that using drugs is not normal—we support programmes that divert drug users away from the criminal justice system and into treatment.

If we are really to shift the dial on drug-related deaths, we must ensure that anyone with a drug problem, wherever they are, can access the help and support they need. That means providing evidence-based, high-quality treatment. Those dedicated drug treatment services reduce harm and provide a path to recovery. My Department is continuing to invest in improvements to local treatment services,

[Ashley Dalton]

which faced significant cutbacks during a decade of disinvestment, and the local authority funding allocations for 2025-26 will be announced imminently. I recognise the contributions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) about the importance of community-based treatment.

Grahame Morris: I am very pleased with the Minister's response. I appreciate that she has an awful lot on her plate, with cancer services and piloting a Bill through the House of Commons yesterday, but, given that we are looking at evaluating the evidence on what works best, will she agree to meet me and a small group of representatives from the treatment providers, so that they can explain in person what they think is the most effective way to tackle this issue?

Ashley Dalton: I would be delighted to do so. As my hon. Friend knows, consultation and engagement are at my very core. I would be happy to meet him and others.

My Department has invested an additional £267 million in 2024-25 to improve the capacity and quality of drug and alcohol treatment services, alongside £105 million made available by the DHSC, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to improve treatment pathways and recovery specifically for people who are sleeping rough, and housing and employment support. The Government have also awarded £12 million to projects across the UK that are researching innovative technology to support people with addictions and to prevent drug-related deaths.

As of January this year, there were 43,500 more people in drug and alcohol treatment, including more than 4,500 children and young people, and 12,500 more people in long-term recovery. There are around 340,000 people in structured treatment in England, which I am pleased to say is the highest number on record.

The hon. Members for Mid Dunbartonshire and for Brighton Pavilion, and my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones), all referred to drug consumption rooms. This Government recognise the exercised prosecutorial independence of the Lord Advocate of Scotland in respect of the pilot drug consumption room known as The Thistle in Scotland. Along with the Home Office, we will consider any evidence that emerges from the evaluation of that pilot and report on it in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) talked about safe inhalation pipes; I will write to her with further information on them in due course, because there is an academic research study under way to test their effectiveness. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is part of the advisory group and is waiting to see the findings.

Mental health issues and trauma often lie at the heart of substance use issues. People with co-occurring mental health and substance use problems find it hard to engage with support, and services too often fail to meet their needs. That must change. We are committed to ensuring cohesion between mental health services and substance use services, which will mean that people no longer fall through the gaps of treatment. Jointly with NHS England, my Department has developed a mental health action plan to tackle this issue, which I hope will be published soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) talked about naloxone, which other hon. Members also mentioned. I know that tackling drug-related deaths is a key priority for all four nations, and I am proud that together we have legislated to widen access to naloxone, the lifesaving medicine that reverses the effects of an opiate overdose. We know that over half of the people struggling with opiate addiction are not engaged in treatment at all, which means that significant numbers of an incredibly vulnerable population are at increased risk of overdosing and dying. The UK-wide naloxone legislation that came into force in December 2024 enables more services and professionals to supply the medication, which in turn makes it easier to access for people at risk and their loved ones. We are also working to set up a registration service in England that will further expand access to naloxone.

We are highly alert to the growing threat posed by synthetic opioids, which were raised by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) and for Easington. Synthetic opioids such as nitazenes and fentanyl are often more potent and deadly, but naloxone is an effective medicine for synthetic opioid overdose. The Government are undertaking a range of actions to prevent the rise of these dangerous drugs and working with colleagues across the devolved Governments, including on increased surveillance and enforcement.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) for raising the important issue of children affected by parental drug use. Our mission-based approach will ensure that every child has the best start in life and that we create the healthiest generation of children ever, which includes supporting the children of parents with drug problems and those suffering adverse childhood experiences.

My Department is leading work to improve the health system's ability to respond to and support the needs of those people who have drug addiction and multiple and complex physical health needs. Intervening earlier and treating co-occurring physical health conditions will reduce drug-related deaths and improve recovery outcomes.

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities has an action plan in place to reduce drug and alcohol-related deaths, and I was pleased to announce that on 1 May this year my Department will host a national event on preventing drug and alcohol-related deaths, where we will work with the sector to agree priorities.

I again thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing this debate. I can assure everyone that this Government are committed to reducing the harms illicit drugs pose to both individuals and across wider society. These deaths are avoidable, and I am confident that the Government's mission-led approach will put us in a stronger position to tackle this complex issue. Harm reduction and strong public health approaches are at the heart of this Government's work to prevent drug related deaths.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank hon. Members for their contributions. I have secured numerous Westminster Hall debates, but I have never had as many people at a debate as I have had at this one, and that illustrates the deep interest that there is from all Members. Some of the ideas that they have put forward could be replicated,

such as the centres where people can come with an addiction and they can be weaned off, supported and given the help that they need. Most of those examples have been from Scotland, although we did do something similar in my constituency back home.

I also thank the Minister, in particular for her reply. I genuinely think none of us could fail to be impressed by her response. It certainly encapsulated the feeling of us all in this Chamber and what we are trying to achieve. The Minister referred to Paddy, who lost his life just a few steps away from this place—an example of just how real this issue is for people—and she also mentioned Stephen, a relative who is suffering problems as well. She also referred to the public health issue, and recognised it in her response, along with tackling the blight of drugs. I welcome her commitment to having discussions with devolved Governments and bringing us all together—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—and getting a strategy.

Drug addictions should be directed to treatment rather than criminalisation. That is the thrust of what I was trying to put over, and everybody put over the same idea as well. I welcome the £250 million commitment for drug treatment pathways that the Minister mentioned; she also spoke about £12 million for research on drug-related deaths in the UK. The Minister reminded us about children, as did another hon. Member; sometimes when we look at the addict, we do not see the child. Forgive me; I do not remember which hon. Member said that, but it is really important for us all to remember there are sometimes children left when parents go astray, and the Minister committed herself to addressing and giving support on that as well. I thank all hon. Members for their significant contributions to a debate that needed to be had in Westminster Hall, for the questions asked and the answers given.

The Minister said that this is a mission-led Government, and I am really impressed: well done. We will look to keep an eye on her and make sure that they will be mission-led, but we look forward to helping and supporting her in the pathway that she has chosen to take us forward on. Thank you so much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the prevention of drug deaths.

Hughes Report: First Anniversary

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the first anniversary of the Hughes report on valproate and pelvic mesh.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. It is a delight to see such a well-attended debate and a packed Public Gallery, as this is a very important topic. Last month marked the one-year anniversary of the publication of the Hughes report. Thanks to that report, we now understand what the potential compensation schemes for women and children impacted by the mesh and valproate scandals could look like.

I will briefly break convention to say how grateful I am for the passion and hard work of our Patient Safety Commissioner, Henrietta Hughes, who—gosh!—has not managed to get into the public Gallery. Somebody might want to tell her there is a spare chair. Can somebody make sure she is allowed in, because it is her report we are discussing? [*Interruption.*] There she is. I thank our wonderful Patient Safety Commissioner, who has thankfully now been let into the room.

It is great to see so many campaigners, who have been a great help and source of expertise and support to me over many years. I particularly thank Kath Sansom from Sling the Mesh, and Janet Williams and Emma Murphy from the Independent Fetal Anti-convulsant Trust, or In-FACT, as well as many more—too many to name.

I am also glad to see Charlie and Lesley Bethune, who have tirelessly campaigned on behalf of their daughter, Autumn. They have travelled all the way down from Scotland. Their MP, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), cannot be here today, but he sends his sincere apologies. They would welcome an undertaking from the Minister and the UK Government to engage with those affected in Scotland, recognising that this is a UK-wide issue. Like so many others, they would also welcome progress on a response.

Every Member present will have a constituent who is affected by one of these health scandals. At least 7,000 children have been harmed by the drug valproate since it first came on to the market in 1973, with an estimated further 28 per month exposed to it, and at least 40,000 women across the country have been injured by mesh.

It is important to note that the actual figures are likely to be much higher due to a lack of awareness and many parents being reluctant to label their children. Putting an exact number on these things can therefore be extremely convoluted and difficult. Regardless, these are not just statistics: behind each number is the story of a woman who trusted a healthcare professional and was horrifyingly let down, a woman or a child who has been damaged irreversibly, a woman who has had to alter her life to accommodate for the physical, mental and financial toll of these scandals.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important that any inquiry and report looks into the fact that the products that were used, particularly in the mesh scandal, were properly licensed for the procedures they were used for?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, I agree. That is a huge part of the problem, especially with regard to medical devices. The Cumberlege report looked into the medications, but also medical devices, which is what mesh comes under. Often they are put into use for one thing and then used for something else without any further testing or investigation. I agree with the hon. Lady that that has got to stop.

