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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 12 June 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NORWICH LIVESTOCK MARKET BILL [LORDS]

Bill read a Second time.

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Agreements Programme

1. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UK's trade agreements programme. [904552]

17. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the UK's trade agreements programme. [904572]

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The UK's recent trade agreements with India, the United States and the European Union confirm that, under this Government, Britain is back and open for business. These deals open markets and cut tariffs and will contribute to growth across the United Kingdom. For example, our deal with the EU—our closest and largest trading partner—contributes to our promise to reset our relations with our friends and neighbours in Europe. The sanitary and phytosanitary measures and the emissions trading system measures announced at the summit could increase UK GDP by nearly £9 billion by 2040.

Katrina Murray: Cumbernauld is fast becoming a centre for advanced manufacturing, with too many companies to name basing themselves there. Will the Minister set out how the UK's trade agreements are helping such companies to expand into new markets, creating growth and jobs in places such as Cumbernauld? What steps are being taken to ensure that more Scottish manufacturers can take advantage of these deals?

Mr Alexander: I pay tribute to Cumbernauld's advanced manufacturing capability. It is estimated that the UK-India free trade agreement will boost the whole UK economy by £4.8 billion and grow trade with India by over £25 billion annually. The Scotch Whisky Association

forecasts £1 billion in extra exports and 1,200 new jobs. For Irn-Bru, which I understand is headquartered in my hon. Friend's constituency, the agreement also removes India's 33% tariffs on UK soft drinks. This India deal was delivered in the UK as a result of the hard work of our negotiators and the leadership of the Secretary of State, and it will benefit exporters and advanced manufacturers right across our country.

Elaine Stewart: Luxury knitwear products from Alex Begg, based in my Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock constituency, are a great example of quality Scottish exports, and it has a great reputation in leading fashion houses across the world. Like many businesses, Alex Begg is happy to see that good UK trade deals are back in fashion. Will the Minister join me in visiting Alex Begg in Ayr to hear about the importance of trade deals to local businesses with global ambitions?

Mr Alexander: I pay tribute to the craftsmanship and global ambitions of Alex Begg in Ayr. My mother's side of the family are all from Ayrshire, so it would be a personal pleasure to visit Ayrshire, as my hon. Friend suggests. I would suggest that we could visit Alex Begg during the summer recess, but then again, as Billy Connolly once observed:

“There are two seasons in Scotland: June and winter.”

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Yesterday the Chancellor championed the Government's supposed trade deal with the United States, but that trade deal is not yet complete. We know that because no impact assessment has been published. Why are the Government popping the champagne prematurely, and have they done an impact assessment on any of the ongoing negotiations?

Mr Alexander: I am grateful that at least one of the Opposition parties accepts that there is a deal. The hon. Member is right to recognise that the implementation phase is what we are now relentlessly focused on. I am sure the House will be aware of the statement issued overnight by US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, confirming that the US will expedite the agreed quota for car exports to the United States, reducing tariffs from 27.5% to 10%. The Government continue to work on this important deal.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The UK has a trade agreement with Israel that permits the import of goods produced in illegal settlements. Such goods are effectively proceeds of crime, given that settlements constitute illegal expropriation of Palestinian land. How can the UK justify this complicity in trade of illegally produced goods, and when will we finally see a ban on the import of any settlement goods?

Mr Alexander: The hon. Lady raises a critical issue. The British Government have a long-standing opposition to the illegal occupation of lands in the Palestinian territories, principally in the west bank. We have been clear and consistent that, on the grounds of international law, the responsibility lies with the Israelis to resolve these issues. On the points she raised, it is a significant and contentious enough issue. I will be happy to write to her, but it has been clear for many years that we oppose the settlements and continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The gov.uk website, which has not been updated since 8 May, states that the Prime Minister negotiated the 25% steel tariff down to zero, but that is not right, is it? Steel faces a tariff of 25% today and runs the risk of a 50% tariff being imposed next month. Will the Minister take this opportunity to commit to updating the website, updating this House and updating steelworkers on the state of the negotiations?

Mr Alexander: I am very happy to consider the issues that the hon. Lady raises in relation to the website, but I can assure her that, whether it is the Minister for Industry or the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the Government are in constant dialogue with the British steel industry. We will introduce a steel strategy, unlike her predecessors, and we have put serious money behind it. Thanks to the economic prosperity deal with the United States, the UK was the only country to be made exempt from the 50% tariffs on steel and aluminium that other countries around the world now face.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have long called for a closer trading relationship with Europe after the disastrous negotiations by the previous Conservative Government. We welcomed last month's new trade agreement, including an agrifood deal establishing a UK-EU sanitary and phytosanitary zone. The EU is our largest agrifood market, but since Brexit exports are down by 21% and imports are down by 7%. The introduction of an SPS agreement will provide welcome relief to many businesses by reducing costs through the removal of border checks and reducing many certificate requirements, such as for export health certificates. However, businesses and producers cannot plan without clarity, so will the Minister set out a timeline on when we can expect the SPS deal to be implemented?

Mr Alexander: I sympathise with a lot of what the hon. Lady has said. She is right to recognise that post Brexit we have broadly overperformed in services, relative to expectations, but significantly underperformed in terms of goods exports. That was in no small measure because a number of food and agriculture producers were buried in red tape and new paperwork. That is exactly why, as she suggests, the SPS deal is critical. Again, I welcome the fact that, for the second time today, we are being challenged to go further and faster on deals that we have delivered. I can assure her that, as I have said in relation to the United States, we take seriously our responsibilities on the implementation of SPS, but that places responsibilities on the British Government and, in this case, on the European Commission.

UK-India Free Trade Agreement

2. **Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the UK-India free trade agreement on the economy. [904553]

11. **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the potential impact of the UK-India free trade agreement on the economy. [904564]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): This trade agreement is a huge economic win for the UK—the biggest trade deal since Brexit and the best deal that India has ever offered. As we have heard, it is estimated to increase bilateral trade by £25.5 billion, UK GDP by £4.8 billion and wages by £2.2 billion each year in the long run. It will mean new opportunities for businesses in every part of the United Kingdom.

Alan Gemmell: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am having some import-export issues myself, as my first book, a provocative and racy thriller, is being published in India in July.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): What's it called?

Alan Gemmell: It is called "30th State".

May I congratulate the Secretary of State and former colleagues on this deal, which is great for whisky distilleries such as Lochlea in my constituency. When I was trade commissioner, Conservative Ministers were clamouring for a trade deal with India. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how he has managed to do it one year after they failed miserably?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful for that question. I acknowledge my hon. Friend's considerable expertise and service to this country through his commendable work as trade commissioner. I hope that he will advise us all on how to get a copy of his book—perhaps a copy could be placed in the Library. He is right to say that this is a great deal for every part of the UK. It is particularly strong for Scotland, given the iconic reduction in the tariff on Scotch whisky for the Lochlea distillery, and it is strong on Scottish salmon and services. These deals come down to a lot of work not just from the ministerial team but from the whole departmental team. I pay tribute to them and my officials for all their important work in this matter.

Gurinder Singh Josan: Last week I had the privilege of visiting A&M Pure Precision, a long-established local firm in my Smethwick constituency that specialises in designing, developing, testing and machining complex precision components in a range of materials for sectors including aerospace, automotive, motorsport, space and unmanned aerial vehicle engine systems. Given the importance of advanced manufacturing to the local economy, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of how the UK-India free trade agreement—and indeed other agreements—could create new opportunity for such firms and support wider economic growth in the west midlands?

Jonathan Reynolds: What a privilege it must be for my hon. Friend to represent a constituency with so many essential businesses doing such brilliant work for this country. On advanced manufacturing, he is right to say that a set of advantageous positions has been agreed, putting this country at a genuine competitive advantage, particularly in relation to sectors such as automotive and machinery, which I would expect his constituency to benefit from. India is traditionally a very protectionist economy, and it is the world's fastest growing big economy.

Whether it is for goods or services, A&M Pure Precision or the west midlands as a whole, there is so much good stuff here to celebrate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister can expect an autographed copy of the book by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell) to be spinning its way towards his office as we speak.

I very much welcome the UK-India free trade agreement. It is good news, but Northern Ireland has a particular protocol issue. I know that the Minister is keen—I know it for a fact, because his answers are always good—that Northern Ireland can receive the same benefits as the rest of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland and Wales. Can he assure us that we in Northern Ireland will also be benefactors?

Jonathan Reynolds: I appreciate the hon. Member's kind words. He will know that ensuring that everything my Department does works for Northern Ireland is a personal priority for me and for the ministerial team. In relation to exports, I can assure him that Northern Ireland will benefit from the advantageous position that the whole United Kingdom is in. We do have issues in making sure the more complex regulatory position from the protocol in Northern Ireland is working in the best possible way. There are very strong reasons for making that work better, if we can do so, and he has my commitment that we will seek to do that.

Support for Entrepreneurs

3. **Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support entrepreneurs. [904554]

18. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What support his Department plans to provide to entrepreneurship incubators in towns. [904573]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): The Government continue to support entrepreneurs through start-up loans via the British Business Bank and through programmes such as growth hubs in England and “Help to Grow: Management” training across the UK. Later this year we will publish our small and medium-sized enterprise strategy, one key element of which will be to signal our determination to do even more to champion our entrepreneurs, including through a new vision for business support, built around the coming business growth service.

Mr Quigley: You will be pleased to know that I do not have a book coming out, Mr Speaker. I am reading the one that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell) has written, and it is excellent, but I should probably say on his behalf that any likeness to characters in this place is entirely coincidental.

I thank the Minister for his response. I have seen at first hand his commitment to supporting Britain's entrepreneurial spirit, but I worry that on the Isle of Wight unreliable cross-Solent transport is holding back entrepreneurs. Local businesses do not lack ambition; they lack a dependable link to their supply chains. Some are even considering leaving the island. Will the Minister meet me to discuss a long-term solution to cross-Solent travel that supports, rather than punishes, island businesses?

Gareth Thomas: I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to championing entrepreneurs on the Isle of Wight. We know that there is huge untapped potential in the entrepreneurial talent across the UK, and we are determined to do even more to unlock it, including on the Isle of Wight. As he will know, the Department for Transport, which leads on cross-Solent travel, has been clear that ferry services to and from the Isle of Wight are vital for islanders and for business. I know he has already had some contact with ministerial colleagues at the Department for Transport to discuss these issues, but if he thinks I can be helpful, I will be happy to meet him.

John Slinger: Towns like Rugby have a proud industrial heritage and an exciting present, and we are building a dynamic and sustainable business and industrial future. It was very welcome that the Chancellor revised the Green Book to make sure that investment and economic growth are spread more fairly across the country, beyond the major city regions. Can my hon. Friend set out what support may be available for towns like Rugby to attract and encourage people to start and grow their own businesses—for example, entrepreneurship hubs in towns rather than cities, so that they can play a role, and targeted tax reliefs for firms setting up in places like Rugby?

Gareth Thomas: I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to championing entrepreneurs in his constituency. He may know that we already have some 41 growth hubs across England, including the Coventry and Warwickshire growth hub, which provides a bespoke service for first-time entrepreneurs, tailored advice and support to start-ups and those wanting to scale up a business. We are determined to do more to help entrepreneurs and will set out our plans in our SME strategy, which is due to be published relatively shortly.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I recently met a load of entrepreneurs and small businesses in Mid Leicestershire who all have the same concern about the low VAT registration threshold of just £90,000. That is stifling their growth, because it adds a lot of bureaucracy and cost. What representations will the Minister make to the Chancellor to ensure that those small businesses can flourish?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that we receive representations on the VAT threshold from a number of small businesses, and we ensure that they are heard by Treasury colleagues. He will recognise that VAT raises a significant sum of money for the public finances, and given the mess that we inherited, we had to take some difficult decisions about those public finances to protect funding for hospitals in his constituency, and indeed other public services across the country.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Recently imposed general product safety regulations have added yet another layer of cost and complexity to exports to the European Union. That is particularly hitting entrepreneurs and microbusinesses, many of which have had to end exports to their EU customers. Did the Department have any discussions with its EU counterparts during recent trade negotiations about exempting small and microbusinesses from those rules? If not, is it doing any work to support small businesses in particular, which have had to end exports to EU customers because of the new regulations?

Gareth Thomas: We have been talking to businesses about what they can do in the light of the new regulations, and we are in the process of improving significantly the range of support available to businesses online. The Secretary of State recently set out our plans for a new business growth service, which will significantly improve the speed and quality of advice that businesses can get from the Government.

Employment Costs

4. **Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce employment costs for employers. [904556]

20. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce employment costs for employers. [904575]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The Employment Rights Bill is the next phase of delivering our plan to make work pay. The Bill is both pro-worker and pro-business, and will see significant benefits for employers. For example, increased worker wellbeing could be worth billions of pounds a year. The Bill will also reduce workplace conflict, which, according to a report published by ACAS in 2021, costs employers around £30 billion a year. The Bill will level the playing field so that those employers who are engaged in good business practice are not forced into a race to the bottom.

Harriet Cross: Yesterday, Scotbeef announced the closure of its abattoir in Inverurie in my Gordon and Buchan constituency, with 90 job losses and another blow to agriculture in north-east Scotland. It blamed rising costs. In April the increase to national insurance contributions came in—a huge tax rise on businesses—and the Office for Budget Responsibility has shown that 109,000 jobs were lost in May, which was the highest monthly figure in five years. It cannot be a coincidence that that happened the month after the NICs increase. How is the Minister's Department supporting businesses and jobs in sectors such as agriculture, which are having to deal with huge cost increases because of his Government's decisions?

Justin Madders: I am very sorry to hear the news from the hon. Lady's constituency. It is the case that 667,000 more people are in work compared with this time last year, and 300,000 fewer people are economically inactive. I am rather surprised that she mentions the national insurance hike, because the Leader of the Opposition was on the radio this morning and was repeatedly asked to confirm whether that hike would be reversed. She failed to do so, and it seems to me that the Opposition are in opposition to themselves.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Minister seems to be in denial. As a former entrepreneur, I visit lots of businesses in my constituency, and I talk to them about their fears. Not a single one has anything positive to say about the Employment Rights Bill—indeed, they are concerned that it will reduce employment, not increase it, and it has been estimated that it will increase costs by more than £5 billion. The Minister has been asked this before, so he has had

a lot of time to think about it: can he name a single business that publicly supports the Employment Rights Bill?

Justin Madders: I can certainly name a number. I also refer the hon. Member to *Hansard* on Tuesday 11 March, column 953, where I named a small business. A number of other businesses have been in support: Centrica, Co-op, Richer Sounds, Nationwide, Adept, One+All, Pedal Me, Inkwell—there are many businesses that we talk to on a regular basis and that understand that treating staff well is a good thing for those businesses. It is a pro-growth, pro-worker measure.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): On 12 June 1996, a Conservative Minister stood at the Government Dispatch Box and said:

“Labour's minimum wage would cost hundreds of thousands of jobs”.—[*Official Report*, 12 June 1996; Vol. 279, c. 248.]

They were wrong then and they are wrong now. With particular focus on the Teesside region, what steps are the Government taking to bring more well-paid jobs to people to make sure they can spend more in our local economy?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there are so many echoes of the minimum wage debate, it is uncanny. As time has shown, the minimum wage has raised living standards in this country and it is something we are very proud to have implemented. We are looking to bring more investment across the economy. Recent surveys have shown that business confidence is increasing as a result of decisions made by this Labour Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) made clear earlier, the ONS statistics are very clear: 109,000 fewer on payroll in May alone and 276,000 fewer since the autumn Budget. As UKHospitality points out, the NICs changes were “felt most intensely by foundational sectors like hospitality,” which “necessitates an urgent review”.

My question to the Minister is simple: where will his red line sit? How many more jobs have to come off payroll before the Department for Business and Trade will stand up to the Treasury on this? Another 100,000? A million? Where is the line?

Justin Madders: Again, it is interesting that those on the Conservative Front Bench do not seem to be in agreement with their own leader any more about the national insurance hikes. I will just point out some statistics to the hon. Member: the International Monetary Fund has predicted that growth will increase this year and the Lloyds business barometer found that business confidence was up. We are putting money back into people's pockets and investing in this country. We are doing things that the Conservatives failed to do for 14 years and that is why they are out of power.

Small Businesses: Exports

5. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to encourage small businesses to export. [904557]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Just last month, we relaunched the Board of Trade to focus on the targeted support and help that small businesses need to take up opportunities from the UK's free trade agreements. The recent trade deals with India, the United States and the European Union aim to reduce red tape, improve customs processes, slash tariffs and open new markets for small exporters up and down the UK.

Liz Twist: Small businesses—like Rezon in my constituency, which makes groundbreaking brain protection sports headwear—are working hard to grow and export, but it is often hard to know where to get the right advice. What practical support are the Government giving to small businesses to help them export and take full advantage of those trade deals?

Gareth Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the opportunity to attend a wide-ranging roundtable with local businesses in her constituency, at the end of last year. Our new workshop, "Introduction to Export", is in collaboration with the North East combined authority, and is aimed specifically at helping local small businesses that are thinking about exporting to new markets for the first time. A range of other support is available on the Government website, and that will be significantly improved as a result of the coming business growth service.

High Street Businesses

6. **Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to support high street businesses. [904559]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): We have announced plans to reform business rates, launched high street rental auction powers for councils that will help businesses to access currently vacant properties, worked with industry to open over 150 banking hubs, and introduced the Crime and Policing Bill to provide retailers with greater protections from assault and shoplifting. Our forthcoming small and medium-sized enterprise strategy will set out our further plans to help businesses on the high street and beyond.

Aphra Brandreth: Chester South and Eddisbury is home to some truly special high streets, lined with independent shops and pubs that play a vital role in the life of our communities. I have spoken to local business owners, especially in hospitality, who are already feeling the pressure. Following the spending review, the chief executive of UKHospitality said that

"the overwhelming challenge holding back hospitality from meeting its potential is the current tax burden".

Does the Minister accept that unless action is taken to ease the burden on high street businesses, especially in hospitality, the Government risk undermining the very communities they claim to support?