After all that these women, families and children have been through, compensation would help at the very least pay to their bills if they cannot work any longer, or help to ease the constant worry about how their child will be able to survive independently when they are gone. I have a constituent impacted by her mesh implant who is unable to work—like most of those affected—and therefore cannot afford the day-to-day necessities. She is in constant pain, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and has lost all trust in medical professionals. Compensation would not reverse her physical or mental pain, but it would at least make her life easier. There are thousands just like her, including my very own mam, who is now aged 80. I have spoken in detail about her journey previously. The damage to her body and health from mesh is something she says she will regret to her dying day, which I hope is still many years off, even though mesh has ruined her long-awaited and hoped-for retirement by ruining her health.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. She is making an excellent speech. My constituent Susan Cole is in the Public Gallery. Her daughter was affected by sodium valproate. It is now 14 months since the Hughes report was published. The time for the payment of compensation is now. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could provide interim compensation even if they do not have the timeline for implementing in full the measures in the Hughes report?

Mrs Hodgson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I commend him on all the work he does to represent his constituents. Interim payments were provided to victims of the contaminated blood scandal, as we know. Henrietta Hughes, the Patient Safety Commissioner, has detailed how to do it in her report. I ask the Government to look at that in detail when considering their response.

If the Government are not moved by the moral case in respect of these health scandals, surely they cannot deny the economic toll they have taken on our public and mental health services. Although compensation would require finding money in what we all appreciate is a very tough fiscal situation, if we do nothing we will still need to find money: one payment will be given directly to the women and children harmed; if we do not do that, another will be have to be made for the provision of mental health services, for the NHS and for out-of-work benefits. We have a decision to make and, for me and the thousands of women and campaigners, the answer could not be simpler.

I know from conversations with campaigners and constituents that the Government's recent announcement on personal independence payments and welfare reform have caused anxiety for mesh and valproate victims who rely on those payments to survive. It is vital that we understand that the physical complications and illness

caused by mesh and valproate are going to be with them for life, so they should not be forced into work if they cannot work.

I spoke to the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst) recently, and he told me about his constituent, Julie Robinson, and her family's experience of sodium valproate. Julie's daughter Samantha has been severely impacted by the epilepsy drug that was prescribed during Julie's pregnancy. They both live in Market Weighton, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He sends his apologies and asked me to raise the case of his constituent.

I hope Members will allow me to list the seven complications Samantha has following the damage done to her by valproate while in uterus. She has neurodevelopment issues, including autism; memory difficulties; speech and language impairments; hearing and vision problems; heart defects requiring major surgery; a cleft lip and palate that led to a year in hospital; dysmorphic facial features at birth; and fine and gross motor challenges. It is quite a list. These conditions have significantly affected Samantha's health and education and will persist throughout her life. There are thousands just like Samantha who will require lifelong care, which will also affect her parents' ability to work.

If a person can never work again because of mesh or valproate, they deserve support and to be treated with dignity. If they want to try to work, they should never be penalised or forced to go through reassessments and put under excessive anxiety or fear if it does not work for them and their family. Even prior to the welfare announcements, I have long argued for better education and empathy from the Department for Work and Pensions when assessing mesh and valproate victims. I hear from constituents impacted by mesh, for example, who would rather struggle financially than go through the gruelling and dehumanising process of explaining their condition and trying to claim the benefits they are entitled to. There needs to be proper and effective education among DWP staff about these health scandals, so that assessments are humiliation-free and quick for these women.

While the valproate and mesh scandals differ in the specifics of the cases, the crux of them and the flags that they raise remain the same. Both affect women; both exemplify what happens when there is a lack of honesty and communication about the risks of medical procedures; and both highlight the need for increased transparency on the payments made to health professionals. They show the damage that is done when profit is put before people, when big firms avoid accountability and transparency and when—I have to say it—medical misogyny is allowed to run rife. I intend to emphasise those points, which I imagine colleagues will also touch on.

Let us consider the valproate scandal. If warnings had been given at licensing, or in 1987, when Sanofi asked for information to be added to the patient information leaflet, the women and children impacted by valproate would not be in this position. Likewise with mesh, if women had been properly informed about the risks of adverse effects rather than being fed a false image, as my mam was, of "In and out; a quick 20-minute procedure that will change your life"—boy, did it change her life, but not for the better—we would not have thousands of women harmed on an irreversible scale.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Before I became an MP, I specialised exclusively in dealing with compensation claims on behalf of women who had suffered from the use of vaginal mesh. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the mesh was sold to patients as a gold standard, and they were misled. Does she agree that a proper Government-backed compensation scheme will save the NHS money in the long run? As a solicitor, I was always conscious of the fact that, in pursuing these claims, it was ultimately the NHS that had to pay out the compensation and legal costs.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which perhaps nobody else but him would have been able to make in this debate, so I thank him for it, and I do agree.

The people harmed by mesh and valproate did nothing other than trust a medical professional's judgment. The very least we should do is offer them compensation to help them navigate their now damaged lives, which they have had inflicted on them, most horrifyingly, by our very own NHS.

The fact that the victims of these scandals are mainly women is no coincidence. I have recently spoken in this place about medical misogyny in our healthcare system, and some colleagues here were in that debate. I said then—and I say it again—that had the thousands of women impacted by these scandals been men,

“I do not believe that dismissal on such a scale would have occurred.”—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 499WH.]

We hear stories of women seeking advice from medical professionals, only to be told it is all in their head—that it is just their menstrual cycle or the menopause—or being gaslit into believing it must be anything other than the devices or medication they were prescribed.

Women not being listened to by medical professionals not only perpetuates structural misogyny; it endangers lives. It is so heartening to see so many male colleagues in this debate, because it proves that we can change things and that it does not have to be this way. Issuing compensation to these women would, at least and at last, confirm that they were right to be concerned and that they were not being hysterical—we know why it is called a “hysterectomy”—which is something women have been accused of for many hundreds of years when it comes to our health.

As well as medical misogyny, part of the defensiveness and dismissal stems from the huge sums given to the healthcare system by the industry, which creates bias. Knowing that that is the case is not enough: the UK needs to adopt sunshine legislation to ensure that this information is fully declared, in the same way that all of us in this room, as MPs, have to make declarations. That information should be presented via a centralised public database that is totally independent of industry. As we all know, sunlight is the best disinfectant, and we need to act now to prevent future scandals.

I am conscious of time, and colleagues will have a lot to say and experiences to share, so I will end my remarks by leaving the Minister with a few quick questions—sorry, Minister. Will she provide Members and campaigners here today, and the no doubt many victims of these scandals watching at home on the internet, with a timeline for when we can expect a Government response

to the excellent Hughes report? If she is unable to do that today, will she commit to writing to Baroness Merron to ask for a timeframe?

Will the Minister explain what scope there is for the Government to implement a sunshine-style piece of legislation to ensure the transparency of payments made by industry to our healthcare sector? In the spirit of cross-departmental working, which I know the Government are committed to, will she write to the Work and Pensions Secretary for reassurance that victims of the valproate and mesh scandals will not be subject to reassessment and forced into work, given their physical and mental complications? Finally, in her new role, will she commit to meeting campaigners, many of whom are here today, to hear at first hand about the valproate and mesh scandals, if she did not do that in her previous role as a Back-Bench MP?

I thank the Minister in advance for her consideration, and I look forward to her answers. I will end with this: we have rightly seen compensation for the infected blood scandal, which I mentioned at the start of my remarks, the Post Office scandal and the Grenfell disaster. Those all involved innocent people whose lives were turned upside down, whether physically, mentally or worse, through no fault of their own. I fail to see how the mesh and valproate scandals do not meet the same criteria, and I encourage anyone opposed to compensation to consider that.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. At this stage, there are a lot of you to get in, so we are limiting speeches to four minutes.

3.19 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate, Ms Furniss. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for the work she has done on this matter to date and for her powerful advocacy this afternoon.

I am drawn to this issue as a result of my recent experience as a Minister in the last Government, where I was responsible for bringing forward the infected blood compensation scheme and passing the legislation to set up the authority that would pay out compensation. I do not presume to be an expert on the sodium valproate and pelvic mesh issue, and nor do I seek to draw direct parallels, but I thought it would be helpful to make some observations about what I experienced in Whitehall when trying to come to terms with the infected blood compensation, and to offer some perspectives on how we might move forward.

It has been my privilege to meet Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, two victims of sodium valproate, who have briefed me on their long campaign going back many years. They have seven children between them, with disabilities consequential of valproate. It seems to me that we have already gone down a familiar path, with the Cumberlege review and then Henrietta Hughes's work last year. As the Patient Safety Commissioner, she suggested a way forward, with a two-stage redress scheme and some clear next steps setting out what must happen, what should happen and what the Government need to do. We look forward to hearing a response from the Minister in a short while.

[John Glen]

However, there are three things I have taken from my experience. Constant delay will increase the cost and build up ill will. Lessons need to be learned, and they cannot be platitudes that are recurrently uttered in a well-meaning way by various Ministers who do not get to the heart of the matter. I say that with the greatest respect, but we must move on these things.

We must also not underestimate the complexity of delivery. A vast amount of work has been done on trying to understand the population involved, the range of suffering and the medical conditions consequential of valproate. It is important to recognise that there are ways of putting in compensation schemes very simply and clearly and in short order. That is what happened last year with infected blood, and it can happen in this case.

It is also important to improve communications with stakeholders, so that they are taken on a journey to where this will head to. There will be vast institutional blockers in Whitehall to stop this moving swiftly to a point of resolution. That will primarily be from the Treasury, and there will be sensible conventions on processes that will delay progress—unless the Minister can grip this and recognise it as a top priority.

Lots of things go wrong in medicine—we all understand that—but when things go wrong that could have been avoided, the state must step up, come to terms with it and clearly state the way forward. I urge the Minister to use the power of her office, for however long she has it—I hope she has it for a long time so that she can deliver, because it is very satisfying to be able to do—to address this matter urgently.

3.23 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this important debate. The Hughes report makes for grim reading, as we have to read about the twin scandals of sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. Both scandals have one thing in common: the lack of provision of timely, accurate information to patients about the benefits, as well as the risks, of the treatments offered to them.

Many people rely on treatment with sodium valproate to effectively manage their epilepsy, and for many it is a remarkable drug that allows them to control their condition and lead a life free from the worry of epileptic seizures. However, a constituent experienced severe side effects from it, with no warnings and no information on the risk to pregnancy from taking it. In my constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, a family approached me to press for action on compensation for families impacted by sodium valproate.

My constituent's daughter was born with autism as a direct result of the sodium valproate she was prescribed to control her epilepsy. She has been left feeling guilt and self-blame for her daughter's condition, as many mothers would, given the challenges her daughter has had to endure growing up and managing in an education system where getting the right adjustments was a constant battle. My constituent and her family have faced the consequences of the lack of information and advice for pregnant women regarding sodium valproate. It is not fair, it should not have happened and it could have been prevented.

It is depressing that we have seen an array of similar medical scandals, as well as the scandal of the Horizon system in post offices. All of those have one significant factor in common: information being withheld, with public bodies showing a complete lack of transparency, rather than being open to addressing serious issues from the outset. The latter would have prevented much distress and anguish and, in the case of sodium valproate, many children from being born with lifelong medical conditions.

But here we are again, after the event, looking quite rightly at a public wrong, and with the Hughes report, published in February 2024, outlining options for redress. The previous Conservative Government did what they always did: kicked the cans down the road, leaving impacted women and families in limbo and making no financial provision to pay for the redress that families rightly deserve. It is a scandal that Opposition Members should be apologising to all affected families for.

The Labour Government are faced once again with the responsibility to pick up the mess left by the Tories, by responding to the Hughes report. I will continue to press the Government to do the right thing, which I know they want to do.

John Glen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lillian Jones: Sorry, I must go on—other people want to speak.

I know that the Labour Government want to do the right thing. It is in our Labour values to right wrongs and injustices such as sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. But I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends and the Government to do more and to look to change the culture in Government bodies that enables such scandals to happen in the first place. Transparency and accountability are what hard-working tax-paying families demand of the Government. Today, I call for fairness for all those harmed by sodium valproate and pelvic mesh, and for them to receive recognition and redress to ensure that their needs are met.

3.26pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for leading the debate, as she always does, in such an expert fashion. This issue has impacted thousands of people, including many in my constituency. It is something I have spoken on many times. It is crucial that it is given recognition and time. I look forward to giving my constituents a voice and explaining how this has impacted them. As the DUP's Westminster health spokesperson, I am here to join the call for justice, because that is what the hon. Lady asked for, and that is what I wish to see as well.

Between 2007 and 2015, 5,255 women in Northern Ireland underwent vaginal tape procedures for stress urinary incontinence. In June 2017, the media reported the challenges and difficulties faced by women in Northern Ireland, leading to a pause in the use of mesh there. In addition to mesh being used for women, men have also been affected by it—it is important to add that to the debate—and it has been used particularly for hernia repairs. Research has shown that some 10% to 15% of men experience chronic pain post surgery.

I was contacted by a male constituent in 2020 who told me his experience of excruciating pain. His GP denied that it was due to the mesh, and he faced many infections, numerous antibiotics and extremely limited day-to-day life. He informed me that, for many years, his problems got worse, and he contemplated taking his life, not because he wanted to die, but because he did not want to struggle with the pain. The sad reality is that that will be the case for many people, not only across Northern Ireland but across the whole nation. Both men and women have been directly affected by something that was supposed to do good. It clearly did not, so people deserve some form of redress and, more importantly, an acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the NHS and Government Departments.

Similarly, the Hughes report highlights the need for redress for women who were prescribed sodium valproate during pregnancy, even though it had long been known to pose risks to unborn children. A conversation must be had around compensation and better regulation of the use of drugs that are known to have impacts on women, especially during pregnancy. It is said that some 20,000 children were exposed to the drug in the womb, leading to many living today with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism.

I have spoken to many parents—many constituents—who have said that their ultimate feeling is guilt. There is something seriously wrong when a mother feels guilty for taking something she was told would do no harm, for not asking enough questions and for taking medication for which due diligence should have been done. More research and double-checking should have been done to make sure that the medication was suitable for pregnant women. Many find it difficult to cope both mentally and physically with the long-lasting pain, along with the trauma, anxiety and guilt that rack them over what they have done.

On the first anniversary of this report, I look to the Minister on behalf of my constituents for a commitment to put things right. These matters must not disappear, and we must not forget the thousands of people suffering to this very day. From Primodos to thalidomide, from pelvic mesh to sodium valproate, we must do better by all our people so that they know they are not forgotten. I await the Minister's response. I will be grateful if she can provide an update on any compensation scheme in relation to this matter. I hope she will do all she can to ensure that due compensation is awarded. My constituents and those who suffer as a result of pelvic mesh want that, and I want that today on their behalf.

3.30 pm

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate and on her tireless work on this issue.

I have come fairly late to the issues surrounding mesh implants. I became acutely aware of them when a constituent in Leeds South West and Morley who had suffered because of this procedure came to see me at my surgery. I would like to highlight her experiences. I have her consent; she has asked me to do so. Her story starts 17 years ago, when she had mesh implants offered by the NHS. Little did she know that years later she would

face severe health problems, despite being assured that the implants were the gold standard. The mesh would hang out of her body, and would be trimmed to try to prevent that. She eventually had it removed, but it was far too late: some of the mesh had disintegrated and could no longer be removed. It caused hernias and incontinence, and more recently she believes it had a role to play in her cancer diagnosis, as she has tumours in and around the areas where the implants were inserted.

My constituent tells me that the implants have completely ruined her life. She has had to give up her business, and now has to deal with the health impacts every day while having ongoing treatment for cancer. The one bright spot from our meeting is that it was so clear to me that she and her husband were a team. He has been there, and will continue to be there, throughout everything she has had to go through. I was moved by that.

Quite understandably, my constituent is seeking redress, and that has led to another issue that she and people in the Public Gallery have had to contend with. The NHS complaints policy states that for clinical negligence the time limit for any claim is three years from the date of injury. Although there are some exceptions relating to knowledge of the injury, that has been absolutely no comfort to my constituent, who is yet to receive any acknowledgment that she could be entitled to redress.

That was partially addressed by the Hughes report, which presented options for compensation for those harmed by pelvic mesh implants. It is disappointing to those impacted that, more than a year on, there has still been no response to the report. Although some good steps have been taken in treatment and support, we must at least address the calls for financial compensation. I therefore encourage the Minister to give whatever outline she can about when the families and the victims will be updated. With time so short, that is the one point that I ask the Minister to respond to.

In the words of the Patient Safety Commissioner, Dr Hughes:

“Patients and families are suffering right now, and whilst the Government reviews my recommendations, it does not put their problems on hold.”

I know the Minister is aware of that, and I remain grateful for the Government's positive work so far. However, I urge them to do all they can to reassure those who have been impacted by this scandal, and to respond to the Hughes report at the earliest opportunity.

3.34 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I must say, the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Swards) has done us all a service by outlining in detail one case out of what are understood to be a minimum of 10,000; some estimates put the number of people damaged by mesh as high as 40,000. We should bear that statistic in mind when we think about the limited redress that people have had so far through the courts.

In the time available, I wish to touch briefly on the topics of research, legal cases, waiting lists and financial support. I make no apology for coming back to the question of research, because as we have heard, the victims of the mesh implant scandal are still suffering today, and there is no definitive gold standard of how to remediate their suffering.

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

I did table a question in February that drew attention to a particular world-leading expert called Dr Dionysios Veronikis, who, I gather, has developed extremely effective mesh-removal methods in Missouri. I believe that he has, in the past, offered to give the benefits of his research and successful practice to members of the NHS. I would hope that the Minister would take this away and consider whether an effort should be made to reach out to the best practitioners worldwide on mesh removal and take advantage of their expertise.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): On the question of treatment, one of my constituents, who I will call Louise, endured years of pain and suffering due to the complications from mesh implants. After facing delays caused by local hospitals, she had no choice but to pay for private healthcare that would remediate the issue in one operation. That would not have been available on the NHS. She would have had to go through three separate, painful and lengthy procedures. Does the hon. Member agree that her experience underscores the urgent need for investment in urogynaecology services, as well as the justice that everybody is rightly calling for?

Sir Julian Lewis: That is exactly right. The problem is that people are going back for partial remediation time and time again, and it is not achieving the desired outcome.

When we move on to the question of how someone can get financial redress other than by virtue of a Government scheme, we find that of the 1,252 legal cases initiated between 2014 and 2024, only 356 were settled in or out of court with damages, but 678 were concluded without any such damages being awarded. I understand that many of those rejected were rejected because they were out of time, which leads me back to a point that I highlighted during the previous debate we had on this, in December 2024, in which it was pointed out that the 10-year limit on initiating action arising out of medical devices needs to be extended because, in this particular case, the limit has often long passed before it can be established that the victim was damaged by mesh in the first place.