Gareth Thomas: I say gently to the hon. Lady that when she had the conversations that she says she had with businesses in her constituency, I am sure she pointed out the huge economic mess that this Government inherited and the £22 billion black hole in public finances.

That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer had to make some very difficult decisions in last year's Budget. We have set out a series of plans that will make a genuine difference on our high streets, including new opportunities to persuade landlords to open up premises for rent. We will set out further plans in the coming small business strategy, and our industrial strategy will also help to generate growth in high streets and beyond.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): The town of Burntwood in my constituency has a high street that has been struggling after 14 years of neglect by the Conservatives. One of the things holding Burntwood back is the lack of access to high street banks. Will the Minister update us on what the Department is doing to support access to banking in our high streets as a key pillar of driving the regeneration of high streets like the one in Burntwood?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the need for face-to-face banking in communities and high streets up and down the country. We are committed to working with the banks to roll out 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament, but we also think that the Post Office can do more to help to improve access to banking services. On the particular issue in his constituency, if it would be helpful, I would be very happy to sit down and talk to him about what else he might be able to do to secure a banking hub for his constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Retail Jobs Alliance is very clear in its warning that the Government's changes to business rates will

"accelerate the decline of high streets, reducing footfall...and creating a cycle of economic downturn."

That letter was also signed by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—a Labour-affiliated trade union. Once again, the Minister and the Department for Business and Trade have a choice. Will they stand up for high street retailers, actual employers and even their own affiliated trade union, or will they just go along with Treasury diktat?

Gareth Thomas: Once upon a time, the Conservatives supported business rates reform to help the high street; the hon. Gentleman now seems to be shifting his party's policy. Indeed, time after time his Government promised that they would reform business rates, but one of the reasons they lost the confidence of British business at the last election was because they did not act to reform business rates. We have said that we will introduce permanently lower business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure. The Chancellor of the Exchequer set out our initial thoughts on that in the Budget in October, and we will publish an update on where we are on that issue in the coming months.

Greg Smith: We support business rates reform, but when Labour's own trade union says that its plan is not going to work, Ministers should really sit up and listen.

Let me turn to another issue affecting our high streets: shoplifting—which continues to devastate many high street retailers. I see that in my own constituency in

high streets in Princes Risborough, Wendover and Great Missenden. How is the Minister actively engaging with the Home Office, police and crime commissioners and police forces to move shoplifting up the agenda across the board, just as my home force of Thames Valley has done with its Disc scheme? Before he comes back with police numbers, let me tell him that there are more police in Thames Valley than ever before, let alone since 2010. Just talking the talk on numbers is not enough. What is he going to do proactively to make this issue go up the agenda?

Gareth Thomas: I think the hon. Gentleman, in his own way, is congratulating the Government on increasing police numbers in his constituency, and he is certainly right to do so. We have committed to an extra 3,000 police officers over the course of this financial year and a total of an extra 13,000 by the end of this Parliament. We are also taking action to end the immunity that his party introduced for shoplifters and taking steps to increase the powers that the police have to take action when shoplifters and others are violent against retail staff.

Support for Small Businesses

7. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small businesses. [904560]

13. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small businesses. [904567]

19. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support small businesses in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency. [904574]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Our small business strategy will be published later this year and will set out our plans to champion entrepreneurs, improve access to finance and help small and medium-sized enterprises to reach more markets and adopt new technology. As I alluded to earlier, we are developing our plans for our new business growth service, simplifying access to support and advice for small businesses. We are also tackling the challenge of late payments, including the introduction of a new fair payment code and upcoming legislation requiring large companies to report annually on their payment performance.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: In Aylesbury town centre, we have some fantastic businesses, from Darlington's to the Rockwood pub and Nafees bakery. They provide an amazing service to the community, but with issues such as traffic, parking and antisocial behaviour, they can struggle to get customers into town and through their doors. I congratulate the Minister on the work he is doing, but can he tell us more about how his small business strategy will support our high streets and town centres, like Aylesbury, to thrive?

Gareth Thomas: I very much enjoyed my visit to my hon. Friend's constituency and the roundtable we had with some of the fantastic businesses there. I very much hope that Conservative-controlled Buckinghamshire council

will finally get its act together and sort out some of the traffic and parking issues she mentioned. We will set out our plans to do more to help small businesses across the country, including in Aylesbury, in our SME strategy. One particular measure that we will be able to take action on is to improve access to finance for small businesses, following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's significant increase in the capacity of the British Business Bank yesterday.

Joe Powell: Small businesses on our high streets across my constituency, from Earl's Court Road to Queensway, Notting Hill Gate and Portobello Road, are fed up of being blighted by candy shops, low-grade souvenir shops, Harry Potter shops and even barbershops, with accusations of VAT and business rates evasion and even links to money laundering and serious organised crime. Can the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking, in conjunction with the Minister responsible for high streets, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the National Crime Agency, to crack down on these operations and create a legitimate level playing field for our small businesses?

Gareth Thomas: I recognise that my hon. Friend has been very persistent on this issue, and he is entirely right to be so. We have been working with colleagues in the Home Office and the National Crime Agency to take action to crack down on illegitimate businesses that threaten to undermine the legitimate ones that exist on all of our high streets. In March, the National Economic Crime Centre co-ordinated a three-week crackdown on barbershops and other cash-intensive businesses where there were concerns, visiting almost 400 premises and securing freezing orders over a series of bank accounts totalling more than £1 million.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I really do need to press him, because my constituents in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes are as fed up as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) with seeing high streets dominated by dodgy vape shops and unlicensed barbers. While some of those businesses are legitimate, a recent BBC investigative report shows that many are involved in money laundering and organised crime. Obviously, the Minister is aware of the situation, but is he working closely with the Home Office to try to tackle this blight? We probably need a national strategy, not a three-week operation.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is right to say that this is not just an issue for our high streets, such as those mentioned by our hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), but a concern up and down the country. The National Crime Agency and Home Office colleagues are seeking to take action against illegitimate businesses, and my hon. Friend will recognise that the announcement in yesterday's spending review of additional police officers, with more to come over the spending review period, will help us with that activity.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): If the book that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell) has written is a political thriller about fighting for small business, I am sure it features five heroes on the Government Front Bench doing everything

they can to promote small business. But readers will ask, “Who is the villain of the piece?” Is it not obvious that it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is doing everything possible to undermine business, with 276,000 people having lost work since the autumn statement, and 109,000 in the month of May alone? When will the Ministers—the heroes of this story—fight against the Chancellor, who is getting so much so wrong?

Gareth Thomas: It is a little while since I have been called a hero by the right hon. Gentleman, but I am glad that I have finally had some recognition from him. I do not think that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a villain at all; indeed, I think the spending review she announced yesterday will help to unlock investment in our high streets and our small businesses up and down the country. The record investment in research and development and in infrastructure, and the additional capacity for the British Business Bank, will help to unlock billions of pounds of new investment and many more job opportunities across the country.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Charlotte from Harpenden and her family run Gatwards, one of the oldest family-run jewellers in the UK. It is a small business that has been there for so many years, but it has been hit by the rise in national insurance contributions and changes to business property relief and inheritance tax, meaning that it will shelve plans to hire staff and the premises are in peril. Will the Minister work with the Treasury to review the impact of these policies on small businesses and our high streets?

Gareth Thomas: We will always work across Government with the Treasury to look at issues that affect businesses, whether on the high street or beyond. In the discussions the hon. Member has had with the particular businesses in her constituency, I am sure she will have noted our plans to reform business rates, which will help many businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector. She will also have noted that more than 40% of businesses will pay no business rates in the coming year.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Lky7 Sports is a small cycle and nutrition business in Ashford in my constituency. It has been hammered by the loss of small business rate relief, and wrote to me yesterday saying:

“The Government say that they are helping small business, but this is a joke when our business rates have gone from nothing to £1,800. We are seriously considering closing the shop down.”

What advice does the Minister have for that boss?

Gareth Thomas: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman—I say this gently to him—will have explained to that particular business that we inherited a very difficult economic situation because of the decisions that his party took, including on tax, but our small business strategy will set out more plans to help small businesses, such as the one in his constituency. Our business rates relief package will make a significant difference for retail, hospitality and leisure. *[Interruption.]* He asks when we will publish the small business strategy—it will be shortly.

Industrial Strategy

8. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on developing an industrial strategy. [904561]

15. **Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on developing an industrial strategy. [904569]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The Department is making good progress developing our industrial strategy—a strategy that has been called for by industry for many years and opposed by the Conservatives for ideological reasons. We have launched our consultation, we have met industry and thousands of businesses across the land, and we are finalising our report, which we will be publishing shortly. The spending review announcements yesterday on investment will add to the business growth in the country that we all want to see.

Alison Hume: British bus manufacturer Alexander Dennis announced yesterday that it is consolidating its operations in the UK to its Scarborough facility, placing 400 jobs in Falkirk at risk. The company is warning about competitive imbalance, the increasing market share of Chinese bus manufacturers and an absence of incentives for British-built vehicles. How are the Government planning to support British bus manufacturers as part of our industrial strategy?

Sarah Jones: This is a challenging and difficult time for the workers and their families at Alexander Dennis, as well as for the local area. As Members would expect, I have engaged extensively with ADL's senior executives alongside the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Department for Transport and the First Minister of Scotland to discuss what we can do to support. We wrote jointly to the company, offering to support it in any way we can. There are many issues that we tried to talk through with its representatives. Bus manufacturing sits with the Department for Transport, so it is taking the lead, but we are working together to do what we can.

Kenneth Stevenson: Do the Secretary of State and the Minister agree that the industrial towns and villages that make up Lanarkshire must be central to any modern industrial strategy? Will they meet me, potentially in Airdrie and Shotts, to hear more about the excellent skills and potential that exist throughout the constituency that could undoubtedly contribute to their and this Government's ambitious work?

Sarah Jones: Of course, our industrial strategy will speak to the whole country about the way that we are supporting businesses to grow and thrive. We have identified eight growth-driving sectors as the arrowheads of growth, but there are also policies that we believe will lift the whole country. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. I congratulate him on the support that the local community showed in the recent Hamilton by-election, and look forward to talking to him further.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): As part of the Government's industrial strategy, will the Minister and her colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology carefully consider Somerset's bid for an artificial intelligence growth zone? Its unique advantages—the Gravity local development order, and its existing connections to the grid—make it an ideal location to boost jobs and growth.

Sarah Jones: We have very big ambitions for AI and growth across the country, and I am very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about his proposals. I am sure that he has already talked to colleagues in DSIT, but I am very happy to take this matter further.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Cyber-security will be a key pillar in the industrial strategy. That is welcome news in my constituency of Cheltenham, which is already a centre of excellence in the sector. We are on the cusp of unlocking £1 billion-worth of investment at the Golden Valley development in west Cheltenham. I know Ministers are aware of that, as are their colleagues in many other Departments. A planning application is expected very soon. Will Ministers join me in urging the two councils—the borough council and the county council—to get on with it and unlock that investment, which will bring growth to Cheltenham and the nation and, crucially, support defence as well?

Sarah Jones: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are doing what we can to unlock the planning challenges that people have faced for many years in a whole range of areas. We are introducing legislation to do that, and making several changes. I obviously cannot comment on specific planning proposals in his area, but he should be reassured that we are doing what we can to encourage growth.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): We have been promised a modern industrial strategy for nearly a year. First, it was going to be with us in the spring; then it was going to be published at the spending review; and now it will be here “shortly”. The industrial strategy seems to be a strategy to clobber industry with higher taxes and higher business rates. Will the modern industrial strategy have greater longevity than the Office for Investment? It was announced in October, and we were not given an update until last Thursday, when it launched. Yesterday, we were told in the spending review that it is now being restructured. What is the future for the Office for Investment?

Sarah Jones: I can guarantee the hon. Lady that our industrial strategy will have a longer shelf life than hers did; I think it lasted 18 months—I am not entirely sure. We forget, because it did not have much of an impact. We have worked with all industries across the country to put together a comprehensive package that will make it easier to do business in the UK, and support our city regions and clusters across the country, where we have excellent industry. It will turbocharge the eight growth sectors, and it will make the Government more agile in interacting with business. That is why we are reforming the Office for Investment, as we have always said we will. It is now a significantly more substantial organisation, and will give significantly more support. The hon. Lady should look at—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am really bothered, because we have only got to question 8, and I still need to call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome yesterday’s announcements from the Chancellor on investment in public infrastructure

projects. However, the general secretary of the Prospect trade union has warned that the UK lacks the skilled workers required for the new defence and nuclear projects outlined by the Chancellor. Similarly, Make UK and the Federation of Small Businesses have highlighted that a shortage of skilled workers would be a critical stumbling block for growth. As we continue to await the much-anticipated industrial strategy, why are the Government moving funding away from level 7 apprenticeships, when we know that they support social mobility? More broadly, why did they not seize the opportunity in yesterday’s statement to commit to fixing the apprenticeship levy, to ensure that money is invested in skills and training?

Sarah Jones: Forgive me for my long answers, Mr Speaker, but there is a lot to talk about in the industrial strategy, and I like to talk about it. The hon. Lady raises an important point. There is a significant skills challenge, and we will not shy away from it. Yesterday, £1.2 billion for skills was announced in the spending review. We have announced £600 million for construction skills, because that is a big issue for building the infrastructure that we need. We know we need to go further, and we are working closely with industry on how we can use the resources we have to recruit the welders, engineers—

Mr Speaker: Order. If there is so much to say, the Minister should bring forward a statement, or let us have a debate on this very important subject. I do not know how she will explain to MPs that they will not get in, because I am now going to topicals.

Topical Questions

T1. [904577] **Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Since our last oral question time, we have secured three major trade agreements to boost British exports and drive growth across the UK. This Government are delivering trade deals that benefit businesses and put money in workers’ pockets, and are securing deals that other Governments promised, but failed to deliver. We have an agreement with our largest trading partner, with the biggest economy in the world, and with the fastest-growing big economy in the world. As we have heard, the India deal alone will boost wages by £2.2 billion a year when fully operational. Our new strategic partnership with the EU could add nearly £9 billion to our economy by 2040, and the UK was of course the first country to secure a deal with President Trump. I can also confirm that in the past week, we have hosted delegations from the US and China, in order to assist them in their negotiations with each other. As I have always said, under this Government, the UK will be the most open and best-connected economy in the world.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his excellent work. The Government’s decision to suspend their trade negotiations with the Israeli Government last month was absolutely the right one, but some constituents have been in touch in confusion after trade envoy Ian Austin’s visit still went ahead. Can the Secretary of State affirm that this Government’s

position is that we will not be deepening our trade ties with the Israeli Government while the situation in Gaza and the west bank remains so appalling?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Yes, I can reaffirm that position. As she says, the Foreign Secretary announced on 20 May that we have suspended negotiations on an upgraded free trade agreement with Israel in response to the egregious actions of the Netanyahu Government in Gaza and the west bank. Of course, the UK has existing business relationships with Israel that are not affected by that decision, and we maintain trade envoys with both Israel and the Palestinian territories. What we all want is peace, a two-state solution and a strong UK relationship with both states.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Postmasters who were hit by the Horizon scandal will be concerned to hear Sir Alan Bates describe the compensation process as a “quasi-kangaroo court”. Can the Minister reassure postmasters about the redress that they are due, and reassure taxpayers about the redress that he is seeking from Fujitsu?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (**Gareth Thomas**): I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and she is absolutely right to draw attention to the continuing need to speed up compensation to sub-postmasters. Since we came into government, we have increased fourfold the amount of compensation paid to sub-postmasters, but there is an awful lot more to do. On the issues that Sir Alan Bates raised, the hon. Lady will know that under the group litigation order scheme, through which his compensation issues are being addressed, there are various independent points on the journey at which to consider the offer—

Mr Speaker: Order. If Ministers do not want Members to get in, please will they say so, because they are taking all the time from Back Benchers, which is really unfair to them? Back Benchers have put forward their names and come here to ask questions, and Ministers are just enjoying themselves too much.

T2. [904578] **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): This week, the Government have announced £86 billion for research and development. Recently, I visited PROTO and Digital Catapult in my constituency. Does the Minister agree with me that this sort of investment is exactly what Gateshead, the north-east and our country need?

The Minister for Industry (**Sarah Jones**): I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I know that he will do what he can to promote his constituency, and the extra funding for the British Business Bank will really support his area.

T3. [904580] **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): In the US trade agreement, the Prime Minister gave access to the UK market for 1.4 billion litres of US bioethanol. The Secretary of State will know that that is the entire size of the UK market. Yesterday, apprentices came here from Vivargo in my constituency. The hundreds of people directly employed there, and the thousands in

the supply chain, wonder how this Government, on the verge of producing an industrial strategy, can want to abandon the nascent bioethanol industry in this country entirely. What will he do to stop that?

Jonathan Reynolds: I understand the prominence of the issue in the right hon. Member's constituency. We already import a significant amount of ethanol from the US: 860,000 tonnes of bioethanol. We recognise the competitive pressures that the US trade deal will bring—it is obviously not yet in operation—and have met the companies affected and continue to negotiate with them. They are already very distressed and lose significant amounts of money, so what they really need are regulatory changes from the Department for Transport for the market as a whole. I can assure him that we are working on that.

T5. [904582] **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): Rusty's Collectables is a great new addition to Redditch high street, offering unique items such as Pokémon and Marvel collectables. Owners Russell and Ameer have successfully moved from online to the high street. Can the Minister explain how the Government will help more entrepreneurs like them to turn great ideas into high-street businesses?

Gareth Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Through our small business strategy, we will set out very shortly further plans to support businesses to get on the high street. The increase in money in the British Business Bank, announced yesterday by the Chancellor, will also significantly increase access to finance for such businesses.

Mr Speaker: I call Sarah Pochin—not here.