I said we should remember that minimum figure of at least 10,000 mesh-damaged women and bear in mind that out of that pretty large figure—and the real figure is probably much larger still—only 1,200 legal actions were initiated. That is hardly surprising because of the extra burden placed on someone initiating a legal action.

I would also like to look at the question of removal centres. There are nine of these specialist centres, and we have established that people who are justifiably extremely worried about going back to one of them that might be run by the very person who inserted the mesh, do have the option of visiting other centres. However, when it comes to waiting times there is a huge variation. The waiting time for Bristol, which has a particularly high reputation, is much longer than for some of the other centres.

Finally, on the question of financial support, we know that the Government have had to take moves to deal with the question of personal independence payments. We hope that will not affect these victims adversely.

Gill Furniss (in the Chair): After the next speaker, we will limit speeches to three minutes. That means that your microphone will be cut off at that time, so I would appreciate it if you looked at the clock while speaking.

3.40 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this important debate and for all the work she does on this issue.

As I mentioned earlier, I specialised in pursuing clinical negligence claims on behalf of women who had had mesh implants, and I have seen many examples of the type of life-changing injuries described by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Swards). As the Hughes report confirmed, these women were in debilitating pain after the implants; they were forced to stop working and faced a lifetime of uncertainty. The implants had a major impact on their relationships. My hon. Friend's client was lucky in the sense that she had a supportive husband, but I had many clients whose marital relationships had broken down because of the inability to have intimate relationships following the mesh implant.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said that 10,000 women had been affected by pelvic mesh implants, but the campaign organisation Sling the Mesh has argued that that figure could be as high as 40,000. Before the Hughes report was published in February 2024, we had Baroness Cumberlege's report in July 2020. She said that there should be a Government apology, a scheme to meet the cost of providing additional care and support to those affected, and a network of specialist centres.

A patient engagement survey carried out by the Patient Safety Commissioner found that more than half of those impacted by pelvic mesh or valproate said that it had had a very negative impact on their ability to work, and that it affected their financial situation. More than three quarters said that it had a very negative impact on their mental health.

It is essential that the Government provide a redress scheme. The right hon. Member for New Forest East said that delay will not help matters, and we have all heard the phrase "Justice delayed is justice denied." The clients that I dealt with just wanted to move on with their lives. It is essential that we have a redress system that works quickly, so that these women can try to rebuild their lives and move on. The redress scheme must provide not only financial compensation but non-financial compensation.

The right hon. Member mentioned PIP. Lots of these women struggled to apply for PIP and other benefits after they had been injured. They had little or no access to mental health services, and they were exposed to an inaccessible and adversarial legal system that was complicated to navigate. There are often delays in legal claims, and we need to move away from that. We need a Government-backed compensation scheme that is similar to the infected blood compensation scheme that this Government are properly pursuing. Only with such a scheme will we have proper redress for these women and ensure that justice is given to those impacted by this tragedy.

3.43 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Sodium valproate is currently the third most prescribed epilepsy treatment for many women, and it is very effective in combating epilepsy. What they do not tell people, of course, is the damage that can be caused if someone is pregnant. The damaging effects have affected thousands of women over the years.

The alarm bells about the damage sodium valproate could do to the unborn child were going off in 1973. Indeed, there was a legal claim between 2004 and 2010 that sought compensation for those affected; sadly, it was dropped when legal aid was denied. When I was elected in 2010, I took up the cudgels, as it were, on behalf of the poor women suffering from this problem.

One of my constituents, Karen Buck, who is in the Public Gallery, is a mother of four children, all of whom have been affected as a result of her taking sodium valproate during pregnancy. Her daughter Bridget was born with severe brain damage, spina bifida and a condition directly linked to this drug that has also affected others. Sadly, Bridget's case is one of many similar cases across the country. Karen has dedicated her life to serving Bridget and looking after her, but she should never have been prescribed this drug in the first place.

On 13 November 2024, Karen and other campaigners took a petition with over 1,000 signatures to Downing Street. I ask the Minister to follow up on that petition, because so far the petitioners have not received an answer and they deserve an answer at least. They have asked for compensation, and for the removal of this drug from the market. They have campaigned for years for a redress scheme and I am proud to support them. That campaign is not just about financial restitution; it is all about accountability. I understand that the drug companies—in particular Sanofi, which pushed this drug—are withdrawing the high-strength drug in September, but the rest of the drugs will continue to be available. This process is all about ensuring that the campaigners get the support and assistance they need.

The previous Government listened to the recommendations of the Cumberlege review, appointed Dr Hughes as the Patient Safety Commissioner in 2022 and asked her to produce a report. She produced that report and then, before the election in July, Ministers wrote to ask her what needed to be done, highlighting the need for primary legislation to provide compensation for those who have suffered. We need that primary legislation, so that victims can get the compensation they are due. All this campaigning has clearly had an effect, but we need the Government to step up because progress has stalled.

I remain committed to helping and assisting victims, to ensure that they get the justice and support they deserve.

3.46 pm

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate.

My remarks will principally focus on mesh and the experience of my constituent Bev, but it is disappointing that the issue of sodium valproate and its risks to women of childbearing age and their children, which had seemingly been resolved in an earlier Parliament in which I served,

is anything but resolved. Sometimes, our Parliament and our politics are too much process and not enough progress—too much rhetoric and not enough record. I hope for a full resolution for the women and child victims of this historic injustice, on which I spoke and worked at length between 2017 and 2019. I send my solidarity to the victims in the Public Gallery today.

I want to speak to the experiences of the victims and survivors of all these appalling scandals, but I will particularly speak about my constituent, Bev. These victims and survivors have been courageous campaigners in bringing these issues to the forefront, turning personal trauma into activism. These women, who were never told of the risks and trusted the advice of medical professionals, now live with life-changing consequences.

Bev endured years of crippling pain before the mesh was eventually “dissected”—that is her word—out of her body. She walked into my office, sunken by the immobility of this pernicious scandal and its effect on her. She is physically weighed down by the legacy and trauma of the pain she has experienced, yet she remains infectiously good company, and I am proud to stand up and speak for her.

Bev should not have needed this surgery, as she never needed this device, which should never have harmed her. The loss of mobility and continence, and the permanent nerve damage that Bev suffered, are compounded by the years of missed time with her family. She gave up her career, indeed her vocation, as a midwife. She has to navigate life with emotional and psychological trauma that she should never have endured.

Bev, you are not alone. The attendance in this Chamber and the Public Gallery are testament to how many people are in our thoughts today. These victims demand redress from this new Government.

3.49 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this important debate.

Like other hon. Members, I also have constituents who have suffered from the scandal. Colleen and her husband, Andy, are in the Public Gallery today. They first contacted me about their son, Byron, in February 2024. Colleen has epilepsy and, like so many others, was prescribed valproate. Throughout IVF and her pregnancy, Colleen and Andy were not warned of the potentially harmful side effects of remaining on the medication, despite repeatedly being asked what medication they were on. We know that valproate use in pregnancy leads to neurodevelopmental disorders in 30% to 40% of cases.

Colleen and Andy have told me about Byron, about what a lovely person he is, and particularly about his love for “Star Wars”. He has autism, learning disabilities, and speech and language development issues, but he is happy at school. Sadly, we know that this is not an isolated incident, and that around 20,000 children have been harmed. Parents like Colleen and Andy deserve redress, but they have had to fight to get the support for Byron. They went to a tribunal to get assistance with his education, and they are still battling to get an updated diagnosis to ensure that he gets support as he moves into adulthood.

[James Wild]

Following the Cumberlege review, my former colleague Maria Caulfield commissioned a report from Dr Hughes. That report was published a year ago, setting out the options for financial redress, with an interim and a main scheme. The interim scheme was meant to be up and running, with compensation payments being made this year. The main scheme was to follow with more bespoke support, based on assessment of individual circumstances. We need to get on with it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) talked about the experience of other inquiries and redress schemes, and we need to use that to get this scheme up and running.

I regret that the previous Government did not solve the issue before the election, but what happens now is what is important, and that is the priority. When I asked Colleen and Andy what they wanted to hear from the Minister, they said that they wanted a commitment to getting the scheme up and running, and a timeframe for the Government to deliver the interim compensation, and then the final compensation, as well as an apology from all those who are responsible for the scandal.

It is seven years since the Cumberlege review began, but people have been fighting for justice for much longer. Colleen and Andy, and thousands of parents like them, need progress and redress so that they can be confident about their children's future. I know that the Minister is relatively new in post, but I hope she will be able to give those families some of that assurance today.

3.52 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this important debate.

I pay tribute to my constituents Paula and Gillian, who have experienced the impact of pelvic mesh. I raised Paula's experience in a debate on 5 December, but not much has changed for her. She is still living with the devastation that pelvic mesh has caused to her life and wellbeing. As we have heard, Paula and Gillian are not alone in their experience. According to the Patient Safety Commissioner, the lower-end estimate suggests that 10,000 women have been harmed.

I pay tribute to all those who have campaigned for many years on the issue of sodium valproate. My good friend Teresa Pearce, the former MP for Erith and Thamesmead, worked very closely with many of the families over many years. She knows that the issue is close to my heart.

The Epilepsy Research Institute welcomed the Hughes report's recognition of the vital role that research plays in understanding and mitigating the risks of anti-seizure medication. It continues to raise its key asks on how we can move forward with the report's recommendations. The institute's view is that Ministers need to provide a clear timeline for implementing the redress schemes and research funding that are recommended in the Hughes report. There is a need for dedicated, ringfenced funding for epilepsy research, particularly into the effects of anti-seizure medications taken during pregnancy.

My wife and daughter are both on sodium valproate. I know that sodium valproate did not affect my daughter, even though she has cerebral palsy from a brain injury at birth. However, I saw what happened to my wife: being taken off sodium valproate turned her life upside down. She went from being 12 years seizure-free to having to surrender her driving licence and not being able to work for some periods. I saw what it does to women in that situation, even though she had the correct advice. She eventually had to return to sodium valproate because of the number of seizures she was having and the impact it had on her life. I cannot imagine for a moment what the families present have gone through, but I know the impact that sodium valproate can have on women's lives.

The Epilepsy Research Institute's asks include:

"Ensuring that regulatory bodies act swiftly on safety concerns and that pregnant women with epilepsy have access to the best possible information and care. Working alongside experts and patient groups to ensure policies reflect the needs of those affected."

I ask the Minister to address those recommendations.

We need to consider the people impacted by mesh and sodium valproate, as well as the wider impact. Sodium valproate continues to be prescribed, and we need a continuing review of how that affects women through their lives.

3.55 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I warmly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this important debate.

It is a national scandal that pelvic mesh has been used in thousands of operations, often without a thorough explanation of the side effects. It is also a national scandal that this matter is not at the forefront of public awareness and attention. As we have heard, at least 10,000 women were injured by pelvic mesh implants, and it could be many more. Their lives have been permanently altered. They now live with chronic pain, they find it difficult to work and live their lives well, and they suffer from a number of serious health conditions. These women have been badly let down. How can it be acceptable that so many women now live with debilitating pain?

This scandal also speaks to a wider issue: the continuing neglect of women's health. It is unacceptable that we still hear so many accounts of women feeling like their health concerns are not being adequately addressed. I place on record my thanks to all those in the room who have campaigned tirelessly on restoring justice to women, and a special thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South, who has raised this issue on so many occasions over such a long time. We must push for redress for the victims of this scandal.

Sadly, like so many other hon. Members here, I must raise the case of a constituent who has told me she feels let down by failed medical advice when receiving a procedure. She told me that she was not told about the nature of the operation, and that she was not given consent forms. She was later told she had not needed the procedure at all.

My constituent described her level of pain as "horrendous" and that

"passing stool or water felt like passing glass."

That should never have happened to my constituent, nor to the thousands of women up and down the country. Those harmed deserve better. They deserve proper redress, and they deserve it now.

3.58 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on securing today's timely and important debate on the first anniversary of the Hughes report. She has been a tireless champion for those harmed by pelvic mesh and for children born with birth defects as a result of sodium valproate. I commend her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on first do no harm, mesh, Primodos, valproate—that is a mouthful and could have been a bit shorter—of which I am also a member.

In 2024, the Patient Safety Commissioner estimated that at least 10,000 women in England have been harmed by vaginal mesh implants, some involving the mesh slicing into their bladder, bowels or vaginal wall, leaving them in permanent pain, sometimes unable to walk, work or have sex, leaving their lives changed profoundly. As multiple hon. Members have mentioned, including the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the campaign group Sling the Mesh believes that the true number could be closer to 40,000 women.

When Dr Henrietta Hughes agreed to produce this report, she made one thing very clear: this was not to be another review that just gathers dust—this report must lead to action, not just words. We are now a year on and the people affected are still waiting.

The Hughes report makes the case plainly: there is a clear need for redress. These women were, in most cases, not failed by a single doctor or a one-off error. They were failed by the system, by healthcare structures, by regulators and by Governments who did not listen when they should have. The redress we need is not about blame but about restorative justice. It should be co-designed with the patients, and it should be distinct from adversarial court proceedings where, as other hon. Members have mentioned, women have to relive their experience and their trauma, time and again.

The Hughes report recommended establishing an independent redress agency. The lack of clarity on creating a bespoke redress scheme has left patients in limbo, which is deepening the harm—on that point, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) shared his useful insight and learnings from the infected blood scandal. Several women in my constituency of Chichester have shared their stories with me: stories of being dismissed by clinicians, of medical records being incomplete, inaccessible or not reflecting the true circumstances that these women are in, and of suffering through chronic pain and ill health even after the mesh has been removed. I have met two of those women in person. I met one at her home because she is so profoundly injured and traumatised that she no longer leaves her property for any reason. With no access to social media or the outside world, my constituent had no idea that there were others like her, or that there is a national campaign for justice. She felt alone, embarrassed and broken by her circumstances, so I promised to stand by and with her, and with the thousands of others, up and down the country, who have been failed.

I take this opportunity to mention Paula Goss: a national campaigner, and a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young). Paula was affected by a mesh procedure that was not covered by the original Cumberlege review. The surgeon involved was found guilty of serious misconduct but only suspended for six months. Of the 462 patients harmed at the Spire private hospital and the Southmead hospital, just five were called as witnesses to the General Medical Council. When Paula tried to complain, she was—as many hon. Members, from both sides of the House, have noted in this debate—told that she was out of time, and that it was not in the public interest to waive the deadline. How can we call that justice? It is not justice or accountability. Cases like that of Paula, and those raised by my constituents in Chichester, are why we Liberal Democrats believe that the entire set of recommendations in the Cumberlege report must be implemented without further delay.

This scandal is not limited to mesh and sodium valproate. The same approach must be extended to other medical scandals, such as Primodos. We cannot continue to treat each crisis as an isolated issue, and need a system-wide approach to patient safety and accountability. That means a duty of candour on public officials. The Liberal Democrats would achieve that by establishing an office of the whistleblower so that safety concerns can be raised without fear or delay. It also means embedding patient voices in the heart of our healthcare system, not as an afterthought but as a fundamental principle. Earlier this year, 100 women secured a financial settlement from mesh manufacturers, but that is a drop in the ocean compared to the number of women who deserve redress. Every single woman affected by this scandal deserves proper compensation, not just those women able to pursue lengthy and difficult legal claims.

Warinder Juss: The Hughes report actually recommends that women affected by pelvic mesh should receive an initial interim payment of £25,000, followed by a main payment. Does the hon. Member agree that that interim payment would be of some comfort to the women she has mentioned, and mean that they could at least begin to try to get redress, and make some improvement in their lives?

Jess Brown-Fuller: The hon. Member says that from a place of experience and knowledge. Who am I to speak against anything he says as the expert in the room? I totally agree that that would provide those women some reassurance that their cases have been heard and recognised by the Government.

Finally, we are still waiting for a formal response from the Government to the Hughes report. In August, that response was promised “in due course”, but “due course” has come and gone. These women have waited long enough. People who have already suffered for years should not be forced to wait any longer for the compensation and recognition that they deserve. Let us end this culture of delay, disbelief and denial and do what we should have done years ago: listen, apologise and act.

4.4 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Ms Furniss. As a GP who has seen patients with valproate and mesh injuries, standing here with a chance to raise this issue is humbling for me.

[*Dr Luke Evans*]

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for proposing this debate. It is yet another important topic that she has brought to the House. She is in danger of rivalling the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing so many Westminster Hall debates on health. The fact that we have two worthy champions fighting it out to be the person in the country doing the most for health is a true testament to the dynamics we have; I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South on that. I remember her powerful contributions to last month's Westminster Hall debate on women's health, and she has done the same today. With her personal experience of her mother's situation, and as the chair of the APPG first do no harm, she is a true champion.

Now that we are past the first anniversary of the Hughes report, this debate is an important opportunity for the women and families affected by valproate and pelvic mesh to get clarity from the Government on what progress is being made on the recommendations of the report and a way forward more broadly. It is heartening to see how the Chamber has come together to ask unanimously for that progress. I welcome the fact that the previous Government took productive steps and asked the Patient Safety Commissioner, Dr Henrietta Hughes, to undertake work in this area. Her report was issued a year ago, and it is clear that the victims are anxious for some form of redress for the harms that have been caused. The report states:

"The first point to make clear is that the Commissioner thinks that there is a clear case for redress based on the systemic healthcare and regulatory failures revealed by the First Do No Harm review in 2020. The Commissioner supports a restorative practice-based redress scheme, co-designed with affected patients, and which is, therefore, very different from court proceedings which seek to attribute blame."

Of course an election halts progress, but now, with new Ministers and a new Government nine months in, it is right to continue keeping the spotlight on this topic. To that end, my questions echo many of those raised by others. Could the Minister clarify the Government's position on the recommendation for financial redress, and could she give a timeframe for when they will respond to the report? Has the Minister met with Dr Hughes and campaigners to discuss the report, and will she commit to communicating with all those affected, as that is so important to help reduce some of the anxiety? It has already been a long and painful journey for victims, so continuing to take steps forward to address the fallout is important.