T6. [904583] **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. A local manufacturer and a number of residents in my constituency have raised concerns that products, such as cosmetics or first aid kits, sold on e-commerce sites like Temu not only undercut local producers but may fail to meet high UK quality and safety standards. What is the Department doing to ensure that products sold by online retailers continue to meet high-quality UK trading standards?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (**Justin Madders**): I thank my hon. Friend for her question; she is absolutely right to raise it. UK product safety law is clear: all products must be safe before they are placed on the market. As she sets out, goods sold via online marketplaces are becoming a significant problem. That is why we introduced the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, which will allow the introduction of clear obligations for e-commerce businesses, in order to ensure consumer safety and a level playing field. We intend to consult on product safety requirements for online marketplaces very shortly after Royal Assent.

T7. [904584] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State accept an invitation to engage with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and trade unions on the Spirit negotiations, a joint venture to safeguard Northern Ireland jobs at Short Brothers, which will impact my constituents in Strangford?

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely accept that invitation, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are already extremely involved, as is the Minister for Industry. We welcome what has happened with Airbus, but we are focusing a great deal on the RemainCo and the issues there.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): Last year, the Secretary of State joined me on a visit to our vibrant high street in Pangbourne. I recently met the owner of one of those businesses, Nino's, a fantastic trattoria and deli. One issue that Nino raised with me was the regulatory burden on his business. How will the Government's small business strategy deal with that key challenge, and how will it support small businesses like Nino's, so that they can continue to thrive?

Jonathan Reynolds: We had a wonderful visit about a year ago, and I hope the Pangbourne Cheese Shop is still going strong. Yes, the regulatory burden on small business is a huge area of attention for this Department; there is the business growth service, our action on late payment, and our incentivising of digitisation and e-invoicing.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Our farmers and growers can survive only if there is a functioning supply chain, but since the creation of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, they complain bitterly about continuing poor practice and the risk of de-listing. Does the Minister not agree that it is time to beef up this organisation, and to amalgamate it with the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator?

Justin Madders: We had a Westminster Hall debate last week in which a number of these issues were raised. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are undertaking our fourth review of the GCA. I encourage him and other hon. Members to contribute to it. We are considering the points made in that debate, and we will welcome any comments in the review.

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I very much welcome yesterday's investment in UK energy abundance, but as our Committee pointed out on Friday, the success of the industrial strategy will depend on a plan to cut industrial energy costs now. When the industrial strategy is published, will the Secretary of State reassure us that there will be a plan to ensure that UK energy prices are internationally competitive?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my right hon. Friend and the Select Committee for all their work in this area. He knows my view from the evidence that I have given. The significant increase in industrial energy prices under the previous Government is a significant issue for our competitiveness—and yes, that is something that we seek to address.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): When it comes to bus manufacturer Alexander Dennis and the jobs at risk there, there is not an elephant in the room—there is a Chinese dragon. The company is in competition not with commercial organisations from China, but with entities of the Chinese state. What representations will

the Secretary of State make to the Prime Minister in an attempt to level a playing field that is currently about as flat as the Galloway hills?

Jonathan Reynolds: I firmly agree with the hon. Gentleman that a level playing field is not just an economic necessity, but a matter of economic security and production in western economies like our own. Of course, if a company has a specific case to make, it should make the representation to the Trade Remedies Authority directly—I have that power, but it would usually come from industry. If the company has a specific case to make, the hon. Gentleman should encourage it to make that representation.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It was fantastic to hear the Government's commitment yesterday to making the UK a defence industrial superpower. At its peak, Stocksbridge Speciality Steels, in my constituency, produced 15% of global defence and aerospace steel, which is essential to our national security. What work is the Secretary of State doing to secure Stocksbridge Speciality Steels so that this valuable steel asset can be used to maintain our national security?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend knows that I believe the workers at that mill in her constituency are a national asset and that I want them to have a strong future as part of our overall steel strategy. We are closely monitoring the specific situation there, which colleagues will be aware of, and are determined to find the outcome that she and I would want to see.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The Prime Minister routinely states his unwavering support for Ukraine, yet as a result of UK Government inaction, British businesses continue to bankroll Putin's brutal war on a colossal scale. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, a whopping £205 billion of Russian fossil fuel exports have been shipped by our own UK-based maritime companies or by ships with our own UK-issued insurance. Astonishingly, one company, Seapeak, has carried almost a quarter of Russia's liquefied natural gas exports. Can the Secretary of State give us an update on what the Government are doing, and deal with this immediately?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am concerned by the figures the hon. Gentleman raises; if he writes to me, I will look into that immediately. We have taken extensive action to sanction not just individuals, but the shadow fleet, as it is described, transporting Russian fossil fuels, and are willing to take any action necessary.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): Yesterday, the Dad Shift campaign organised hundreds of dads to come to Parliament to campaign for better paternity leave. Does the Secretary of State agree that better paternity leave can give dads more security to spend more time with their babies, support the development of children and help gender balance in the workplace? Will he tell the House whether the issue will be covered in the upcoming parental leave review?

Justin Madders: I am sorry that I was not able to meet the Dad Shift campaigners yesterday, although I have met them previously. I can assure them and the

House that the Government are committed to ensuring that parents receive the best possible support to balance their work and home lives, and we recognise that parental leave and pay entitlements play a key role in that. We know that the leave system needs improving, which is why we are committed to conducting a review, which will look at paternity leave and pay and the length of leave available to fathers and partners. More detail on the review will be set out before the summer recess.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The chief executive of UKHospitality estimates that there will be an extra £1 billion of costs on employers for new workers—774,000 of them—coming in to the national insurance contributions regime, on top of £2.4 billion in other costs. If, by the next Budget, it turns out that the previous Budget is crushing the hospitality sector, will the Government consider tax reliefs in order to power our hospitality industry?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman knows the Government, and the Treasury in particular, monitor the impact of all taxation. I have to be frank with colleagues: I have no idea what the Conservatives are trying to tell us today. They seem to want more spending and lower taxes—it seems like Liz Truss is still hanging around the party, to be honest. I have to ask Members on the Opposition Benches: what is your policy towards national insurance?

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I welcome the UK-India trade deal, which is good for salmon and good for whisky. Will the Secretary of State use his muscle to ensure that a chain of small distilleries in my constituency and across Scotland can sell a wee dram to India, as well as the big brands?

Mr Speaker, I would like to draw the House's attention to reports of a crash on take-off of a London-bound Air India flight from India today, and allow the Secretary of State to express our concern.

Mr Speaker: It is very important, and I think the Leader of the House will make reference to it when we get to business questions—if we get there.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for updating the House on that matter. He will know that one of the brilliant things about the UK-India deal is that it is not just for the higher-value, iconic products we are all familiar with; for bulk, there is no minimum price in the deal. The deal is incredibly strong for every bit of the whisky—and gin—industry in the United Kingdom.

I am alert to the news my hon. Friend has just shared, and colleagues will update the House.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Greenergy, a company based in Immingham, has been forced to shut down and review some of its operations in the UK. In part, that is due to an influx of heavily subsidised hydro-treated vegetable oil from the US. Will the Secretary of State bear this in mind when he has trade negotiations with the US with a view to easing the situation?

Jonathan Reynolds: I shall of course take that up with the hon. Member. I have spent a fair bit of time in his constituency, as he knows, on one matter or another. On fair trade and level playing fields, colleagues can direct their industries to the Trade Remedies Authority if they have specific concerns, but, of course, we monitor those matters at a departmental level as well.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Since the global financial crisis, listing on the London Stock Exchange has fallen by 40%, posing a significant barrier to growth, as liquidity and investor activity decline. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that more British businesses are listed on the London Stock Exchange and that the UK remains a leading global financial sector?

Jonathan Reynolds: That is an area of concern to us all. We support and continue to implement some of the listing rules and prospective changes of the previous Government, but the bigger change from this Government is to liquidity, particularly around pensions reforms. None the less, this remains an issue of key competitiveness for the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call Josh Babarinde for the final question.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne businesses Qualisea, Gianni's and Gr/eat are up in arms, as I am, that East Sussex county council's shambolic management of the Victoria Place pedestrianisation means that works will now fall in the summer, their busiest trading period. What provision will Ministers make to ensure that businesses hit by such disruption can be properly compensated?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman will understand that I do not have the details of that specific case, but if he wants to write to me I will happily look into it.

Mr Speaker: That completes questions. We will now let the Front Benchers change over.

Business of the House

10.36 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): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 16 JUNE—Motion relating to the House of Commons independent complaints and grievance scheme, followed by a general debate on Windrush Day 2025. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 17 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Crime and Policing Bill (day one).

WEDNESDAY 18 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Crime and Policing Bill (day two).

THURSDAY 19 JUNE—Motion to approve the draft Licensing Act 2003 (UEFA Women's European Football Championship Licensing Hours) Order 2025, followed by general debate on incontinence, followed by general debate on water safety education. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 20 JUNE—Private Member's Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 June will include:

MONDAY 23 JUNE—General debate on Pride Month.

TUESDAY 24 JUNE—Estimates day (2nd allotted day).

WEDNESDAY 25 JUNE—Estimates day (3rd allotted day). At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 26 JUNE—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 2) Bill, followed by general debate on Armed Forces Day.

FRIDAY 27 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: As the House will know, we have incoming news of a terrible disaster involving a flight out of Ahmedabad in India. I know that the Leader of the House will want to say a few words, but, from the Conservative Benches—I am sure that I speak for the whole House—let me wish everyone involved and their families the very best.

It would be a bad day this week if I did not mention the fantastic news of the knighthood of Sir Billy Boston—it is nice to be able to do that. I hope you will admire my restraint, Mr Speaker, in not mentioning your birthday and therefore not giving any incentive to any other Member of the House to mention it in their remarks either.

I had the dubious pleasure, as you did, Mr Speaker, of listening to yesterday's spending review in this Chamber. It brought to mind President Abraham Lincoln's immortal line about managing to compress the greatest number of words into the smallest amount of content. I am afraid that the statement was somewhat worse than that. It was, in both its design and delivery, an exercise in distraction and sleight of hand—a document not of economic strategy but of political evasion.

We should be clear from the outset that this was a spending review, not a Budget. Unlike a Budget, it was not subject to scrutiny by the Office for Budget

Responsibility. The Chancellor's figures have, therefore, not been externally verified. Her assumptions have not been stress-tested, and her projections have not been independently reviewed. She was not required to publish the full fiscal implications or to give the embarrassing numbers in her own remarks—and, of course, she did not.

Even within the confines of departmental budgets, the presentation was, I am afraid, somewhat disingenuous. A final year outside the actual spending review period was included, filled with speculative figures designed to suggest rigour and restraint in budgetary control. This is the illusion of discipline without the reality of delivery. In case any Member is interested, this is on page 13 of the document. Elsewhere, baseline figures were conveniently shifted; most comparisons began from the year 2023-24, not the current year, which had the effect of inflating the apparent scale of any increases.

Sizewell C is a classic example. The document trumpets a near 16% increase in investment. In truth, spending over the period is falling by 3.7%. That is on page 44. Similarly, on police funding, the Chancellor was very careful in her language to say that there would be an increase in "police spending power", but what she meant was that there would be an increase in the local authority precept: in plain English, a tax rise.

The same obfuscation was at work with overseas development aid. The Chancellor has always said that ODA cuts were needed to fund defence, but the reality is that defence increases are almost entirely in capital spending, while ODA is a cash line. Far from funding our national defence, what has actually happened is that overseas development aid has been cut to prop up other Departments' day-to-day budgets.

The most obvious case is defence spending: we were told in grand rhetoric that it would rise to 2.5%, and later 3%, of GDP at some undefined moment when fiscal circumstances allow. In fact, it is unlikely that even 2.5% will be reached this Parliament. The 2.6% quoted includes the single intelligence account, which suggests that the number is below 2.5%. The defence investment plan—the plan that will release the money—is unlikely to appear until the end of the year. That is nearly 18 months after the 2024 general election—this at a time of war in Ukraine, and with China potentially positioning itself for conflict over Taiwan by 2027.

On Monday NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, echoed yesterday by no less than Lord Robertson, said that unless NATO members raise defence spending to 3.5%, with an additional 1.5% in wider support, we may as well "start learning Russian". That is the strategic context. The Government's response has been to dither and delay.

The Chancellor's U-turn over the winter fuel payment badly damaged whatever credibility she ever had. Yesterday's statement has compounded the problem for her and the Government. No mention was made of the estimated 5% annual council tax increases now expected, as flagged by Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. No admission was made that the review will add £140 billion in new borrowing. That is an extra £10 billion a year in interest payments, at current rates, by the end of the period. Meanwhile, the supposed efficiency savings of nearly £14 billion are widely regarded as illusory.

As the Chancellor herself said about the spending review, these are her choices. But the truth is plain: there will be a tax cut for the people of Mauritius. For the rest

of us, the spending review was a gigantic speculative splurge of spending, presented via smoke and mirrors, which will end up, as it always does with Labour, with higher taxes, and British taxpayers will have to bear the impact.

Lucy Powell: I start by saying that the thoughts of the whole House and the Government will be with the families of those travelling on flight AI171 from Ahmedabad in India to London Gatwick, which has reportedly crashed. This is an unfolding story, and it will undoubtedly be causing a huge amount of worry and concern to the many families and communities here and those waiting for the arrival of their loved ones. We send our deepest sympathies and thoughts to all those families, and the Government will provide all the support that they can to those affected in India and in this country.

I congratulate Billy Boston on receiving a knighthood for his services to rugby league—during your birthday week, Mr Speaker. I know that as a former patron of rugby league, you felt very strongly indeed that it was about time rugby league was recognised in this way, and you might want to mention that later.

Given that I know it is of great interest to the House, I am pleased to update colleagues on the ratification of the BBNJ—biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction—oceans treaty. Our oceans are dying, and without urgent action they will be irreversibly destroyed. I am proud to confirm to the House today that this Labour Government will introduce legislation before the end of the year to ratify the high seas treaty and protect marine life around the world. We were all shocked by Sir David Attenborough's film about the destruction caused by bottom trawling, which this Government will ban in protected British waters.

I am really happy, as ever, to debate the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) on the economy. He used to be a Treasury Minister and he is well read. He knows, I am sure, what every economist in this country knows, which is that for many, many years, the UK economy has been defined by low growth and stagnant living standards, because of our comparatively low productivity. That is because we have had years and years of under-investment in our infrastructure, in our services, in our regions and in our people. This Labour Government are finally putting that right with a 10-year renewal plan to rebuild Britain and address the productivity gap. I am not sure whether the Conservatives really understand basic economics, because they are showing no sign of it.

In my part of the world and yours, Mr Speaker, that has been particularly true. Towns and cities across the north and the midlands have been held back by woeful transport infrastructure that would be unacceptable to people in the south; held back by the lack of job opportunities near where they live; held back by poor, insecure and costly housing; held back because they are not getting the training and skills they need; and held back because their life chances are lower as a result of deep-seated inequalities.

That cannot be addressed overnight, and we are not pretending that it will be, but we have a long-term plan for renewal. That includes the biggest investment in affordable and social housing in 50 years; nuclear and renewable infrastructure transforming communities around the country; the north finally getting the rail connectivity

it deserves; and every community getting better buses. Schools and hospitals are being rebuilt for the 21st century, based not on fictional budgets and economics but on actual plans to deliver them. We are addressing today's cost of living crisis, too, with our warm homes plan to bring down bills, by extending free school meals and free breakfast clubs, with more free childcare, with a cap on bus fares and by increasing the wages of the lowest paid—with wages going up more in the first 10 months of this Labour Government than they did in 10 years of the Conservative Government. Finally, we continue to boost the NHS, which has already resulted in waiting lists coming down month after month.

The right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about choices, so let us talk about those choices. We would not have been able to set those things out if we had not made the difficult changes to taxes that we made in the Budget last year. He seems to want more spending for the police and defence—I think that is what he was saying—but he does not want to make the hard decisions about where the money will come from. He mentions yet again the 2.5% of spending on defence, which this Government are delivering, but he might want to remind himself of when defence spending reached 2.5% in the last 20 years. Was it in any of the 14 years for which his Government were in office? No, it was not. It was only when Labour was last in government that we reached the heights of 2.5%.

In contrast to the Conservatives' fantasy economics, yesterday's spending allocations were all within the envelope that we set out in the Budget last year, so we are really clear where the money is coming from. As ever, their economic argument is utterly incoherent. On the one hand, they say that we are spending too much, and on the other that we are not spending even more on police and defence. They criticise us on growth, yet they do not want the investment to turbocharge our productivity and, therefore, our growth. We are the party with a plan—a plan to renew Britain, a plan to raise living standards in every part of the country, a plan to get our public services back on their feet and a plan to give people the security they need in their homes.

Mr Speaker: To follow on from what the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House have said, all our prayers and thoughts go to the families of the London-bound aircraft that has crashed. Let us hope there is better news to come on that.

I was tempted by the Leader of the House when she talked about the knighthood for Sir Billy Boston. I just hope that it will be like London buses and we will see further knighthoods for rugby league—I look forward to none more so than the news of Sir Kevin Sinfield.

Let us try somebody from Yorkshire; I call Jon Trickett.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I very much associate myself with your comments about Kevin Sinfield, Mr Speaker, who is a hero for the whole nation and a great role model.

On the question of the north, the Leader of the House is right. In the great northern town of Featherstone, there is increasing irritation about the way in which the absentee and irresponsible owners of the former Junction pub are allowing it to deteriorate. It is now in a dangerous condition and I fear that somebody will be badly hurt.

[Jon Trickett]

The process of dealing with dangerous structures is too long, too bureaucratic and too cumbersome. Please may we have a debate in Government time—I think lots of Members will have the same experience—so we can share our experiences and see whether the Government can push things forward?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise the difficult issue of the Junction pub in his constituency. We all hear those stories time and again. We want to give local communities more powers to have the right to acquire such facilities, and for those powers to be exercised more quickly than they currently are. We are bringing forward legislation in that regard, but he might want to club together with others to get a debate on the issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): May I echo the thoughts and sympathies that have been sent to all those involved in the Air India crash that is being reported? I know that many British citizens will be affected, and our thoughts are with them.

I recently joined Essex police on a ride-along in my Chelmsford constituency to witness at first hand its vital work in our local communities to keep us all safe. Worryingly, Essex police has regularly raised with me that the national funding formula, known as the police allocation formula, is outdated and unfair. The funding that Essex police receives falls far short of the proportion of policing carried out by the force in a national context. Yesterday's spending review did nothing to change that or to remove concerns about police funding overall. Indeed, the chairman of the National Police Chiefs' Council said that in real terms, the increase in funding "will cover little more than annual inflationary pay increases for officers and staff."

He added that

"the amount falls far short of what is required to...maintain our existing workforce."

If we want to keep crime off our streets and retain the experienced officers who do such vital work to keep us safe, surely we must give them the funding to match. Yesterday's spending review did not do that. Will the Leader of the House therefore raise those issues with both the Treasury and the Home Office?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for expressing her thoughts on the India crash as well.

She raises an important issue about adequate police funding. All our constituents want to see more police on the streets and crime in their communities coming down. This Government are committed to more visible police on the streets and to increasing neighbourhood police numbers by 13,000. Yesterday's spending review announced an above-inflation increase in police funding of 2.3%, which we believe is an adequate settlement for the police. The hon. Lady is right, however, that we need to bring forward reforms to make sure that we have better distribution of funding and that we can have efficiency savings on police procurement and other issues. We will, as is our commitment, bring forward legislation in that regard in due course.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I welcome the new banking hub in Penistone, which I visited this week. However, other parts of my constituency remain a banking desert. The Stocksbridge and Deepcar Townswomen's Guild raised the urgent need for a hub in Stocksbridge and we desperately need one in Chapeltown too. Otherwise, my constituents have to trek all the way to the centre of Sheffield to have cash access and to receive in-person advice from their bank. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how I can secure those essential grassroots financial services for those areas in my constituency?

Lucy Powell: Access to banking and financial services remains a huge issue for many MPs across the House. I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend has a new banking hub in Penistone, but I recognise that Chapeltown needs that service too. We are rolling out 350 banking hubs. Over 100 of those are already open. There was a well-subscribed debate on this issue in the House last week, but I will ensure that the relevant Minister gives her an update on the banking hubs in her constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): A third of my constituents emanate from Gujarat, so my thoughts and prayers are with the families and relatives who are obviously concerned about the plight of the 242 passengers on that flight. I understand that the plane came down in a residential area, so the people who live there will also be affected.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and for announcing the estimates days. Estimates day applications can be obtained from the Table Office or the Committee's website. We welcome applications. They will close tomorrow at the rise of the House, and we will be considering applications for debates at our meeting on Tuesday at 4.15 pm. Anyone applying should expect to turn up and present their case. We intend to allocate three debates each day, with a preference given to those who were unsuccessful in the supplementary estimates days.

In addition to the business announced by the Leader of the House, in Westminster Hall next week, on Tuesday there will be a debate on hydrogen-powered aviation, and on Thursday there will be a Select Committee statement from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, followed by debates on the role of careers education in improving social mobility and on Down's syndrome regression disorder. On Tuesday 24 June, there will be a debate on the right to maintain contact in care settings. On Thursday 26 June, there will be a Select Committee statement from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, followed by debates on the role of the RAF photographic reconnaissance unit during the second world war and on the funding of the BBC World Service.

In recent weeks, I have raised the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh. I have also raised the atrocities in Pahalgam, but now things have come home to this country. Earlier this week, three young Indian boys were playing cricket in Headstone park. They were approached by three slightly older men. An altercation took place, and the three young boys were hospitalised, one with a fractured

eye socket. We understand that the police are dealing with this as an aggravated racial assault. It took place between young Hindu boys and older Muslim men. The police are appealing for witnesses to come forward to see who the perpetrators are, and community leaders are trying to take down the temperature so that there is no escalation. But if this type of religious hatred is going to come to this country, we desperately need the Home Secretary to make a clear statement about what the Government will do to prevent it from happening. I ask the Leader of the House to facilitate that next week.

Lucy Powell: May I first send my thoughts to the hon. Gentleman's constituents? When I first heard of the crash, I thought of him, knowing the demographic of his constituency. If any of his constituents need help and support, the Foreign Office, the authorities and the Government here stand ready to support them. I thank him for announcing future Back-Bench business, particularly the estimates days, which are important debates in the calendar year.

I am sorry to hear about the attack on three young boys innocently playing cricket in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He raises these issues time and again in the House. I am sure the whole House will join me in sending the clear and strong message that we absolutely stand against any kind of sectarian religious hate or violence like that and that we will take whatever steps necessary to eradicate it.

We have two days of debate on the Crime and Policing Bill next week. There are further measures in that Bill in relation to attacks on places of worship and on memorials, which would include religious memorials. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman wants further action on these issues, so if he does not get a chance to raise them with the Home Secretary next week, I will raise them for him.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): Glasgow City football club in my constituency recently won 2-0 against Hearts, securing the team a place in the UEFA women's champions league. I was delighted to be at that game cheering the team on. It is a fantastic achievement and a testament to the hard work of the team on and off the pitch, spearheaded by club co-founder and chief executive Laura Montgomery. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Glasgow City the best of luck for their European campaign, and will she consider a debate in Government time on the importance of supporting grassroots women's football?

Lucy Powell: I am absolutely delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Glasgow City football club on its achievements and I wish the team all the very best in their European campaign. Women's football and grassroots women's sport are discussed regularly in this House, and I am sure that she will continue to raise those matters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. My intention is for business questions to run until around 11.45, so if we can help each other by speeding through, that would be really good. I call Sir Roger Gale to set a good example.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The Government have pledged to enhance the record of the previous Conservative Government and uphold animal

welfare. Retained European regulations currently prohibit the handling of chickens by their legs, but in their first act of animal welfare, the Government are proposing to pass regulations to permit that harmful practice. Will the Leader of the House ask the agriculture Minister to write to me—and place a copy of the letter in the Library—to explain why the Government are choosing to lower the legal standard rather than to uphold the law and protect animal welfare?

Mr Speaker: That was a bad example.

Lucy Powell: The Government are committed to introducing the most ambitious programme of animal welfare in a generation. I am not aware of the particular regulation that the right hon. Gentleman mentions, but I will ensure that he gets a full response from the Minister and that it is made available for everybody else.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): Government data released last year shows that homeschooling figures have doubled since 2019. Although I wholeheartedly welcome the measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to ensure that all children are safe, many parents in my constituency actively and positively choose to home-educate their children, and it is safe and reasonable for them to do so. On behalf of her Cabinet colleagues, will the Leader of the House reassure home-educating parents in my constituency and across the UK, who are doing a fantastic job of educating their children, that the Bill will safeguard educational freedom and honour the incredibly positive impact that parents can have on their children's development? Will she consider a debate on the merits of alternative forms of education?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of homeschooling. She is right to say that many families provide high-quality and important education for their children where it is not available to them in the mainstream. I am sure that she will agree that we must tackle absenteeism in school, which is particularly rife since covid, and that we need to get more children back into mainstream education. Although children are home-schooled for good reason, some are not safe at home, and we must take steps to deal with that.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): This weekend, with the team from my parliamentary office, I will be taking part in the Knaresborough bed race, a fantastic local community event, to raise money for Knaresborough Town AFC. Will the Leader of the House congratulate in advance all those who take part and hopefully finish, as well as the organisers of the event, and will she consider a debate in Government time on unique and culturally important sporting events?

Lucy Powell: I am not quite sure that I understand what that race is, but it sounds very unique to Knaresborough, and I will take an interest now that the hon. Gentleman has raised it with me. That would make a good topic for a debate.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Yesterday's spending review saw this Government investing in national renewal. To truly deliver on that, it is vital that small towns such as those in my constituency fully feel the benefits. We need local investment strategies to

[*Andy MacNae*]

address the things that hold our areas back, such as a lack of a commuter rail link in Rossendale or overreliance on a single road in Darwen. These solutions are inevitably unique to an area, requiring investment plans that are locally led but nationally backed. Small towns like mine need to be at the heart of our national renewal, so will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on that vital subject?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said earlier, the lack of investment in many of our northern towns and cities has really held those communities back. I am well aware of the challenges in Rossendale and Darwen and how much his constituency could flourish if it had better rail and road connectivity, and I look forward to working with him on that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I remind the Leader of the House that when I referred to the prayer tabled by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition against the Mauritius treaty, in early-day motion 1398, she was unable to give an undertaking that this will be debated within the 21-day period laid down by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010?

[*That the Agreement, done at London and Port Louis on 22 May 2025, between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Mauritius concerning the Chagos Archipelago including Diego Garcia, should not be ratified.*]

However, in a subsequent answer to the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), she made it clear that the global ocean treaty would not be ratified until the necessary legislation had been passed. Can we take it that the Mauritius treaty will not be ratified until the House has approved the legislation providing for the very substantial expenditure that it involves?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that with me again. I have looked at these issues closely since he and others raised them with me last week. As he will be aware, with the Diego Garcia agreement and the global ocean treaty, ratification depends on this Government implementing many of the commitments that are made in that treaty. That is why the CRAG process, as well as legislation, is required in both cases. There will be a Bill brought forward on the Diego Garcia agreement, and therefore this House will have ample opportunity to debate its merits and vote on it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Before ratification?

Lucy Powell: Yes.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): In 1993, my constituents Liz and Steve Fitzgerald tragically lost their daughter Claire and 11 other pupils in a school minibus accident. Together, we have been campaigning to make school minibus travel safer. The NASUWT union found that many teachers are still being pressured to drive school minibuses without the appropriate training, because of a licence exemption for schools. That exemption does not exist for private schools. Will the Leader of the House find time for the House to discuss the issue of school minibus safety?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the case in my hon. Friend's constituency. She is absolutely right to raise that here and with others. It sounds like a good topic for a debate, because I am sure we would all want to know that our children were safe on school transport.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): When the Bank of Scotland branch closes later this year in Pitlochry, the town will desperately need a banking hub. That is why I was disappointed that the independent assessor and Link assessed only access to cash, not access to banking. I challenged Link on that, and it said that that is because of the mandate set for it by the Financial Conduct Authority; so I challenged the FCA on that, and it said that that is because of the regulatory framework in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023; so I challenged the Treasury on that and asked it to change its regulatory framework and imposition on the FCA. The Treasury said it will not do that. In opposition, Labour tabled an amendment to the Financial Services and Markets Bill that would have mandated a survey of access to banking services, not just access to cash. Can we have a debate in Government time about how we fix this utter guddle?

Mr Speaker: We have just had the debate!

Lucy Powell: Yes, we have just had a good debate on it! This issue comes up often—it has already come up today. We have banking hub deserts in Scotland and the rest of the UK. We are committed to addressing that with the opening of banking hubs. We will, I am sure, have ample opportunity as various pieces of legislation pass through the House to discuss any changes to regulations, but I will ensure the hon. Gentleman gets a proper response about those regulations.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): First, as co-chair of the India all-party parliamentary group, may I express my condolences to the families affected both in this country and in India? I cannot imagine what they are going through, and I thank the Leader of the House for offering her support and the support of this Government.

Every single year, the horse fair comes to Mountsorrel and my constituency. I have no doubt that the vast majority come to enjoy it, but there are always reports of antisocial behaviour, harassment and businesses and homes being damaged. It is unacceptable, and that antisocial behaviour is incredibly damaging. I call on everyone who comes this year to do so in a way that is enjoyable but peaceful. Will the Leader of the House set out what this Government are doing to address crime and antisocial behaviour in my community?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in hoping that everybody who goes to the horse fair in his constituency does so for the right reasons and because they want to celebrate that event, rather than to cause criminality or antisocial behaviour—I am sure we all recognise that. We want to take steps to clamp down on antisocial behaviour and give the police more powers to do that, and that is what our Crime and Policing Bill will do. I hope that everything passes off well for his constituents.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that Queen's hospital in Romford, which serves the boroughs of Havering, Barking and

Dagenham and of Redbridge, is in urgent need of an A&E upgrade. Indeed, I met the Minister for Secondary Care only this week to discuss it. May we have an urgent statement from the Government on this issue? The situation has led to many patients being left on trolleys for more than 24 hours. The hospital serves 800,000 people in that radius, and that is simply not acceptable. Please can some of the money from the statement yesterday be spent in Romford on a hospital that serves local people?

Lucy Powell: It is good to hear the hon. Gentleman supporting our spending review measures yesterday and the increased funding that we are providing to the NHS in both capital and revenue. That is to tackle the issues that he describes: the chronic underfunding of our A&E over many years, and the unacceptable delays that many people face in accident and emergency departments around the country—my husband works in one, so I am well aware of the issues. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman voting with us when we implement the spending review. There will be a statement shortly on how that money is being allocated.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House when we are likely to see the public authority accountability Bill, which will introduce the Hillsborough law on duty of candour? Are we likely to see it before the summer recess, and can we have an assurance that it is not being watered down at the request of mandarins in the Cabinet Office?

Lucy Powell: As I have said, the Government remain very much focused on fulfilling our commitment to the Hillsborough families—and indeed to many other families affected by injustices and scandals—and to bringing forward and enacting a Hillsborough law, which of course includes a duty of candour. Most importantly, we need to ensure that we get the legislation right, and that it reflects the full range of concerns and experiences and meets the expectations of the families. We are working on the Bill at pace, but we will take whatever time is necessary to work collaboratively and get the legislation right.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Transferring from legacy benefits to universal credit seems to be overly complicated, and makes it difficult for my constituents not to find themselves in debt. As an MP, I feel that my hands are tied. We are seeing constituents coming forward with rent arrears and in very difficult situations. May we have a statement from the Department for Work and Pensions on what is being done to make the transfer easier? I am concerned that people are falling into deep poverty and facing civil actions in the absence of better Government support.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that some of the hon. Lady's constituents are facing challenges moving from legacy benefits to universal credit. She will be aware that the Government made changes to the debt aspect of universal credit, which put money in the pockets of many people in that situation, but I will ensure that she gets a full update on where we are up to.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the Ukrainian St Mary's trust, which in recent years dramatically

scaled up its community school to serve more than 2,500 displaced children, and pioneered new trauma-sensitive methods of education? Will she consider making time to debate its proposal to set up the country's first bilingual Ukrainian secondary school in Kensington and Bayswater, delivering on the education section of our historic 100-year partnership with Ukraine?

Lucy Powell: That sounds like a really interesting proposal, which my hon. Friend is right to raise. This country has now given sanctuary to more than 300,000 Ukrainians since the war broke out, of which I am sure we are all incredibly proud. We all recognise the contribution that they are making to our country. I will ensure that a Minister from the Department for Education gives him a reply about the new school.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Across Keighley and Ilkley, there are many fantastic independent businesses that rely on footfall for customers to come through their doors. However, after hiking parking charges in Ilkley earlier this year, Labour-run Bradford council has now decided to strip away our free one hour on-street parking from the town centre and, quite rightly, local businesses and residents are up in arms. On top of the whopping 10% increase in council tax and increases in business rates, Bradford council is now scrapping free car parking, so does the Leader of the House feel that will be to the detriment of our many businesses and residents across the constituency?

Lucy Powell: As a constituency MP—I represent Manchester Central—I am well aware that parking charges in local communities cause a great deal of contention among our constituents. I am not sure about the reasons behind that decision in Ilkley, but local authorities are balancing the needs of a range of different residents on these matters. It would make a popular topic for a well-subscribed debate.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Woodlands Quaker care home, in my constituency of Wolverhampton West, on its work? It is an excellent non-profit residential care home, providing accommodation for older people so that they can live as well as possible. As a charity, it prides itself on having a high staff ratio, with 70 members of staff, many of whom work part time, for 36 residents. However, even with the increased employment allowance, it now faces a significantly higher employer national insurance liability, adversely affecting its operating costs. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can support adult social care providers, which in turn will ease pressure on the NHS?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue. He is aware that we took the difficult decision to raise employers' national insurance contributions so that we could get our NHS back on its feet, and that is what we have been doing since the Budget. We are providing the support needed against any knock-on effects to social care providers and key charities, particularly through the additional boost that we have given to local authorities in their funding. He may want to raise this issue with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who will be in the Chamber shortly.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): My constituent Mr Wayne Arnold has compiled a dossier of faults following an ECO4 upgrade at his home last year. I have the lever arch file here—it is two inches thick and well worth looking at. It has taken 62 weeks for the works to be completed. Another constituent, Judie Haines, cannot find local engineers to service the ECO4 system that has been put into her home. The company has become insolvent, meaning that my constituents cannot get remedial works completed. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on the poor work that has been carried out under ECO4, the effect that that has had on vulnerable households and the lessons learned as we move on towards ECO5?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the experiences that the hon. Lady's constituents have had under ECO4. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), made a statement to the House a few weeks ago, when this Government uncovered the real challenges of the previous scheme, which had been introduced under the previous Government, and the poor level of some work that had been carried out. We are taking steps to put that right and ensure that we learn all the lessons from that for the next phase, and I know that the Minister will be keen to keep the House constantly updated on that.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The Government recently announced £7.5 million of funding for the British Sugar factory in my constituency, support that unlocks a further £43 million of investment. In Liz Truss's former constituency, this Government are investing to secure growth. The Wissington factory is Europe's largest sugar beet factory and is celebrating its 100th birthday this year. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming that investment and wishing the Wissington factory a very happy birthday?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in wishing the factory a happy birthday and I am delighted to hear about the extra investment in British Sugar in his constituency. It highlights how important it is to get such investment and new jobs into communities such as his, so that his residents can access the good jobs of the future. I am sure it will give us all a very sweet aftertaste.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is common ridings and festival season in the Scottish Borders, a spectacular and ancient tradition dating back to the battle of Flodden in 1513, bringing together each of the Borders communities to celebrate, so may we have a debate on the importance of the Scottish Borders common ridings and festivals? Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Selkirk's Royal Burgh standard bearer, Darren Knox, and to wish him very well for this week's Selkirk common riding?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Darren Knox and wishing him the very best as he participates in the common riding. I did not know of that great tradition in the hon. Gentleman's constituency until he mentioned it to me, and it sounds like a fantastic thing to celebrate.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I stood on a promise to stop sewage polluting our waterways in Bolton, and under this Labour Government I am delighted that we are turning that pledge into action. Last year alone, 295 days-worth of sewage was dumped into Bolton's waterways. That is nothing short of a disgrace. I welcome the decision to block bonuses for United Utilities bosses, whose shameful record has gone unchecked for far too long. When asked to fix the problem, they pleaded poverty while pocketing massive bonuses. As a fellow north-west MP, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is high time United Utilities was held to account and stopped profiting from environmental destruction?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. What has happened in our waterways in recent years—the pollution and the discharges—is absolutely shocking. I am so proud that one of the first acts of this Labour Government was to introduce the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is now an Act. That has given us the powers to tackle the erroneous and unwarranted bonuses of water companies such as United Utilities, and I am really glad to see the Act in action.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Voices is a domestic abuse charity in Bath that supports victims to recover from the long-term trauma and stresses of domestic abuse. It is in a new funding crisis, because mandatory funding goes into crisis and immediate risk-management services, not long-term recovery. May we have a debate in Government time on the vital importance of long-term recovery from domestic abuse and the financial support needed to keep charities such as Voices going?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the struggles that Voices in the hon. Lady's constituency is experiencing. She will know that this Government are absolutely committed to halving violence against women and girls over the next 10 years. That is an incredibly ambitious agenda, and of course it includes working with the voluntary and charitable sector. I will ensure that the Minister for Safeguarding gives the hon. Lady a full reply about that charity.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In Burslem, a memorial to our Royal Doulton fallen was very sadly lost. I am proud to have joined a campaign led so brilliantly by Mike Lightfoot, ably supported by the former MP Joan Walley, St Modwen Homes and others, to reinstate the memorial, which will be unveiled on VJ Day this August. With Armed Forces Day approaching, will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Mike and the team for their commitment to ensuring that those who made the ultimate sacrifice will never be forgotten?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking and congratulating all those who worked to reinstate that important memorial, and commemorating all those who gave their lives and sacrificed so much to keep this country safe in many ways. We have a general debate on Armed Forces Day on 26 June, and I am looking at requests that I have had from other Members about a particular debate for VJ Day before we break up for the summer recess.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Many of my constituents and millions across the country suffer from arthritis in its various forms. Earlier this week I met Arthritis Champions who are seeking a Government strategy to tackle this issue. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from a Health Minister on how the Government will take that forward?