Further to the Hughes report, I am glad that the last Government took several actions to begin addressing the injustices suffered by victims of valproate and pelvic mesh. The former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), established the Cumberlege review, and significant progress was rightly made before the election on implementing seven of Dr Hughes's recommendations. Those included an unreserved apology to the women and children affected, and their families, on behalf of the healthcare system, for the time the system took to listen and respond. I am pleased to see that the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), the new Minister at the time, reiterated that apology when these issues were last debated in

December 2024. Progress also included the appointment of Dr Hughes as the first Patient Safety Commissioner to advocate for patients and improve the safety of medicines and medical devices, and a network of specialist centres established to provide comprehensive treatment, care and advice for those affected by implanted mesh.

Hon. Members have already referenced the Westminster Hall debate on these issues last December. Looking at the record of that debate, I was pleased to see from the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton that the Government were committed to implementing the remaining three recommendations as a priority. He said:

"It is a priority for this Government. We are working at pace, and we remain focused on making meaningful progress. This is a complex area of work, involving several Departments, but we are committed to providing an update at the earliest opportunity. I have heard the desire for urgency today, and I hope that we can make the progress that Members want to see."—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 175WH.]

I know that there has been a change in personnel in the ministerial team since that debate, but can the Minister confirm that it remains a priority for the Government regardless? Given that it is now four months since the last debate, and the Minister recognises the desire for urgency, what new update can she provide on the progress that has been made in implementing these recommendations since December?

As stated, I was in the debate on women's health last month, in which the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South raised the issue. The Minister's response was:

"On sodium valproate and pelvic mesh, the Cumberlege review made nine recommendations, of which the then Government accepted seven. I can confirm that the national pause remains in place."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 518WH.]

I also note that the Minister frequently quotes the following lines in her response to written parliamentary questions from colleagues:

"The Government will be providing an update to the Patient Safety Commissioner's Report at the earliest opportunity."

So could she say whether today is "the earliest opportunity"? If it is not, would she be kind enough to give an estimate of when that might be?

During that December debate, the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), also raised concerns about the experiences of some of the women within the specialist mesh centres, and urged Ministers to look into that. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out whether she shares those same concerns. If so, what steps has her Department taken to address these and look into them?

Finally on sodium valproate, we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) about the difficulty we have when it comes to valproate, given the damage it can cause but its importance as an epilepsy drug in supporting people to keep seizure free. The report itself states:

"However, the Commissioner continues to have concerns about incomplete adherence to the Pregnancy Prevention Programme requirements. As a result, in November 2023, she recommended that NHS England create a fully funded and resourced system for improving the safe use of the most potent teratogenic medications, beginning with the safe use of valproate."

With that being said, could the Minister update this House on the workstream regarding teratogenic medications? More importantly, given the news of the abolition of NHS England, what safeguards are being put in place to ensure that this system is resourced adequately?

“One year on” is a milestone to be celebrated—for getting this far after such a torrid journey in raising concerns, having them heard and getting them responded to—but it is just that: a milestone on a journey, not a destination. For those so affected, and their families, they will be keen to know what redress they are due and the mechanisms to deliver it, so that their cases might finally be fully rectified. After all, we cannot undo the past, but we can make amends for it, and I hope that the Government will continue to act on the recommendations to do so.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate, and I thank all hon. Members for their powerful words on this emotive topic.

I know that my hon. Friend met with the Minister for Patient Safety, Baroness Merron, last November to discuss the transparency of industry payments to healthcare practitioners, one of the nine recommendations that the independent medicines and medical devices safety review put to the then Government in 2018. This is something that the Government take extremely seriously. We must ensure that lessons are learned, and that is why we are putting patient safety at the heart of improving our health and social care system. I will continue to build a system that listens, hears and acts with speed, compassion and proportionality.

I want to repeat the apology that the previous Government made, which was echoed by my predecessor, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), and by Baroness Merron. I say to all of those mentioned today—to Samantha and her family; to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South’s mam; to the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Swards) and Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) and the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller); to Karen from Harrow East; to Bev from Bury North; to Colleen, Andy and Byron from North West Norfolk; to Paula and Gillian from Bexleyheath and Crayford; to Paula Goss; and to all those affected in the Gallery and across the country—we are sorry. We are sorry for the time the system took to listen to you and to your families. Everyone who has suffered complications from sodium valproate and pelvic mesh implants has our deepest sympathies and our assurance that we have listened and will continue to listen to those affected.

I am grateful to the Patient Safety Commissioner, Dr Henrietta Hughes, and her team for the Hughes report, which was published just over a year ago. It built on the important work started by Baroness Cumberlege in 2020. We will continue to work closely with Dr Hughes on how best to support affected patients and prevent future harm, on both this issue and a number of others.

The independent medicines and medical devices safety review was among the first of its kind, shining a searing spotlight on the harmful side effects of certain medicines and medical devices, including sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. The Cumberlege review revealed grave systemic issues in our health system that needed to be addressed with urgency. They covered areas ranging from the healthcare system’s lack of engagement with patients to the lack of safety monitoring for devices once they are on the market. That is why we are working to improve how the system listens and responds to concerns raised by patients; to strengthen the evidence base on which decisions are made; and to improve the safety of medicines and medical devices.

Recommendation 8b of the IMMDS review stated that there should be mandatory reporting for industry payments made to the health sector, akin to the Physician Payments Sunshine Act in the US. The previous Government accepted that in principle and held a six-week consultation. I recognise the importance of transparency and trust in the health system, and the Department is considering options regarding payment reporting, with an aim to publish a response later this year.

I absolutely understand why colleagues are pushing for clarity on our response to the Hughes report. I am acutely aware that this is a difficult and sensitive topic, and I appreciate frustrations about timescales, but this should not be rushed. The Government will need to consider carefully all the options and the associated costs before responding to the report’s recommendations. I assure Members that we will continue to progress this work across Government, ensuring that lessons are learned, and I will commit to writing to Baroness Merron on the timescales, as requested by so many Members today.

Sir Julian Lewis: I think it is true to say that the author of the Hughes report anticipated that the Government would want to take their time over these matters, but that is why Dr Hughes—and Baroness Cumberlege, I believe, as well—recommended an interim payment. If at least that interim payment could be made, people might be more patient about the bells and whistles that have to be added to the response later.

Ashley Dalton: I do appreciate the frustrations. Since we came into government last July, patient safety has been, and I can confirm that it remains, a top priority for this Government. Although it has been a year since the publication of the Hughes report, this is a complex issue involving several Departments, and it is important that we get the response right. As I have said, I will commit to writing to Baroness Merron on timescales, as requested, to get further clarification on that, and we are committed to learning from other instances in which patient safety has been impacted. The infected blood inquiry was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen).

John Glen: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I was not trying to suggest earlier that her tenure in office would be short-lived; I wish her every success in her endeavours. I think the spirit of today has been about cross-party consensus, not seeking to make political points about this matter, but what I will say to the Minister is that she can go back to her officials and say that there are two very recent precedents for interim payments, under the infected blood compensation scheme,

[*John Glen*]

of quite significant numbers. They were maximised, so that there would be no loss to the public purse—that is to say, they were entitlements that everyone would have been able to receive. That mechanism is there, so this can happen sooner. I recognise what the Minister is saying and I wish her well in her endeavours, but she should be able to do something with that information.

Ashley Dalton: I assure the right hon. Member that we are working at pace on this. It is a complicated matter, and we are taking note of previous similar situations. I assure him and the rest of the House that we will be updating the Patient Safety Commissioner at the earliest opportunity. I appreciate that it is frustrating that I cannot give an exact date or timescale in this debate, but we are working to make sure that we get this right.

Bob Blackman: The Minister is absolutely right in saying that patient safety must be at the forefront. However, we know that 40% of babies whose mothers took these drugs have developmental problems and one in nine have severe handicaps following birth, yet the drugs are still being prescribed to pregnant women. Will the Minister have a look at what can be done to make sure that pregnant women who suffer from epilepsy can at least be advised about the position and then decide whether they want to take the risk or not?

Ashley Dalton: I am encouraged that the number of women still being prescribed sodium valproate has reduced significantly following the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's introduction of the valproate pregnancy prevention programme. In April 2018, 27,441 women aged under 55 were prescribed valproate in England, but in March 2024, that number had come down to just under 16,000—a reduction of 42%. Nobody should stop taking valproate without advice from their healthcare professional. Beyond lowering prescription rates, I am also grateful to see Dr Rebecca Bromley, who is in the Public Gallery, heading up the foetal exposure to medicines service pilot study. The study is running for 18 months and was commissioned by NHS England. It is a multidisciplinary clinical service that is providing expert assessment, diagnosis and advice to individuals harmed following exposure to sodium valproate. We recognise those concerns.

Patients know what support they need. The Government are determined to make sure that patients feel, and are, truly heard, and to give them more choice and control over their healthcare. The Patient Safety Commissioner rightly sought views from those affected about the issues they are facing with service provision and what support they feel would be most valuable. Hearing from patients is at the heart of our consideration of the Hughes report, which is why Baroness Merron held a roundtable in December with groups representing patients impacted by sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. I know she remains extremely grateful to all attendees for sharing their stories and those of the patients that they represent.