Lucy Powell: I know from dear family members of the plight of those who suffer from arthritis and the huge impact it can have on their lives and their ability to work and live a happy and long life. We can do a huge range of things for arthritis, such as new treatments, prevention and early diagnosis, and I am sure that a Minister will want to come forward to this House with a whole strategy.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): At the height of the pandemic, Mr Speaker, you may recall the establishment of the Rosalind Franklin laboratory and national testing facility, which we were promised would be retained after the pandemic for more general testing. Sadly, it was unceremoniously put up for sale on Rightmove a couple of years ago. May we have a debate on, or a review into, the provision of diagnostic testing more generally in this country?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that the testing facility in my hon. Friend's constituency closed under the last Government, despite their previous commitments to it. He will be aware that we will soon set out the 10-year NHS strategy, and as part of that I am sure that my hon. Friend will want to put those kinds of questions to the Secretary of State.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Authoritarian regimes are increasing their attempts to silence those who stand up against them, wherever they are in the world. That includes the Hong Kong Government, who have issued arrest warrants and million-dollar bounties for 19 activists in exile, including 10 who are resident here in the UK. Tomorrow, the father of one of those activists, Anna Kwok, will attend a hearing in Hong Kong, charged with helping with her finances using funds from a life insurance policy. It is the first time that an activist's family have been arrested and charged, so may we have a statement from the Government on how they will legislate to specifically recognise and criminalise acts of transnational repression?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and many others raise human rights issues with the Chinese authorities on many occasions, and that we have given people from Hong Kong safe sanctuary in this country, which is something I am very proud of. The contribution to our country of those from Hong Kong is something we should all celebrate, but I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a full response on the case he describes.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): Last September, in Liverpool, the Prime Minister promised my city and all those affected by state cover-ups that a Hillsborough law would be introduced before 15 April this year, the 36th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. Almost two months have passed since the Prime Minister missed that deadline. This is particularly disappointing, since a

draft Hillsborough law written by legal experts and endorsed by survivors, families and campaigners is ready to go—it was proposed in Parliament by Andy Burnham. Will the Leader of the House allow time to discuss this matter, so that the Government can hear loud and clear the message from this place that a failure to introduce a Hillsborough law worthy of the name will be seen as a continuation of the betrayal of families and survivors of Hillsborough, and of all those affected by state cover-ups?

Lucy Powell: I very strongly hear what my hon. Friend is saying. At these times, we always remember those affected by the Hillsborough disaster, particularly their plight ever since in fighting for justice and accountability. That is why this Government are committed to introducing a Hillsborough law, which will include a duty of candour. As I said in answer to a previous question, it is vital that we get that legislation right—that it is workable and watertight in legal terms, but also meets the expectations and needs of the families and all those affected. That is why we are working at pace and working closely with the families and their representatives, and we will bring forward that legislation at a time when we get it right.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): The Government's decision to cut personal independence payments by changing the eligibility criteria is a double whammy for carers, who risk losing their carer's allowance if the person they care for no longer qualifies for PIP. Given that it is Carers Week, will the Leader of the House raise this issue with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and make time for a debate so that we can discuss the far-reaching impact of these changes?

Lucy Powell: This Government are absolutely committed to supporting carers, and we have already taken steps to do so. We recognise how worrying it is for people when we are discussing changes to PIP and what those would mean for passported benefits such as carer's allowance. As the Green Paper sets out, we will be considering all of these issues in the round, including how we can support carers as part of this package.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Chopwell is a small village in my constituency, but this weekend it will see hundreds gather from around the world as it hosts cycling's pump track world championships UK qualifier on Sunday—the only track of the competition in the UK. It is a fantastic opportunity to showcase our vibrant community and brilliant local facilities on the world stage. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of local communities playing their part in delivering worldwide events?

Lucy Powell: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will never tyre of hearing about the great events in Members' constituencies, and this sounds like a wheely good one. *[Interruption.]* No? Okay, we will do better next time. I thank her for raising that event.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Government's own projections showed that their vindictive education tax would drive 3,000 children out of private education. The latest data shows that the exodus is already 11,000, with projections saying it will get worse.

[Greg Smith]

May we have a debate in Government time to find out why the Government's projections were so horrendously out, and the cost to the state sector of now having to educate those children?

Lucy Powell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the numbers he describes are within the normal fluctuations of these things. I am not clear whether this Conservative party supports getting more teachers into our state schools. As a result of the changes we have made to VAT on private schools, we have got over 2,000 more teachers in our schools this year, with more to come. It is vital to get more teachers into state schools, which educate 94% of young people in this country.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It will not have escaped the attention of Members of this House that Britain is in the grip of a viral addiction that has collapsed websites, stripped shop shelves bare and had the staff of Castle Chocolates in my Carlisle constituency working round the clock to feed it. I am of course speaking about Dubai chocolate. Will the Leader of the House not just join me in thanking the staff of Castle Chocolates, who are literally working round the clock, but give us time for a debate on the entrepreneurship of our small businesses and the contribution they make to our cities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in celebrating Dubai chocolate, and I congratulate Castle Chocolates in her constituency on meeting that demand. It shows the opportunity that social media brings to small businesses in parts of our constituencies; we should always remember that when we discuss issues around social media. I will join her in having a few Dubai chocolates later.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): As a person of Gujarati heritage and an MP who represents a large number of Gujarati constituents, I, too, would like to express my shock, horror and sympathies over the devastating news coming out of India. Like the rest of the House, I pray and hope beyond hope for some good news. Recently, I have spoken to many nurseries in my constituency who have served close-knit, hard-working communities for generations, including Shanklin day nursery, Nursery Rhymes and Saffron pre-school. They all tell me that they are struggling and one is to close imminently, due to a combination of rent increases from the council, increases in employer's national insurance, the low rate provided by the Government for free childcare places and their no longer being able to charge for additional services. Will the Leader of the House kindly commit to scheduling a debate on how we can improve funding for our vital nurseries?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in sending all my thoughts and wishes to his constituents who may be worried and affected by the news coming out of India regarding the inbound flight to Gatwick. It is truly devastating. This Government are committed to more childcare places and more free childcare. That is what we are rolling out. We have more money going into school-based nurseries, too, so that families can access that provision. I hear what he is saying this morning; the issue would probably make a good topic for debate.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): May I start by associating myself with the sympathies given over the news coming from India this morning, which will be causing great anxiety to many of my constituents? The Ascension Eagles cheerleading team of Silvertown have just returned triumphant from an important event in Florida. As a sports fan, Mr Speaker, you will know that almost 100,000 people take part in cheerleading now. It has recently been recognised by Sport England, but it often goes unrecognised by the wider public. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to do more to shine a light on grassroots sports that often do not get recognition? Will she start today by congratulating the Ascension Eagles on their success in showing the Americans what talent the girls and boys of east London have?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is certainly a great cheerleader for his constituency and for this sport, which has been raised with me before. It provides great opportunities for people to engage with sport and showcases what can be done.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I declare my interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital. There is a chronic shortfall of staff in radiology and oncology. Those shortages mean that people find out they have cancer later and treatments are delayed, worsening survival rates. Is the Leader of the House aware that 2,910 more clinical radiologists could be recruited if money spent outsourcing demand was spent within the NHS? Can we have a debate in Government time to scrutinise those shortfalls?

Lucy Powell: We have inherited a very difficult situation when it comes to cancer diagnosis and many other diagnoses across our health service. That is why we are boosting healthcare spending in the coming years, as we did yesterday in the spending review. We will publish a dedicated national cancer plan shortly, and that will include how we can identify and diagnose cancer earlier.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I recently had the privilege of meeting the Seaton Sluice defibrillator group—an amazing group of volunteers who have managed to secure funding for 16 defibrillators in the village, and who also provide training and servicing for them. Can we have a debate on how we can support groups such as the Seaton Sluice defibrillator group, and will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating and thanking all the volunteers who support them in this effort?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all the volunteers in her constituency for getting those defibrillators, because they can absolutely save lives. It is really important that we get them into as many communities as possible, and we are committed to improving access to them. As ever, I am sure they would make a good topic for a debate.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Emma from Tring lives with a rare genetic connective tissue disorder as well as comorbid conditions, which means that she lives in pain every day. Despite that, she has worked hard to build a great career in the NHS. Although she understands that reform to disability

allowance is needed, the changes absolutely terrify her. Simply functioning on a daily basis comes at a significant physical and financial cost, and she has lost her personal independence payment, which will lead to her deterioration and to the loss of her career. Can we have a debate about the impact of the changes to disability allowance, especially on those who proudly use it to get into work?

Lucy Powell: I hear what the hon. Lady says. Many of us have met constituents with fluctuating illnesses like the ones she describes, and I understand that this is a worrying time for people. We have had the Green Paper. We will shortly bring forward a piece of legislation to consider further the eligibility criteria for the personal independence payment, and I am sure that she will want to debate them.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): Yesterday I hosted an event for 70 leading experts ahead of World Continence Week. This included campaigners for the Bins for Boys campaign, which aims to ensure that everybody has the dignity of being able to dispose of items like stoma bags, catheters and pads. One of my guests was Pete Reed OBE, a three-time gold medallist and retired lieutenant commander who is now a patient advocate. He highlighted the fact that we do not have suitable bins in our male toilets. Could the Leader of the House please support the campaign to ensure that bins are available for the dignity of our guests?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises the really important issue of World Continence Week and the availability of appropriate bins to dispose of things in men's toilets as well as in women's. I am sure that we can take up those issues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, on behalf of my party, may I convey our thoughts and prayers for the people involved in the air crash in India? I think it is appropriate that we do so.

I wish to raise the urgent case of prisoner of conscience Junaid Hafeez, a Pakistani lecturer who has been sentenced to death on widely condemned blasphemy charges. Since his arrest in 2013, his trial has been repeatedly delayed and he has faced solitary confinement after attacks in prison. His first lawyer was killed, highlighting the danger in defending freedom of expression in Pakistan. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office what representations the Foreign Secretary has made to the Pakistani authorities and international partners to secure Junaid Hafeez's release, ensure a fair trial, push for blasphemy law reform and ensure full religious freedom?

Lucy Powell: May I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue? The Government remain deeply concerned about the use of blasphemy laws to undermine human rights in Pakistan, and those conversations between our Government and other Governments happen continuously. The Foreign Secretary is in his place, so I am sure that he has heard the hon. Gentleman's call.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): June is indeed a very special month for birthdays—as you will know, Mr Speaker, given that you celebrated your birthday this week. Will the Leader of the House

join me in celebrating the 100th birthday of the *Doncaster Free Press* and recognise the importance of local newspapers in our regions?

Lucy Powell: Well, I can confirm that it was not Mr Speaker's 100th birthday—he falls well short of that. Weren't you 21 again this week, Mr Speaker? I join my hon. Friend in congratulating *Doncaster Free Press* and all our local newspapers on continuing to provide a trusted source of local news that many of our constituents rely on.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): On Friday last week, a mass brawl broke out outside a primary school in my constituency, with children as young as four and their families witnessing violent acts, and they were understandably scared. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this disgraceful behaviour and in commending Cleveland police and the school for their response, and can she secure a statement from the Justice Secretary to ensure the perpetrators of such crimes feel the full force of the law?

Lucy Powell: I of course join my hon. Friend in condemning this awful incident in his constituency. I thank his local police and the school for their swift response, and I look forward to justice being served.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, as a proud Lancastrian like myself, you will be aware that this Friday is Whit Friday, and that across the north-west we still have a strong tradition of Whit walks and carnivals, where brass bands play to our local communities. Some of our fabulous local bands, including Milnrow, Wardle Academy, Wardle Anderson, Littleborough and Bloom Music will be performing at the internationally renowned Saddleworth and Oldham Whit Friday band contest. Will the Leader of the House join me in blowing their trumpet—or, more appropriately, cornet—and have a debate in Government time on the brilliance of brass bands across the country?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend may be slightly better at puns than me, but I join him in celebrating Whit walks. I can confirm that his constituency does a great turn at that, and I join him in trumpeting all those in his constituency who participate.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): This is Carers Week—9 to 15 June—and Carers Week 2025 is focused on caring about equality. Millions of people across the UK provide unpaid care for an ill, older or disabled family member, and their support is worth a staggering £184 billion a year to our country. In my constituency, we are very fortunate to have a wonderful organisation called Carers of West Dunbartonshire, which provides outstanding support to unpaid carers and helps promote equality of opportunity for carers. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising their efforts, and thank the staff and members of Carers of West Dunbartonshire for all they do throughout the year?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all the carers in his constituency and right across this country. The Government remain committed to supporting carers.

[Lucy Powell]

They do a fantastic and wonderful job—and, as he says, they also save the state a huge amount of money through the work they do.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): A well-established local business and employer in my constituency is facing an ongoing and costly administrative issue with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. It has been trying since January to close an outdated VAT bond that is no longer required, yet despite repeated attempts, including formal letters to six HMRC departments, it has received no response. Virgin Money continues to charge fees for this unnecessary bond, placing an unfair financial burden on a company that employs local people and contributes to our local community. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how HMRC can be made more responsive and accountable to small businesses facing bureaucratic deadlock?

Lucy Powell: This sounds like a particularly frustrating situation for my hon. Friend's constituents. If she gives me the full details of the case, I will make sure that HMRC deals with it quickly.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My constituents Peter from Liverton Mines and Morgan from Brotton are very keen to buy electric vehicles, but they are unable to because they do not have driveways on which to charge them. Will the Government take it upon themselves to make it easier for people to buy electric vehicles, and find solutions to pavement charging?

Lucy Powell: I am aware that that was my hon. Friend's 132nd question to this House since he was elected in July, which is double the number his predecessor asked in his first year, so I congratulate him on that. He raises the very important issue of electric vehicles and the need for us to get access to them.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): This week, I was delighted to welcome pupils from Doon Academy in Dalmellington to Parliament. They were able to make the trip due to the community benefit from local windfarms. A few weeks ago, I paid a visit to the school to learn about its "kind to mind" group. Students have created a safe place for students in the school to connect and talk about how they feel. Would the Leader of the House make time for a debate on what action can be taken to support mental health in our communities, particularly for our young people?

Lucy Powell: We are committed to providing mental health support, especially for our young people. We have an ambitious programme to do just that, and I am sure that Health Ministers will keep us updated.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, this week has been a great week for rugby league with Billy Boston being knighted, but you will be astonished to find out that only one former boxer has ever been knighted—Sir Henry Cooper. Does the Leader of the House agree that more grassroots, working-class sports stars should be knighted, and that maybe Kevin Sinfield and Lennox Lewis would be a good start?

Lucy Powell: I am sure the authorities have heard what my hon. Friend says. He does a really good job of championing working-class sports, particularly boxing and rugby league, and I know that that they matter greatly to his constituents.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): New College Lanarkshire was recently recognised as further education institution of the year at *The Herald* education awards. Deputy principal Ann Baxter and student Chloe Sandilands were also recognised, winning the lifetime achievement and outstanding contribution categories. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating all at the college on its 160th anniversary? Does she agree that the Scottish Government must end their unfair cuts to the college sector to allow people access to the skills that they need?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating New College Lanarkshire on all its achievements, and on its 160th anniversary. He is absolutely right. This UK Government have boosted funding to further education. Now that the Scottish Government have the Barnett consequential for that, they really have no excuse.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The volunteers of the Southwick Village Green Preservation Society have for six years worked with pride and love to improve the green in my constituency. Thanks to their efforts, it not only looks beautiful but celebrates the proud history of Southwick, including the contribution of Suddickers to shipbuilding, and in world wars. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking them for what they do, and consider a debate on the contribution that such voluntary groups make?

Lucy Powell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved in improving the Southwick village green, and thank all volunteers in all our constituencies for what they do.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I had an extremely harrowing meeting with a mum in my constituency. Her 12-year-old son had been groomed by an artificial intelligence chatbot through character.ai. It is utterly unacceptable that young people are exposed to the risks and harms of AI in this way. The Online Safety Act 2023 is a step in the right direction, but does the Leader of the House agree that we must do more? Will she make further space to debate this vital issue in this House?

Lucy Powell: I was really sorry to hear of this horrific case of a young person in her constituency being groomed by an AI bot. It highlights further the challenges we face. My hon. Friend is right that the previous Government brought in the Online Safety Act. We need to see how that unfolds, but if we need to strengthen it, we will.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): The minor injuries unit at Cannock Chase hospital temporarily closed more than five years ago. In August, the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent integrated care board announced proposals to permanently close our MIU, but it has been radio silence since October. My constituents are having to use unreliable bus services to travel elsewhere, or call an ambulance, which is the opposite of what the

ICB wants to achieve. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the importance of urgent care, particularly in more deprived communities, like Cannock Chase?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the access that his constituents need to urgent and emergency care in his constituency. I am sorry to hear of the closure of the minor injuries unit. The Minister for Secondary Care will be here shortly for a statement. He might want to raise that with her then.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in praising Labour-led Rugby borough council and all involved in organising the forthcoming Love Rugby festival, which will take place from 20 June to 6 July in our town centre? It brings together Rugby's diverse communities and celebrates our amazing people, open spaces, volunteers and venues. Town centre businesses are throwing open their doors, as is the Rugby Art Gallery and Museum. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on running, I am glad that the festival includes a "couch to 5k" run, which I will be joining. I wonder whether you, Mr Speaker, and perhaps the Leader of the House, might make the 55-minute train journey up to Rugby to join me, and take part in celebrating pride and place in Rugby?

Lucy Powell: I always prefer invitations that involve eating things, rather than running, but I will consider it. We have heard a lot about rugby today, but my hon. Friend raises a different kind of Rugby. I am sure that many people will be visiting his constituency.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I was contacted this week by a constituent whose son needs to see an occupational therapist. Her son is one year old, but because he does not yet have child disability living allowance, he cannot be given a referral. The Department for Work and Pensions says that the current wait for a child disability allowance application to be processed is 25 weeks. That is just not acceptable. Can the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made to this House on the steps that the Department is taking to clear the backlog it inherited?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of the delays in applications for disability living allowance, particularly for children, which are both unprecedented and unacceptable. The Government are taking action to bring them down, but I will ensure that the case he mentions gets thought.

Gibraltar

11.49 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): My thoughts, and I am sure those of the entire House, are with those who have been affected by the tragic plane crash in India this morning. We know that British nationals were on board. I can confirm, Mr Speaker, that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working urgently with local authorities to support British nationals and their families, and has stood up a crisis team in both Delhi and London.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will now make a statement on Gibraltar. Yesterday, the United Kingdom reached a political agreement with the European Union on the last major unresolved issue from our decision to leave the EU, providing much-needed certainty for people and businesses in Gibraltar. The deal removes another obstacle to closer ties with our EU friends and, crucially, protects British sovereignty over the Rock.

The need for this deal is well understood. As Members across the House have often highlighted, the current situation is not sustainable. Every single day, approximately 15,000 people—half of Gibraltar's workforce—cross the land border with Spain to do their jobs, and to buy goods and services. Without a solution, the EU's incoming system of entry and exit controls would have introduced a hard border, at which every individual's passport would be checked, and all British goods heading for Gibraltar's supermarket shelves would be subject to time-consuming customs checks. That would cause chaos and backlogs, endanger the livelihoods of British citizens in Gibraltar, wreck the territory's economy and possibly cost it hundreds of millions of pounds a year, and place pressure, ultimately, on the UK taxpayer to pick up the bill.

All my predecessors since the referendum have had to wrestle with the looming threat to Gibraltar's economy and way of life. These issues were, regrettably, left out of the EU exit negotiations. The previous Government began further talks to address them in 2021, when the former right hon. Member for Esher and Walton was Foreign Secretary. The issues were taken forward by the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), and the noble Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton came close to reaching an agreement. I pay tribute to their efforts, and to them for briefing me on Privy Council terms when I was in opposition.

It fell to this Government, when we came into office last year, to get a deal over the line, and it was imperative that we did. Gibraltar is part of the British family. Its people are British citizens. Its military facilities are of the utmost importance to Britain's security, protecting important global trade routes in volatile geopolitical times. Britain is safer thanks to the work of our armed forces on the Rock. Since coming into office, therefore, we have made it a priority to negotiate a lasting solution with the European Commission and Spain.

I acknowledge the role of the Minister for Europe, North America and the Overseas Territories, who, in opposition and government, has been a relentless advocate for the people of Gibraltar, and has been integral to finding a mutually beneficial way forward. I also thank the Minister for the Armed Forces, as well as the dedicated team of Foreign Office diplomats for all their

[Mr David Lammy]

efforts, led by Lindsay Appleby in Brussels and Robbie Bulloch in London; their negotiating skill and deft diplomacy have been in the finest tradition of our diplomatic service.

British Ministers and officials have worked hand in glove with the Government of Gibraltar to conclude these tricky negotiations. Chief Minister Fabian Picardo has been at the table at every single stage of the process. Yesterday, he welcomed me to Gibraltar before we travelled together to Brussels to conclude the talks—as he said, as “a united British family”.

This Government would never agree to any solution that did not have the full support of the Government of Gibraltar—nothing about Gibraltar without Gibraltar. The Chief Minister has said that what we have agreed is “something remarkable... Something bold. Something forward-looking and hopeful.”

I pay tribute to all those whose tireless efforts have helped to get us here. We have protected Gibraltar's sovereignty, economy and way of life for the long term. Since 2021, this and previous Governments have been involved in 19 formal rounds of talks and countless technical discussions, sherpa meetings and ministerial calls—it was a massive collective effort—to ensure that Gibraltar could continue to prosper.

We have agreed a unique and practical solution to the problem facing Gibraltar, the only British overseas territory that shares a border with the EU's visa-free Schengen area. Its people's livelihoods depend on a fluid border. Our solution will deliver jobs, investment and stability, not just for Gibraltar, but for the entire region. British sovereignty over the whole of Gibraltar, including British Gibraltar territorial waters, remains sacrosanct and iron-clad. On starting talks, I immediately secured an agreement to add a clause explicitly protecting our sovereignty, and the same goes for British Forces Gibraltar, which will continue to operate without interference or interruption, exactly as it does today.

Traffic at the border between Gibraltar and Spain will be able to flow, without checks on the people crossing. Residents of Gibraltar and of nearby Spanish communities will be able to go about their daily life, as they have done. For those arriving by air at Gibraltar's airport, there will be dual border control checks—a model similar to the one whereby French police operate in London's St Pancras station. Ignore the fake news: Gibraltar will not be joining Schengen. That was never on the table. Immigration, policing and justice in Gibraltar will remain the responsibility of Gibraltar's authorities.

As for products entering Gibraltar across its land border, there will be a unique goods and customs model, avoiding the need for onerous checks at the border. With this pragmatic solution, flights will be able to operate from Gibraltar airport across Europe, driving growth and jobs for the people of Gibraltar.

This Government are showing that a pragmatic, positive relationship with the European Union pays off for the British public. Just as at the UK-EU summit last month, we are solving the problems left by the previous Government and their thin Brexit deal, and are making working people across the British family safer and better off. We can now also strengthen our co-operation with Spain, our NATO ally, a place that British people know so well.

I am grateful to my counterparts in Spain and the EU for completing these negotiations in good faith, in the spirit of win-win solutions for all parties involved. This agreement paves the way for finalisation of the UK-EU treaty text on Gibraltar. All parties have committed to completing this as quickly as possible. I can reassure hon. Members that the House will have the opportunity to scrutinise it in the usual way. I hope that Members from all parts of the House take this matter with the seriousness that it deserves and back the solution that Gibraltar's Chief Minister and I have come to, guaranteeing Gibraltar's sovereignty, economy and way of life.

This is what competent government looks like: fixing problems, not creating them; standing up for our overseas territories, not leaving them exposed; and protecting Britain's interests abroad, to ensure security and growth at home. With this agreement, Gibraltar will have easier access to the European economy. Its businesses can plan for the long-term once again, and its citizens can feel reassured about their future. Britain's commitment to Gibraltar remains as solid as the Rock itself. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

11.58 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The thoughts of the whole House will be with those affected by the plane crash in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and the emergency services at the scene. I thank the Foreign Secretary for assuring us about the assistance that will be given to the families affected. As we know, British nationals are involved.

On the statement, I pay tribute to the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, and his team for the constructive way they have approached this issue. They worked constructively with Ministers in the previous Conservative Government to set out the negotiating position and red lines, the UK having recognised the choices that Gibraltar made in its interests.

The Chief Minister stated in a letter to the former European Scrutiny Committee that

“the UK and Gibraltar have never worked more closely together in delivering the outcome that the People of Gibraltar want”.

As my noble Friend Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton said when he gave evidence to the Committee last year:

“Fabian Picardo and I are joined at the hip: we will not agree anything that we are not both comfortable with.”

The Foreign Secretary has acknowledged his predecessor's work and taken time to reflect on it and secure this outcome. Will he also acknowledge that this negotiating process has been frustrated by Spain, which, as we know, blocked these issues from being resolved through the Brexit negotiations?

His Majesty's Opposition will judge the deal agreed on whether it meets the aims and objectives that we outlined when in government with Gibraltar and once we see the full details. Our principles have been that nothing compromises or infringes on the sovereignty and constitutional arrangements of Gibraltar, which is to remain British. We believe that we must be able to operate our base as we have done to safeguard our defence and interest, and that the deal must be backed by the Government of Gibraltar and Gibraltar's people to support their interests. It must also address the concerns about the actions of Spain to frustrate and prevent the free flow of goods.

I heard what the Foreign Secretary said in his statement and in the joint statement from the Government of Gibraltar, the UK Government and the EU Commission. I have the following questions. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm when the House will get to see the full details of the deal and the treaty? In a letter to the House of Lords International Agreements Committee, the Minister responsible for the Indo-Pacific, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), commented on the benefits to scrutiny of sharing the initial treaty text in advance of its being laid formally. Given the importance of the issue, will the Foreign Secretary make a draft available to the House before signing, and will he commit to make parliamentary time available to debate the treaty?

Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether the red lines that the last Government set with the Government of Gibraltar have been met or whether, during the negotiations and since he took office last year, there has been any divergence from them? Can he give assurances that under this deal we will see a stop to the games that have been played by the Spanish that disrupt the border and the freedoms that Gibraltarians should enjoy? They cause disruption in the EU, so has he received commitments from Spain and the EU that this will never happen again? With in excess of 15,000 people crossing the border every day, it is vital for economic interests that a fluid border, which Gibraltar wants, is in place. That is why when we were in government we respected the choice of Gibraltar to work to achieve this.

No mention is made of the military base in the joint statement, but the Foreign Secretary has referenced it. Can he confirm that nothing will be agreed that infringes on our ability to operate the base, and will members of our armed forces be able to access Gibraltar without needing Schengen checks? On the juxtaposed border controls, can he give more details about their practical operation and explain to the House how they will work? Can Spanish officers stop a British citizen from coming to stay in Gibraltar? Will British citizens' time staying in Gibraltar count against the 90-day Schengen limit?

Finally, the joint statement issued lists areas that the agreement will include, covering state aid, taxation, the environment, transport, the rights of frontier workers, social security co-operation and financial mechanisms on training and employment. However, there is a lack of detail. When will the details come forward, and when will we be able to scrutinise them? Does this put Gibraltar in a customs union with the EU? What does this mean for VAT? Will there be any provisions that will require Gibraltar or the United Kingdom to pass legislation, including to enact any EU law? Conservatives will always defend British sovereignty and the rights of Gibraltar, and we will continue to scrutinise the details of this deal so that nothing undermines this.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone of her remarks. She is absolutely right to pay tribute to Fabian Picardo, the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, who has been fantastic to work with throughout this. As I said to him, nothing about Gibraltar without Gibraltar. He has been in the room every time that talks have been conducted. I am grateful to previous Foreign Secretaries for the briefing that they gave me in office.

May I be clear that the military base will continue to operate as it does today? There will be zero change. It is vital for UK national security, and it is protected by this agreement. That was a red line for us throughout the negotiations.

The right hon. Lady asks whether the arrangement changed with the change of government. On the red lines that were set out by the Gibraltar Government, the answer is no. The only thing that changed was that I insisted that there was a sovereignty clause, which she will see when the treaty is published.

The right hon. Lady asks how quickly we will be able to share the treaty. We hope to do so as quickly as possible. She will recognise that there is a lot of technical detail. Work is ongoing with lawyers to draft the treaty, and between the European Union and Spain to ensure that the language in it is aligned, but we will get to that point as quickly as we can.

The right hon. Lady asks about parliamentary scrutiny. I assure her that we will follow the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process, as is right. Parliament will be able fully to scrutinise the treaty, and to debate the terms of the treaty if it wishes, as she would expect.

The right hon. Lady asks about Schengen. As I said in the statement, this was never on the table. I give her the assurance that immigration, policing and justice in Gibraltar will remain the responsibility of the Gibraltar authorities.

The right hon. Lady asks about VAT. I assure her that Gibraltar will not be applying VAT and will maintain its fiscal sovereignty.

The right hon. Lady asks about the 90-day rule. Because there will, in effect, now not be checks at the land border, it is right that Gibraltarians can come and stay as long as they want. But for those who are travelling into Gibraltar from Spain, or those who are arriving in Gibraltar at the airport, I can confirm that the 90-day rule will apply across both Gibraltar and Spain.

I recognise that these questions touch on the issues that dominated this House following the decision to leave the European Union, which was, of course, a decision that divided the nation. But this moment, this deal and this arrangement, for which Gibraltar was in the room, represent a conclusion to that period. I am very grateful for the tone that the Official Opposition have taken.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I have to admit that when Brexit happened, I thought that the problem of Gibraltar would be so difficult that I really did not see how we would ever get over it. It is a tribute to the flair, the flexibility and the fraternity on display on all four sides of the negotiations that the Foreign Secretary has been able to come to this place to announce such a great success, and I congratulate him and his team wholeheartedly.

The Foreign Secretary talks about our scrutinising this matter in the usual way under the CRaG process. I have to say that I think the CRaG process is rubbish, and I ask him to look again at, in essence, our having the right, as opposed to being given it by largesse, to debate and vote on a treaty. The requirement is that the Government lay before Parliament a treaty, which this House may resolve not to ratify during a 21-day delay. How that is done, I frankly do not know, because it has

[Emily Thornberry]

never been done, but it could, in theory, result in a delay of 21 sitting days. In many cases, it would be not so much ping-pong as hoofing the ball up the pitch again and again. The CRaG process is obscure and out of date. It is basically the Ponsonby rule, and it is unfit for the 21st century and unfit for this place. I ask the Foreign Secretary to look at it again.

Mr Lammy: I will begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend on becoming a dame and on her trip to Buckingham Palace yesterday. I hear what she says about the CRaG process. I recognise the importance of that to the House, so through the usual channels, we will do everything that we can to ensure that there is the appropriate parliamentary scrutiny, and that the House can remain united and confident that Gibraltar remains sovereign, that the base is secure and that our relationship with both Spain and the EU is appropriately intact.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Our thoughts also go out to all those families involved in the tragic air crash in India today.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. The Conservatives' botched deal with Europe left Gibraltar in a state of limbo for years. Our hope is that this new agreement will work to the genuine benefit of Gibraltarians, leaving no lingering questions over the status of Britain's sovereignty of the territory and our commitment to the self-determination of Gibraltarians.

There are a number of vital principles at stake. To ensure that the deal effectively secures the future of the Gibraltarian economy, it is vital that Parliament is given the opportunity to scrutinise the details of the agreement and vote on it. Will the Minister therefore commit to bringing the deal before the House for a review and outline when MPs can expect to vote on it? It is also vital that the Government provide further clarity on the timeline for implementing the deal. Will the Minister therefore confirm whether a provisional date has been agreed for its implementation and whether that timeline provides enough of an opportunity for parliamentarians to provide adequate scrutiny? Another principle is that nothing about Gibraltar should be agreed without Gibraltarians. Will the Minister provide further details on what steps have been taken to consult them, including representatives of business, to ensure that their interests have been front and centre in the negotiations?

The Spanish Government have been willing in the past to act unilaterally over Gibraltar and to the detriment of Gibraltarians. Will the Minister outline what mechanisms will exist in the deal to ensure compliance and effective dispute resolution in the event of future possible unilateral action, thus giving confidence to Gibraltarians that the deal will be enforceable? Finally, will the Minister confirm the lifespan of the deal and whether it will include an opt-out clause, ensuring the ultimate guarantee of Gibraltar's sovereignty?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady is right that the people of Gibraltar have been in limbo since the Brexit decision, which is why it was important that, in coming into

office and inheriting this from the last Government, we put every effort into it. Let me again pay tribute to the Minister for Europe who rolled up his sleeves and was a sherpa at a lot of those meetings, particularly over the last year.

The hon. Lady asked about business. I assure her that I was with representatives from the business sector in Gibraltar yesterday morning discussing what a deal would mean for them if it were reached later in the afternoon. There was one word that they kept coming back to: certainty. They wanted certainty, and they wanted the opportunity of a more frictionless border arrangement with Spain and the opportunity to sell into the Spanish market unhindered. That is what they said and that is what we particularly took on board.

The hon. Lady rightly asked about any ability to thwart the deal that might exist in parts of the Spanish parliamentary system. May I remind her that the deal, appropriately, is between the United Kingdom and the European Union, that we have always been a country that meets our treaty obligations seriously and that whatever one's views about the European Union, it is also an organisation that meets its obligations seriously? When we sign up to a treaty, that is what we are doing. As with the trade and co-operation agreement, there is a review mechanism that would allow the appropriate review; indeed, the UK-EU summit that we had a few weeks ago was an appropriate review. However, we met our obligations under the TCA in opposition, standing up for the agreement that had been struck by the last Government, and we would expect the same in this instance.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): May I congratulate the Foreign Secretary and Chief Minister Fabian Picardo on getting this landmark agreement over the line? The agreement further cements Gibraltar's place as an integral part of the British family. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm to the House what further measures he is taking to strengthen relationships with the overseas territories?