I am aware of the time, and there are many issues that I have been unable to cover in the short time available. However, I commit to writing to all hon. Members who have raised specific concerns. Words cannot express

how sorry we are to the women who have suffered from severe and life-changing complications from both sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. We are actively considering this issue, and I wish there were more I could say at this time. I have heard the calls for swiftness, clarity and boldness in the commissioner's recommendations, and I shall bring that forward at the earliest opportunity. I am sure that this is not the last time this important topic will be discussed, and I know that colleagues will continue to hold our feet to the fire until this gets done.

4.23 pm

Mrs Hodgson: I sincerely thank everyone who has made the time to come along and speak on this most vital issue. They have all made such valuable contributions to this debate, and it is really heartening for me to hear such a great degree of consensus across the House that there is a wrong to be righted and that this new Labour Government have the opportunity to do just that.

There are so many hon. Members who would have liked to be here today. Indeed, while I was on my feet, my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) messaged to send his apologies, so I said I would make sure that was on the record. I thank the Minister; the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans); and the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for listening and for their intelligent contributions. There is so much expertise on this issue across the House. If we cannot get this sorted, nobody can.

I am particularly pleased that the Minister apologised on behalf of the Government again so fully and movingly. She actually moved me to tears—I do not know about anybody else—but I am a bit soft in that regard. I hope she will agree to meet campaigners to continue this conversation, as I know Baroness Merron has done in the other place. I am sure that everyone watching both from the Public Gallery and at home will have appreciated the empathy and the understanding that the Minister has shown in this debate.

With a new Government, we have new opportunities and the chance to make a real difference to the thousands of women and children who were wronged through no fault of their own. We have all the information we need, thanks to the amazing Baroness Cumberlege and our fantastic Patient Safety Commissioner, to ensure that such scandals never happen again and that families are given compensation to help to rebuild their lives. We now have to act, as Members have said. I hope that this debate has highlighted to the Minister the urgency of that—I am sure that it has—and that she will have the conversations required to make this happen so that these wrongs can be righted at last and as soon as possible.

If Members are willing, I ask that they gather at the bottom of the stairs outside this Chamber to join campaigners for a photo to mark this occasion, and to spend a few moments talking to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the first anniversary of the Hughes report on valproate and pelvic mesh.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 27 March 2025

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Compensation Authority Contingency Fund Advance: Correction

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Further to my statement of 17 December, I hereby give notice that the Cabinet Office has received a Contingencies Fund advance to make compensation payments to victims of the infected blood scandal.

The Cabinet Office's capital annually managed expenditure (AME) budget in its main estimate 2024-25 did not provide funding for compensation payments already approved by Parliament through the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. This advance was used to quickly compensate victims of the infected blood scandal. This has been received through the supplementary estimate. This advance enabled compensation to be made ahead of Parliament formally approving the ambit and the associated expenditure.

Parliamentary approval for additional capital of £272,000,000 for this new expenditure was sought in a supplementary estimate for the Cabinet Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £272,000,000 was met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS557]

TREASURY

Devolved Government Funding 2024-25

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): In addition to changes in devolved Government funding at supplementary estimates 2024-25, and in line with the statement of funding policy, the Welsh Government have chosen to draw down £125.000 million in resource DEL (excluding depreciation) and £50.000 million in capital DEL (general) from the Wales reserve in 2024-25. The Welsh Government have also chosen to switch £202.000 million from resource DEL (excluding depreciation) to capital DEL (general). These changes are in line with the funding arrangements set out in the Welsh Government's fiscal framework.

There have been further changes to devolved Government funding due to the application of the Barnett formula—changes that were processed after the finalisation of supplementary estimates 2024-25. These have resulted in a change of £0.019 million CDEL (general) for the Welsh Government and £0.812 million CDEL (general) for the Northern Ireland Executive in 2024-25. The Scottish Government will carry forward their £1.975 million CDEL (general) increase to 2025-26 with no change to their funding for 2024-25.

The Welsh Government will also return £2.000 million CDEL (general) funding for the north Wales growth deal in 2024-25 and £7.000 million CDEL (general)

funding for the construction of border control posts. This is to ensure the profile of funding better reflects the delivery of the deal and of border control post construction. Revised 2024-25 funding is as follows:

<i>£million</i>	<i>Welsh Government</i>	<i>Northern Ireland Executive</i>
Resource DEL excluding depreciation	17,154.011	15,657.049
Capital DEL (general)	3,278.160	1,959.532
Capital DEL (financial transactions)	165.344	90.513
Total DEL	20,597.515	17,707.094

[HCWS561]

Double Taxation Convention: United Kingdom and Peru

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): A double taxation convention with Peru was signed in London on 20 March. The text of the convention is available on the HM Revenue and Customs pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text of the convention will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS560]

EDUCATION

School Places: Capital Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I am today announcing over £1 billion of new capital investment to support local authorities to create mainstream school places needed by September 2028. I am also confirming details of the £740 million of capital funding for the 2025-26 financial year to support the creation of school places for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or who require alternative provision (AP), and details of £2.1 billion in capital funding for the 2025-26 financial year to improve the condition of the school and sixth-form college estate in England.

High and rising school standards for all children is at the heart of this Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity and improve children's outcomes through our plan for change. Ensuring that there are sufficient high-quality school places in well-maintained buildings is a critical part of driving forward this agenda.

Funding for mainstream school places

Today's funding announcement will support local authorities to meet their statutory duty and create school places needed by September 2028.

This funding, £640 million of which will be allocated in the 2026-27 financial year, with a further £400 million allocated in 2027-28, is on top of almost £1.5 billion of basic need capital funding that has previously been announced to create new school places needed between 2024 and September 2026.

Funding for SEND and AP places

I am also confirming the details of the previously announced £740 million to support children and young people with SEND or who require AP.

This funding can be used to adapt classrooms to be more accessible for children with SEND, to create specialist facilities within mainstream schools that can deliver more intensive support adapted to suit the pupils' needs, and to create special school places for pupils with the most complex needs.

Condition funding

We have increased funding to improve the condition of the estate for financial year 2025-26 to £2.1 billion, up from £1.8 billion committed for financial year 2024-25. This is in addition to our continued investment in the school rebuilding programme and targeted support for schools with RAAC.

The funding for financial year 2025-26 includes almost £1.4 billion in school condition allocations for eligible responsible bodies, including local authorities, large multi-academy trusts and large voluntary aided school bodies, such as dioceses, to decide how to invest across their schools. Allocations are partly informed by updated data on the relative condition of schools. It also includes almost £470 million available through the condition improvement fund, an annual bidding round for essential maintenance projects at schools in small and stand-alone academy trusts, small voluntary-aided bodies and sixth form colleges. Successful applications to the fund will be announced later in the spring. Almost £220 million in devolved formula capital (DFC) will be allocated directly for schools to spend on their own capital priorities.

Full details of this announcement, including the allocations for basic need, high needs, and condition funding, have been published on the Department for Education section on the gov.uk website here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/basic-need-allocations>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-provision-capital-allocations>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-capital-funding>

[HCWS559]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

British Council Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): The Minister of State for International Development, Latin America and Caribbean, my noble Friend Baroness Chapman of Darlington, has today made the following statement:

The British Council is an important international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities for the UK. It supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. It does this by uniquely combining the UK's deep expertise in arts and culture, education and the English language, its global presence and relationships in over 100 countries, and its unparalleled access to young people and influencers around the world.

In 2023-24 the British Council received £161.5 million core grant in aid from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

With a total reach of 589 million people in 2023-24, the British Council creates mutually beneficial relationships between the people of all four nations of the UK and other countries. Such connections, based on an understanding of each other's strengths and shared values, build an enduring trust. This helps strengthen the UK's global reputation and influence, encouraging people from around the world to visit, study, trade and make alliances with the UK.

Copies of the British Council's annual report and accounts for the 2023-24 financial year have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The annual report can also be found at the British Council's website: www.britishcouncil.org/about-us/how-we-work/corporate-reports

[HCWS563]

Six-monthly Report on Hong Kong: 1 July to 31 December 2024

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West):

The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today and can be found as an online attachment. It covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2024. The report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A copy is also available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/six-monthly-report-on-hong-kong-july-to-december-2024>. I commend the report to the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-03-27/HCWS558>

[HCWS558]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Health: Expected Spend for 2025-26

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I am today publishing this third annual statement, following the one made in March 2024 by my predecessor. The Health and Care Act 2022 introduced a statutory requirement for the Government to publish an annual statement setting out expectations for NHS mental health services spending. The statement aims to strengthen the accountability and transparency on decisions and spending relating to mental health, as part of the Government's commitment to improve mental health services.

It also supports the Government's commitment to uphold the mental health investment standard, which requires that integrated care boards' spending on mental health grows at least in line with growth in overall recurrent funding allocations. This statement covers ICB spend on mental health within scope of the mental health investment standard, as well as national spending on mental health through transformation funding and through NHS England's specialised commissioning. I am pleased to update the House that we will meet the mental health investment standard for the coming year.

Owing to the statutory requirement to make this statement before Parliament ahead of the new financial year, the figures for 2025-26 are the best current estimate based on projections that take account of the NHS planning guidance allocations, which were published on 30 January 2025. Figures for 2024-25 are based on the month 11 forecast, as full-year spend is not yet available. There have been minor changes to the recurrent baseline in 2023-24 due to final adjustments at year end, while the 2024-25 recurrent mandate now includes the impact of additional funding provided for elective recovery and the 2024-25 pay awards. Our 2025 mandate lays the foundations for longer-term reform and included improving the mental health of the nation as a priority of this Government and for the NHS.