Mr Lammy: I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned the overseas territories more generally. We had a good meeting of the heads of the overseas territories at the end of last year, at which I and the Prime Minister were in attendance. We have undertaken to conduct a review of our relationships to strengthen those further, and the Minister for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories is taking that forward as we speak.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman will know—and he will not take this personally—that for the most part I think his Government's ability to negotiate is appalling. The only reason I have any confidence that this might be a good deal is that the Government of Gibraltar were heavily involved. At some point in the future, this House—me included—will see the detail of this agreement, and I will know what red lines I stuck to when I was negotiating. To save time and for the education of the House, will he, without going into details, let us know: did the European position, including the Spanish position, move closer to ours or did we move closer to theirs to get this deal over the line?

Mr Lammy: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we strengthened the deal, and we did that by putting in a sovereignty clause to ensure that there was no question

about the sovereignty of Gibraltar and its unique relationship as part of the family of the United Kingdom. We were able to reach a deal yesterday that the European Union and the UK had negotiated. We ensured that Fabian Picardo was in the room at every meeting and the European Union ensured that Spain was in the room at every meeting. The right hon. Gentleman will know that Gibraltar has been a block on our bilateral relationship with Spain. This is an opportunity for us to work with Spain and to deepen that relationship, as we have been able to do with so many other countries across Europe.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I used to live in Andalusia, close to the Gibraltar border, so this issue is very close to my heart and I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on the deal. The people of Spain, Gibraltar and Britain are very close, we have very deep links and, as they say in Spain, “Hacemos buenas migas.” Does the Foreign Secretary agree that this is not only a great deal for the economy of Gibraltar, but a chance to deepen those relationships and continue those friendships that have gone on for so many years?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because her question gives me the opportunity to remind people about the many Spanish families living across the border who make their way into Gibraltar for work and to see loved ones, and who were subjected to checks. Now, those families will not have those checks and it will be much more seamless to go between both sides. This is a win-win for them as much as it is for those in Gibraltar. I am grateful to her for bringing to mind the people, and not just the businesses, who will benefit.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is encouraging that the Gibraltarians are receiving more consideration than the exiled Chagossians did. When the Foreign Secretary says that a sovereignty clause was inserted, does that mean that Spain absolutely and explicitly recognises the sovereign relationship between Britain and Gibraltar? If so, what has the reaction been of those elements that he referred to in Spanish politics that do not accept that relationship?

Mr Lammy: Absolutely, Spain does recognise the sovereignty of Gibraltar and its relationship with the United Kingdom in the agreement, and the right hon. Gentleman will see that detail in the treaty. He will know that the subject of dispute over many, many years—long before many of us were in this House—is over the isthmus. Much of the territory that some would describe as neutral—others have different descriptions—exists between Gibraltar and Spain. Overwhelmingly, there has been support for reaching this moment on both sides. I cannot comment on the extremities of politics in Spain, but I am sure that these days that can be looked up on social media.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar. I know she is disappointed not to be able to join us today and would want to be here to welcome today's UK-Gibraltar-Spain-EU agreement. It protects Gibraltar's sovereignty, secures the British naval base and reduces border checks from

10 million to 250,000 a year, as well as strengthening the economy through new European flight access. That is an incredibly strong outcome. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm how we will ensure its smooth and effective implementation on the ground?

Mr Lammy: I, too, pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) for championing the people of Gibraltar and their issues and for ensuring that, in coming into Government, we made sure that there could not be an agreement that Gibraltar's representatives were not content with. I should update the House that yesterday I also met the Opposition in Gibraltar, so they were fully informed of what I hoped would become a good outcome today. We will work at pace on the treaty. I cannot give my hon. Friend a timeline because of the technical legal detail that that will involve, but I will seek to update the House in the appropriate way if there are delays.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the tone of his statement and the tributes he paid to not only his predecessors, but the officials and diplomats who have been involved in the negotiations for many years. I do not think I heard an answer to the question asked by the shadow Foreign Secretary, which was: can a British citizen flying from the UK to Gibraltar now be stopped by a Spanish official as they land? On the sovereignty clause, will he clarify whether it means that Spain has abandoned its claim altogether, or does it plan to follow the same route that Mauritius did with Diego Garcia?

Mr Lammy: On the first point, we have stuck to the political framework that was negotiated and agreed back in 2020 by the then Foreign Secretary, the former Member for Esher and Walton. I have a photograph from the agreement that was struck, of where we would be locating effectively a joint facility in the airport. There will be a second line queue, as there is in St Pancras, and there will be Spanish border guards and police situated in that second line. Of course, if there was an alert at that point—not on its own, but at that point—there would be a hand-back facility with the Gibraltar police, so they will be working alongside that Spanish team. If there was an alert, the individual would have the right to legal advice. They would be able to either return to their country of origin—let's say the UK—or voluntarily go over to Spain to face questions. The key thing is that it is joint and alongside the work and efforts of the Gibraltar police and the Gibraltar customs and border guards.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I strongly welcome this political agreement and congratulate the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team on achieving it. I recently met Chief Minister Picardo, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) and other members of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, to welcome the progress that Gibraltar has made on anti-money laundering, including through publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that it is the intent in the future EU-UK agreement that there will be a section on anti-money laundering? Does he agree that it sends a message to

[Joe Powell]

other overseas territories that tackling economic crime can be a strength in terms of business confidence and investment, and not something to be feared?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's work in this area. He will recognise that Gibraltar, as an overseas territory, is at the strong end of tackling issues of illicit finance and is paving the way. There is more work to do on this issue and particularly on beneficial ownership. I intend to take this forward, working alongside our new envoy in this area, Baroness Hodge, and culminating, I hope, in an event in London next year.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Gibraltar is British and its citizens are British by choice. I was proud to represent Gibraltar for 10 years when I served in the European Parliament. Can the Minister confirm that once the full text is available, he will allow time for both this House and the Gibraltar Parliament to scrutinise the deal before it is ratified?

Mr Lammy: I do not want to speak for the Chief Minister, but I know that he was expecting for there to be the appropriate scrutiny of the Bill in the Gibraltar parliamentary system. Of course, as we would expect, this has garnered a lot of attention in Gibraltar. I have given my undertaking to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). I recognise that this is an important last aspect of our decision to leave the European Union and that it needs the appropriate parliamentary scrutiny.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his statement. Can he confirm that it is his expectation that this deal will provide new opportunities for growth in trade and for businesses in Gibraltar?

Mr Lammy: I can confirm that. There was palpable excitement, when speaking to businesses in Gibraltar yesterday morning, at the opportunities that would arise. Of course, for small and medium-sized businesses, there will be some change. It is important, and we have discussed this with the Chief Minister, that we can support those businesses on trade, on skills in particular and on the opportunities that exist on both sides of the border.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I want to probe the question of whether Spanish border officials have an effective veto on the entry of a British citizen from the United Kingdom landing on British sovereign territory in Gibraltar. I just want absolute clarity for everybody in this House: do Spanish officials have a veto or not? Secondly, will the Foreign Secretary comment on the dispute resolution mechanism and whether there is a regular review clause?

Mr Lammy: I do not know if the hon. Gentleman has flown into Gibraltar airport, as I have, but if he flew into Gibraltar and there was an alert—I am not sure why there might be an alert in the Schengen system—I reassure him that as he is stopped by the Spanish border guards operating on behalf of the European Union, he would be handed back to the Gibraltese,

where he might feel more comfortable. He would be able to access his rights and the legal system that he certainly feels comfortable with, which is ours. He would be able to return to the United Kingdom, where no doubt the Spanish would seek to extradite him and many in this House would be rather pleased.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the Foreign Secretary's commitment to the sovereignty clause, the question of sovereignty can only really be answered once we have the full detail of the treaty. That scrutiny is made poorer by the Government's decision when they took office to abolish the European Scrutiny Committee, which did detailed work on this subject in the last Parliament. If I may tease out a further response, given the unique nature of Gibraltar airport, where the runway and aerodrome are owned by the Ministry of Defence and operated by the Royal Air Force, will a member of the British armed forces landing in Gibraltar have to prove their British identity to anyone in order to go to work?

Mr Lammy: No, absolutely not. We have secured that arrangement. The hon. Gentleman will recognise that Spain is a NATO ally, and it understood the importance of that requirement. As it has been raised, let me just say that, yes, there is a dispute resolution mechanism and a termination clause, as the House would appropriately expect.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): This welcome agreement has been a long time coming. Those of us who have had the privilege of visiting Gibraltar on official delegations are aware of how loyal Gibraltarians are to Britain and the British Crown. On the talk of sovereignty, I think we have established that, other than the St Pancras-style arrangement, the Spanish police will have no authority. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that no other Spanish authority—customs officials, for example—will have any authority on the Rock?

Mr Lammy: Yesterday I met Joe Bossano, who, at 85, is a long-standing Member of the Gibraltar Parliament. He shared his reflections on Gibraltar and its attachment to the UK, on the war and being evacuated to the UK, and on where there have been disagreements with the UK, when the UK has not understood that Gibraltar is part of the family. I give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks: yes is the answer.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is clearly in the best interests of Spain and Gibraltar for there to be a free flow of individuals backwards and forwards across the border. For UK citizens who fly into Spain or Gibraltar and hire a car to cross the border into Gibraltar or Spain, what checks will there be at the border? Clarity on that point would help.

Mr Lammy: The clarity is that there will no longer be any checks. If they fly into Spain, they are flying into the Schengen area. If they fly into Málaga, they are free to drive to Gibraltar without checks—they would already have had those checks. The same applies in the other direction.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, but I must ask a question given the similarities between Gibraltar and Northern

Ireland. The sovereignty issues faced by Northern Ireland in terms of European overreach on borders mean that Northern Irish people will feel anxiety about this agreement. Will the Secretary of State outline what consideration has been given to the views of Gibraltarians, and what consultation was held regarding the policy of a foreign nation on their soil?

Mr Lammy: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that our position of “nothing about Gibraltar without Gibraltar” gave those guarantees, and no meetings were held—certainly not under this Government or, I am quite sure, under the previous Government either—without the Chief Minister in the room, so that they were happy. We would not have had a deal were they not happy; there would not have been a deal were the Chief Minister not able to stand up and say, “I am happy with this deal.” That was the guarantee we gave. Of course we reflected on the issues that arose in relation to Northern Ireland.

Spending Review: Health and Social Care

12.34 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the outcome of the spending review for the Department of Health and Social Care.

This Government were elected on a manifesto to fix our broken NHS and make it fit for the future. Our job is twofold: first, to get the NHS back on its feet and treating patients on time again; and secondly, to reform the service for the long-term so that it is fit for the future. That is why, in her autumn Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor took the necessary decisions to give health and social care a record uplift in day-to-day spending at the conclusion of the first phase of the spending review. The Department for Health and Social Care received a cash injection of £26 billion covering day-to-day spending and capital investment in 2025-26, compared with the 2023-24 out-turn.

All Opposition parties have rejected that investment and those changes to repair the damage done to our NHS and move it forward. They have rejected two above-inflation pay increases for our NHS staff, the recruitment of 1,700 more GPs and the agreement of a GP contract for the first time since the pandemic, the biggest investment for hospices in a generation, the biggest expansion of carer’s allowance since the 1970s, a boost for older and disabled people through the disabled facilities grant, and the biggest real-terms increase to the public health grant in nearly a decade.

We have also given pharmacies the biggest funding uplift in years, ensured that women across the country can access the morning after pill free of charge, frozen prescription charges for the first time in three years, enabled an extra 3.5 million appointments for operations, consultations, diagnostic tests and treatments—reaching and surpassing our manifesto pledge seven months early. I can update the House on waiting lists, which, as of this morning, have fallen by over 30,000 compared with last month, amid a reduction of 232,000 since this Government took office.

I could go on, but I have only 10 minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I would not like to try your patience, so I will make this point briefly. To govern is to choose, and anyone who opposed the decisions that the Chancellor took in her Budget must tell us what they would have subtracted from that list. We cannot spend money if we do not raise it.

As the Minister of State for Secondary Care, I regularly hear appalling anecdotes from colleagues across the House whose local hospitals, GP surgeries and community services are crumbling, with rusty equipment, leaky pipes and buckets catching rainwater. Phase 1 of the spending review has allowed us to arrest 14 years of shocking neglect and undercapitalisation in the NHS, with a record capital investment of £13.6 billion in 2025-26. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives do not like it, but I will go on. That money has gone towards repairing our crumbling hospitals, supporting over 1,000 GP surgeries to modernise their buildings, and installing state-of-the-art scanners across the NHS estate, including the latest linear accelerator machines. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear, investment must come with reform. This year we have unveiled our plan for change, our elective reform plan,

[Karin Smyth]

our urgent and emergency care plan and a crackdown on agency spend in order to reinvest £1 billion into the frontline.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out the conclusion of phase 2 of the spending review, setting budgets that will enable us to make firm plans to deliver on the people's priorities in the coming years, while going further and faster on reform. Our settlement increases day-to-day spending on health, bringing the budget for my Department and our NHS up to £232 billion by 2028-29. That means £29 billion more day-to-day funding for the NHS in England, in real terms, than in 2023-24. We have also secured the largest-ever health capital budget, with a £2.3 billion real-terms increase in capital spending by 2029-30, compared with 2023-24, representing a more than 20% real-terms increase by the end of the spending review period.

Let me hammer this point home: investment must be matched by reform. This will be a critical year for the NHS as we achieve better value for taxpayers, who must see their money being spent well and delivering results. We would rather take those difficult decisions now, to save our NHS so that it is there for future generations. NHS England is a top-down organisation—the biggest quango in the world—with a less efficient system than the previous Government inherited in 2010 and twice the headcount at the centre. That is why my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister announced in March that we will bring together NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care to form a new joint centre. That will put an end to duplication and enable substantial efficiency savings, while bringing the management of our NHS back under democratic control. We will also unlock £17 billion of savings over the spending review period through 2% annual productivity growth in the NHS—money that will be either reinvested in the frontline or used to support radical transformation to make the health system more agile and efficient.

Our elective reform plan set out how we will ensure that by the end of this Parliament 92% of patients will not have to wait more than 18 weeks for elective care. This settlement will drive us further towards that goal, with over £6 billion of additional capital investment over five years across new diagnostic, elective and emergency and urgent care capacity, which could deliver more than 4 million additional tests and procedures.

We will build on the record capital investment from phase 1 to repair the NHS estate. That means continuing the delivery of 25 new hospitals; investing £30 billion in maintenance and repairs, with £5 billion of it to address the most critical building repairs; and reducing by half the number of hospitals containing RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—over this Parliament.

This spending review provides for an increase of over £4 billion for adult social care in 2028-29 compared with 2025-26, including an increase in the NHS contribution via the better care fund. Local authorities with responsibility for adult social care will also benefit from wider reforms to better align funding with need, multi-year settlements and simplification of the funding landscape that enables them to plan more effectively. Last but not least, we have taken steps to simplify targets and better monitor delivery, and we will continue to work with local systems to improve financial and operational performance, to get the most from every penny.

A key part of our 10-year plan is driving progress on the three shifts: from analogue to digital, hospital to community and treatment to prevention. On digital, we will invest up to £10 billion in technology and transformation, to start making the NHS app a digital front door and deliver a single patient record. We will work in partnership with the Wellcome Trust to launch the world's first health data research service, backed by £600 million, to accelerate the discovery of lifesaving drugs.

On primary and community care, we will invest in training thousands more GPs, helping to bring back the family doctor through millions of extra appointments a year; in 700,000 additional dentist appointments annually; in at least 8,500 extra mental health staff by the end of this Parliament; and in mental health support teams for every school within five years. Finally, on prevention, our world-leading immunisation programmes will be supported by £2 billion, and we will invest £80 million in tobacco cessation programmes and our Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

I want to end by thanking the Chancellor for her unwavering commitment to getting our NHS back on its feet. Fixing broken Britain will not be easy, but nothing that is worth doing ever is. Today I have set out how every penny from the public purse will be matched by reform, to make our NHS fit for the future. We remember we were elected on a manifesto to end sticking-plaster politics and do the hard yards of fixing our country, and we will never betray that promise to the British people. The public have a right to know how public money will be spent, and this is something we take extremely seriously. They can put their trust in this Government, because we have fixed the NHS before, and with the help of this Chancellor, we will fix it again. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.43 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): Yesterday, yet again, we saw the Chancellor do what the Labour party always does: default to high spending, more borrowing and higher taxes, leaving the public finances vulnerable. The Minister has spoken of additional funding for the NHS. To use the same comparison as the NHS England chief executive, the NHS budget will now be roughly the equivalent of the entire GDP of Portugal, yet we are still none the wiser as to how the Government actually intend to use most of the money—there is no real detail and no real plan. Just last September, the Prime Minister pledged that there would be no more money without reform. Despite the Minister's words, that is exactly what the Government have done. There is still no plan for reform, and the Secretary of State is unwilling to set out the bold reforms that are needed.

Despite 14 years in opposition and nearly one year in government, the Labour party has failed to come up with a plan for the NHS, with the exception of the abolition of NHS England, which will not happen for years and appears to be delayed and in chaos. Ministers respond to every written parliamentary question about it by saying they cannot set out the savings, how the people will change or how the structure will change at this stage—yet again, there is still no plan. We have been

very clear that where the Government are wrong, we will oppose it, but where they get something right, we will work constructively with them. That includes reform, but there is still no reform for us even to consider supporting.

Can the Minister tell us where the £29 billion she set out will be spent? The chief executive of the NHS Confederation said yesterday that increases in NHS staff pay will

“account for a large proportion”

of the funding increase. The former NHS chief financial officer echoed that view at the Health and Social Care Committee in January, saying that pretty much all the last tranche of additional spending was absorbed by pay rises, national insurance and inflation. Can the Minister confirm how much the pay offers from the independent pay review bodies, alongside increased national insurance, will cost, how much of this funding will have to go to cover that and how much will actually make it to the frontline to improve patient services?