I recently announced changes to the NHS operating model to move power from central Government to local leaders. The Darzi investigation highlighted that there were too many targets set for the NHS, which made it hard for local systems to prioritise their actions or be held properly accountable. We are giving systems greater control and flexibility over how funding is deployed to best meet the needs of their local population. The NHS planning guidance for 2025-26 sets out the first steps for reform and the immediate actions we are asking systems to take to deliver on the three big shifts needed: to move healthcare from hospitals to the community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention.

As stated above, I am committed to the mental health investment standard to support this Government's national mental health objectives and, as outlined in the planning guidance, we expect all integrated care boards to meet the MHIS in 2025-26. Ringfenced funding for mental health will support the delivery of our key priorities, increase the number of children and young people accessing services, reduce local inequalities in access, and improve productivity. This commitment will support the delivery of effective courses of treatment within NHS talking therapies and increase access to individual placement and support, so we can reach those in most need of support while also supporting the Government's objectives on economic growth.

In financial year 2024-25, mental health spending amounted to £14.9 billion and all 42 integrated care boards are forecasting to meet the mental health investment standard. Real-terms spending on mental health in 2024-25 is forecast to be £695 million higher than in 2023-24.

For 2025-26, mental health spending is forecast to amount to £15.6 billion. This represents another significant uplift in real-terms spending on mental health—£320 million—compared with the previous financial year. Real-terms growth in budgets will enable us to continue the roll-out of our manifesto commitments, including recruiting 8,500 mental health staff, modernising the Mental Health Act, providing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, and creating a network of community Young Futures hubs.

The proportion of spend is almost exactly the same as it was last year, with a difference of just 0.07%. This is because of significant investment in other areas of healthcare. Much of this investment in other areas, such as investment to improve general practice, will also have secondary benefits for mental health care.

There are also important elements of mental health spending that are not included in these figures. This includes capital spending, where we have committed

£75 million of investment to reduce out-of-area placements, as well as prescribing for mental health, spend on continuing healthcare and NHS England's routine spend on training new mental health staff.

	2024-25	2025-26
Recurrent NHS baseline (£ billion)	170.2	179.4
Total forecast mental health spend (£ billion)	14.9	15.6
Mental health share of recurrent baseline (%)	8.78	8.71

Total forecast mental health spend in the table above includes ICB spend on mental health (which contributes to the MHIS) and, in addition, at NHS England level, service development fund spending and specialised commissioning spending on mental health. The autumn statement 2023 funding for the expansion of NHS talking therapies—protected in the 2024 Budget settlement—which totals to £69 million, is included in the total mental health spend in 2025-26. Additional spring Budget 2024 and autumn Budget 2024 funding for the expansion of individual placement support, which totals £42 million, is also included.

These figures are different from those on the NHS mental health dashboard, which includes learning disabilities and dementia spend in addition to mental health spend. It also compares ICB mental health spend to ICB allocations.

[HCWS562]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Consultation on Prohibiting Ninja Swords

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government are today publishing their response to the public consultation, "Prohibiting ninja swords: legal description and defences". The consultation ran between 13 November and 11 December 2024. This was open to the public, businesses, the voluntary sector and community groups, and other organisations with a direct interest in the proposals.

The consultation received a total of 312 completed responses, and we are grateful to all those who took the time to respond. The Government response sets out our consideration of these responses.

The Government will introduce legislation to amend the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Offensive Weapons) Order 1988, adding ninja swords to the prohibited list. This will mean that it will become an offence to manufacture, import, sell and generally supply or possess a ninja sword, unless a defence applies. Preceding a ban will be the surrender scheme, allowing individuals to claim compensation for ninja swords that they surrender.

A copy of the consultation response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS556]

Ninja Swords Ban: Statutory Instrument

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government are today laying before Parliament a statutory instrument to ban ninja swords. Under the Criminal Justice Act (Offensive

Weapons Order) 1988, ninja swords will be added to the list of prohibited weapons, making it an offence to manufacture, import, sell or possess one.

The Government are delivering their manifesto commitment and making our streets safer by restricting access to ninja swords and preventing their use as weapons of crime. This will be known as part of Ronan's law and is an important step forward in our mission to halve knife crime within a decade.

We sought views on the proposals across a four-week period through a public consultation, and the responses are in support of the ban. A copy of the Government's response to the public consultation can be found on gov.uk.

The surrender scheme for ninja swords will precede the ban, enabling those in possession of a ninja sword to safely surrender it. Those who own a ninja sword on or prior to today, the cut-off date of 27 March—the day on which this statutory instrument is being laid in Parliament—will be eligible for compensation. Those who come into possession of a ninja sword after today will not be able to claim compensation. It will also be possible to surrender a ninja sword without seeking compensation or without attending a police station.

[HCWS554]

Zombie-style Knives: Surrender and Compensation Scheme

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government have implemented the ban on zombie-style knives and zombie-style machetes approved by Parliament last year. The ban came into force on 24 September 2024. It follows the holding of a surrender and compensation scheme that ran from 25 August and concluded on 23 September 2024. An analysis of the scheme is set out below.

Total weapons surrendered	47,795
“Zombie-style” knives surrendered for compensation	28,180
“Zombie-style” machetes surrendered for compensation	19,180
Surrendered weapons where compensation not sought	435
Overall total claimed in compensation	£685,996.26

It should be noted that the figures in this analysis only include weapons handed in at designated police stations (or by arrangement with the police). The figures do not include any weapons placed in surrender bins during the surrender scheme.

[HCWS555]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Households Below Average Income: Statistics Release

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has today published its annual statistics on incomes and living standards covering 2023-24.

This includes households below average income (HBAI), which contains estimates of household incomes and a range of low-income indicators for 2023-24, derived from the family resources survey.

Further publications in today's release are: income dynamics, pensioners' income series, children in low-income families, improving lives indicators, separated families statistics and the family resources survey. These publications cover the four statutory measures of child poverty required to be published by DWP under the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

Today's statistics underline how poverty and hardship increased substantially under the last Government. A total of 1.2 million more people were living in relative poverty after housing costs in 2023-24 than in 2010-11. That includes 900,000 more children and 200,000 more pensioners in poverty.

The statistics also show that median household incomes fell by 2% in 2023-24 compared to the year before, both before and after housing costs. Child poverty saw the biggest increases between 2022-23 and 2023-24, rising across all four measures: relative and absolute poverty, both before and after housing costs.

Nearly 1 in 5 children—2.6 million—were living in a food insecure household in 2023-24, up from 17% to 18% on the previous year. The number of individuals in households using a food bank in the previous 12 months increased by 500,000 to 2.8 million people in 2023-24, over 4% of the population. These are the highest numbers since records began.

The levels of poverty and food insecurity we inherited are unacceptable. The last Labour Government lifted 600,000 children and over a million pensioners out of poverty. This active Government are determined to drive down poverty, drive up living standards, and grow the economy—this Government's No.1 priority.

We know that good work is the best route out of poverty. That is why, since the election, we have hit the ground running to get Britain working:

Delivering the biggest reforms to employment support in a generation with our £240 million get Britain working plan: creating a new jobs and careers service, giving Mayors and local leaders new powers and resources to join up work, health and skills support to drive down economic inactivity; and delivering a new youth guarantee so that all 18 to 22-year-olds in England are earning or learning.

Setting out decisive action to fix the broken benefits system to protect people who need support and help those who can into employment through our Pathways to Work Green Paper—including £1 billion a year in employment, skills and health support for disabled people.

Creating more good jobs in every part of the country in clean energy and through our modern industrial strategy.

Investing almost £26 billion in the health and social care system to get people back to health and back to work;

Alongside this, we have taken action to support people on the lowest incomes and those struggling the most, including by:

Boosting the national minimum wage for 3 million of the lowest paid full-time workers, putting up to £2,500 a year in their pockets from this April.

Announcing a permanent, above inflation rise to the standard allowance in universal credit, for the first time ever—increasing it from £92 per week in 2025-26 to £106 per week by 2029-30.

Introducing from April a new fair repayment rate that caps the level of debt repayments that can be taken from universal credit. This puts £420 a year on average into the pockets of 1.2 million of the poorest households.

Extending the household support fund in England until 31 March 2026, with £742 million for local authorities to help families and pensioners facing hardship and additional Barnett funding for the devolved Governments.

Poverty scars the lives and life chances of our children—because you cannot fulfil your potential without food in your belly or a decent roof over your head. So, in addition, we are bringing forward a child poverty strategy to ensure every child has the best start in life.

With our commitment to the triple lock, we are also protecting pensioners who have worked all their lives and deserve security in retirement. Unlike the previous Government, who left over 800,000 pensioners missing out on the pension credit they were entitled to, we are protecting the poorest pensioners by delivering the biggest

ever drive to increase uptake. This has seen an 81% increase in applications since July 2024 compared with the same period last year, and 46,000 more awards compared with that period.

Today's statistics serve to underscore the chances and choices that were denied by the last Government and our determination to support those who are struggling and unleash the potential of the British people.

[HCWS553]

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Thursday 3 April 2025

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