The Minister touched on the aim of meeting the NHS 18-week target for hospital waiting times within this Parliament. Of course, we wish the Government well in achieving that and hope they succeed, but just yesterday *The Times* reported that internal departmental modelling showed they are not on track and could only come close to meeting the target with “implausible” and “over-optimistic” assumptions. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies agreed. Can the Minister set out how the Government will meet that target? Again, where is the plan? We need a plan, not empty rhetoric.

It is clear that the NHS needs reforms, not just more funding, so when will the 10-year plan finally be published? Will it be before the one-year anniversary of the Labour party being in government? Will it be like their elective reform plan: simply a reheat of the plan that Sajid Javid brought forward in 2022, with nothing new? The Secretary of State needs to be more ambitious—words that I suspect will never be echoed by the Prime Minister or his team in No. 10.

The capital budget remains broadly flat in real terms from this year onwards. The Minister has said she wishes to continue with the new hospitals programme and invest in technology to boost productivity, but it is unclear how that can be achieved with this settlement. These are not my warnings but those of respected independent think-tanks, including the Nuffield Trust and the King's Fund. The Chancellor's plan is clear—indeed, not one Treasury Minister has ruled it out: more tax rises are coming.

Finally, and importantly, we have seen social care largely neglected again by this Government. There were just two sentences about it in a four-page statement. Social care deserves better. The Minister knows very well that we cannot improve the NHS without social care working well. Earlier today I met with social care providers. They want to see reform, yet the Government have apparently abandoned cross-party talks on social care reform for an independent commission led by the very able Baroness Casey, who is still doing her Home Office work on grooming gangs and is yet to be full time on this commission, which has a deeply unambitious finishing time of 2028. When will Baroness Casey be full time on the commission? These providers were clear that they want a seat at the table when better care funds

are distributed by the NHS—they want to have their voices heard in decision making on that funding. Will the Minister agree to that?

Finally, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said he has modelled his assumptions on continued trends in local government finance and local government precepts—in other words, a 5% uplift in the precept. However, a large number of counties are now controlled by Reform—whose Members are, as ever, notably absent from the Chamber when we talk about health and social care—who have pledged no tax rises whatsoever in their councils. If they do that, what is the Minister's plan to make sure social care is funded? As ever, the Government have gone for the headline announcement, but sadly without a plan, without delivery and with no real reform to benefit patients.

Karin Smyth: I am entirely unclear, after that run-through of a number of different issues, whether the Conservatives welcome the extra investment in the NHS or oppose it. We know they oppose the means of funding it, but after that, I have no idea. At some point, they have to make up their mind whether they support that extra investment or not. As I said in my statement, if they do not, what out of the list of the improvements that we have already made would they not do?

As Lord Darzi made clear, under the Conservatives' watch for 14 years the NHS was broken. Staff were left with out-of-date equipment and unable to do the job they needed to do. We agreed with Lord Darzi's diagnosis, but Conservative Members have still not said whether they agree with it, or apologised for the state they left the system in. I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) has not been able to read the elective reform plan or the urgent emergency care plan that we published recently. It is up to him to read those plans properly and try to understand what is happening.

The right hon. Gentleman has started to do my job for me again, because he cites various think-tanks and people who have said that this cannot be done. Well, I can tell him that we were told, for example, that waiting lists would not drop in April because of seasonality, but we have shown—by keeping a relentless focus on the system, working closely with leaders on the frontline and being clear with officials in the Department—that it can be done. That is what we heard this morning.

We are taking a relentless approach to spending, line by line, throughout the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care. We have rolled up our sleeves and we will not accept putting more and more taxpayers' money into a leaky system, which is what happened under the right hon. Gentleman's Government. If he had read the patient satisfaction survey, he would know that taxpayers across the country, in all our constituencies, love the NHS. They understand that the Tory party broke it and that it will take long time to fix. They also know that they are paying more taxes for it and getting a worse service, and they expect us to do much better. That is what we have already shown we are doing, and what we will continue to do.

I have outlined the capital that is going into the new hospital programme, which we are committed to, and we have already seen increases in diagnostic capability and surgical hubs throughout our constituencies. We will continue to do more of that. I agree with the right

[Karin Smyth]

hon. Gentleman that it is critical to ensure that social care is supported alongside the NHS. That is why £4 billion is going into social care through our colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and as he knows, Louise Casey will publish her interim report next year.

We are clear that fiscal responsibility does not stop at the Treasury or down in Victoria Street with the Department of Health and Social Care. It is important that everybody in the NHS is aware that we are determined to fix the NHS and put it back on a sustained footing. There is record investment; that is our commitment to people, and I know from the people I worked with in the health service over many years that they are determined to make it better. Morale sank to an all-time low under the Conservative party, but we are raising that morale, and we will continue to work with the system to make sure that it is fit for the future.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement about the record funding going into our NHS. We are already seeing the benefit in my constituency, with millions of pounds going into investment in our hospital; that is so desperately needed to get waiting lists down. People were left behind by the Conservative party, and I note that there is still no apology to any of my residents who were left in pain and agony for years and years under their watch—not one word of an apology.

One of the big challenges facing my constituents is accessing an NHS dentist—my hon. Friend knows about that from the time she came to visit me during my campaign. I am campaigning to get new dentists for my constituents in Gloucester, so will she help me to get a meeting with the relevant Minister to ensure that some of this record funding comes to Gloucester to get an NHS dentist for all my constituents?

Karin Smyth: As my hon. Friend said, this is a health area that I know well, and he has been the most amazing campaigner for Gloucester and the health service there since he became the Member of Parliament. He is absolutely right: dentistry is a key worry. It is one of the key areas that the Conservative party neglected for 14 years. That is why it was a manifesto commitment, and why I was able to outline today that meeting the target of 700,000 is front and centre, and part of the plan as we go forward. I know that the Minister for Care, who is responsible for dentistry, is keen to meet many hon. Members, and I will make sure he has heard that request.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): To reiterate: after years of Conservative mismanagement, the NHS is in crisis, with patients left waiting hours for ambulances, women giving birth in unsafe maternity units, and children turning up at A&E with rotting teeth because an NHS dentist cannot be found. That is the Conservative legacy, and they must never be trusted with our health service ever again. So yes, we welcome this funding boost—we really do—and we agree that funding must come with reform, because unless this funding is targeted properly, it will not bring the change that patients urgently need.

When it comes to reform we need to talk about fixing social care, because putting more money into the NHS today will be like pouring money into a leaky bucket. Last year, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care stated that £1.7 billion a year is wasted because patients who are medically fit for discharge cannot leave hospital, simply because no care is available to support them at home. The hospital in Winchester that supports both your constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker, and mine has up to 160 people waiting to be discharged at any given time, and they would be better cared for with social care packages.

We need urgent action and a higher minimum wage for care workers. We need proper respite and financial support for family carers, and a clear commitment to conclude the social care review, hold cross-party talks, and deliver the real reform that the Minister has been talking about. We also need to tackle the crisis in primary care, because that is where prevention happens and where pressure on hospitals is eased. Will the Minister confirm that the funding boost will deliver the extra 8,000 GPs that are needed to guarantee everyone an appointment within seven days, or within 24 hours for urgent cases? Can she also confirm that the funding will bring dentists back into the NHS, and bring an end to dental deserts? That will not happen without urgent reform of the NHS dental contract, which is outdated, unworkable and driving dentists out of the system.

Finally, we cannot ignore the shocking state of NHS buildings, including our hospital in Winchester. It is an outrage that overcrowded hospitals must close operating theatres due to unsafe ceilings and other health and safety issues. I urge the Minister to spend the money where it matters: on primary care, on social care, and on ensuring that our existing NHS buildings are fit for purpose.

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming, on behalf of his party, the commitment that the Chancellor has made and the extra funding that she has identified, but I think his party still opposes the way in which we have raised the funding to do just that. It is good to have your cake and eat it, but we are clear that the funding does come with reform. As I said in my statement, we are committed to improving the front door—primary care—as well as social care and discharge. That is why the NHS contribution, as part of the settlement to the better care fund, increases. He will be aware that we previously revised the better care fund to make it better and more targeted on discharge, which is important.

The urgent and emergency care plan that we published a couple of weeks ago also confirms our recognition that flow through the hospital system is important for patients and staff; we must ensure that we do not face that continued crisis of corridor care over many years. We are committed to the fair pay agreement, and our colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will make more statements in the coming weeks about how that will work.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for dentistry and oral health. Access to NHS dentistry is in crisis, including in my constituency. New analysis by the British Dental Association shows that the share of NHS funding spent

on dentistry has more than halved since 2010, from over 3% to just 1.5%. I know how committed the Government are to reforming the dental contract, but the Public Accounts Committee made it clear that reform will work only if it is backed by proper, sustainable funding. Will the Minister ensure that NHS dentistry gets a fair share of the £29 billion announced in the spending review, so that we can end forever the crisis that is affecting millions across the country?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the work she does to support NHS dentistry as part of the all-party group. As I have said, this issue is of huge importance to our constituents, and the shocking state in which the Conservatives left dentistry is there for all to see—particularly the shocking state of children's oral health. That is why we acted rapidly to introduce the toothbrushing campaign—which, if I remember rightly, was ridiculed by Conservative Members when we discussed it in opposition—and the arrangement with Colgate to ensure that we improve children's oral health. We are absolutely committed to reform of the contract; the Minister for Care is working hard on that and he will continue to update the House regularly. It is our confirmed commitment, as I have reiterated today, to increase access to dental services.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Our spending on the NHS is now as much as the entire GDP of Portugal. We used to be a country with an NHS attached to it, but we are almost becoming an NHS with a country attached to it. Of course we would welcome this spending if we got the same outcomes that people get in civilised countries, like the Netherlands or Australia, but every time I mention fundamental reform, I am dismissed as wanting to bring in privatisation, so it is hardly worth raising that issue. Australia has an extremely successful pharmaceutical benefits scheme; I know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care went out there, and I have talked to Australian doctors about it. Will the Minister at least look at the successful outcomes, including some of the highest life expectancies in the world, that are being delivered in countries like Australia and the Netherlands, to see how we can deliver better outcomes? There is no point spending more money if people's only right is to join the back of a queue.

Karin Smyth: I was expecting the right hon. Gentleman to talk about the funding model, and I am disappointed that he did not; it is something that he has talked about for many years. I do not know the details of the Australian model, but will ensure that he gets a proper answer. I am always happy, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to look at models from across the world. We want to learn from the best, and we want to deliver the best in the NHS.

The Conservatives seem to have an obsession with input into the health service. It is true that the last Government put more money in, but it went into a leaky bucket and they got nothing out. This Government have taken a different approach. We are not just taking money from the Treasury, handing it out and then coming back for more. We are being very clear with

providers and the system more generally. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is talking at the NHS Confederation conference this afternoon; we are working with them to ensure that we look not just at the inputs, but at what goes on in the system. We want to ensure value for taxpayers' money in all our constituencies. There are outstanding examples of both financial and operational good practice across the country. We want to take the best to the rest, and make the best of every taxpayer pound.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has demonstrated the difference that a Labour Government make to our NHS, and to the people of our country. As she mentioned, reform is needed. May I draw her attention to the report by the independent Commission on Palliative and End of Life Care? Around 100,000 people cannot access hospice care, and too few people are able to access specialist palliative care. The report demonstrates a new system of end of life and palliative care that will transform people's end of life experience. To go alongside the reform agenda, will she ensure that we invest in that precious time in people's lives, and deliver a comprehensive palliative care service?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is right to highlight end of life care. We know it has been neglected. I worked on it during my time in the health service, over 15 years ago, and I feel very passionately about it. It is important that we support people. We must have a system that allows people to have those conversations, and that ensures there are options for people throughout the pathway of their life. The Minister for Care is working hard to ensure that happens as part of our overall development of the health service over the next 10 years.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the funding envelope that she set out in a letter to the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn in April stands unchanged after this spending review?

Karin Smyth: Yes.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I warmly welcome the news that waiting lists are continuing to fall, not by chance, but because of the choices made by this Government. As the Minister will know, both the hospitals that serve my constituency have reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, and both have received funding, but as I visit GP surgeries and dentists, it is clear that there is a link between crumbling buildings and the availability of appointments. Will the Minister reassure me that primary care in particular will continue to be supported by upgrades to buildings?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for the great work that he is doing to support progress on work at the RAAC hospitals in his constituency. He makes the excellent point that such issues exist not only in hospitals. As our settlement makes clear, we understand the strain in primary care, as well as in mental health services and community services, which often do not get discussed. When we publish the 10-year plan later in the summer, he will see that the move towards community and neighbourhood health services will be front and centre of what we want to achieve over the next 10 years.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), I welcome the increased investment, and the attention that the new Government are giving to the NHS. I would like to turn our attention to dentistry. My constituency of South Devon is a dental desert. I welcome the announcement of 700,000 extra dental appointments, but we have lost three dental surgeries since the election last year, and more are on the brink. The Government have been in office for a year now, and have talked about reforming the dental contract with the NHS. If that contract is not reformed, we will lose so many dentists that we will never be able to catch up. How long will it take the Government to announce a newly reformed contract with NHS dentistry, so that we can start increasing the number of appointments, and saving the dentist surgeries that we have left?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the shocking state that dentistry was left in by the last Government. They could have reformed that contract at any time over the past 14 years. We were ready to do that in 2010, but things worked out differently; we left office, and the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives between them did not reform the contract. The Minister for Care is working at pace to ensure that happens, and we will update the House as soon as possible.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I very much welcome yesterday's statement, the funding, and the fact that the funding will go on for several years. Does the Minister agree that we depend on the people in our NHS? Will she join me in congratulating Dr Cameron and all the teams at the West Suffolk hospital, who, by adopting a whole-hospital approach, have abolished corridor care and improved the hospital's throughput, using a model that could be widely adopted?

Karin Smyth: I am very happy to thank Dr Cameron and the whole team. As ever, with his vast experience of the health service, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are reliant on clinical and managerial staff to make the system better. I know, and he knows, how low morale has been; Lord Darzi made that point very clear, and we cannot over-estimate how difficult that is for staff. That is why we have reached two record inflation-beating pay settlements for staff, and importantly, we have supported the independent process, because we want to work with staff to make things better at all levels. My hon. Friend gives an excellent example of how, by working with excellent clinical leadership and excellent managers, we can bring the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Minister will know that I too want to abolish corridor care at the Queen's hospital in Romford. I thank her deeply for meeting me on Monday, with the chief executive of the NHS trust for Barking, Havering and Redbridge, Matthew Trainer, who is appealing for a new A&E facility at the Queen's hospital. The situation has led to patients being cared for on trolleys in corridors. I find that unacceptable, and it is costing my local trust, which services 800,000 people in the area, an extra £100,000 a month because of additional staffing needs. Will the Minister ensure

that what was said at our meeting is carried forward, and that we get a better facility for boroughs in the east London and Essex area, which the Queen's hospital serves?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this is unacceptable. I was pleased to meet him and his local NHS leaders this week. They made, as hon. Members always do, an excellent case. Clearly, the situation was left badly under his Government. I hope that he will welcome the extra measures in this settlement. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House told him earlier that she looks forward to him joining us in the Division Lobby to support the extra funding. I hope that hon. Members know that, whatever party they come from, when I meet them, particularly in surgeries, I will follow up on the questions that are asked. They are often matters for the local integrated care board, but we will continue to work with all local systems to deliver the best care possible for all our constituents.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): As an NHS physiotherapist, I welcome the statement. The Government will soon launch their 10-year plan for our NHS, in which a focus will be a move from sickness to prevention. Will the Minister set out how the spending review will support Dudley integrated care board and other ICBs in bringing healthcare on to our high streets, so that patient care is at the heart of our communities?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent role she plays as a clinician. Her expertise is really welcome; we want to hear from a wide variety of experts in this House—that is very valuable. She understands from her professional background, as well as from her constituency, how important it is to look at the entire pathway of care for patients, and to ensure that they have the best possible care as close to home as possible. We think that is better not just for patients, but for clinical outcomes, and it is more efficient and better use of taxpayers' money. The move from hospitals to communities is front and centre of our 10-year plan, as is delivering neighbourhood health services.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister will be well aware of Sir Andrew Dilnot's ambitious plan to put a cap of £86,000 on the cost of the social care that any family would ever have to pay. It was never going to be easy to implement that. Previous Governments postponed the plan, and the Chancellor effectively scrapped it completely. May I appeal to the Minister to work across party lines, and to focus on the crippling debt that hits hard-working families when they come to the end of their working lives and need the support of the state?

Karin Smyth: I agree that this issue absolutely needs to be resolved. There was agreement previously, under the coalition, and it is so disappointing that it was so unceremoniously dumped when I came to this place in 2015; that was one of the first things that the subsequent Tory Government did. It was a great disappointment to many people across the country, particularly those who were responsible for supporting an older person or a disabled person. We have ensured that we will address this issue, and have appointed Louise Casey to lead the

interim report. I know that she will continue to work with everybody, and that all hon. Members will take an active interest in that work.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I welcome the additional £29 billion of day-to-day funding and additional capital announced yesterday. Our investments are already paying interest, in the reduction of waiting lists. May I remind hon. Members of the announcements made earlier this year? I was particularly pleased that the Shotley Bridge hospital replacement in Consett was announced in wave 1, and I thank the Minister for her personal interest in ensuring that wave 1 happens. The 10-year plan will soon be announced. How will the comprehensive spending review announcements help us to shift from a sickness model to a prevention model?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the Government's investment in the health service. She has been such a strong campaigner for Shotley Bridge, and it has been a pleasure to work with her; I know she has continued to advocate strongly on behalf of her local population. The hospital is needed, but as she knows, in her community—and all our communities—patients should not always be expected to travel to hospital for care that can be delivered closer to home. We see massive improvements in virtual care and technology, which is why we have announced a £10 billion increase for technology over the spending review period. We are improving the NHS app and ensuring that people are enabled to do more digitally, but I recognise that does not suit everybody, so we will ensure that parallel processes are available for everybody. Our constituents deserve and need care closer to home, and want more of it.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): More money for the NHS is of course welcome, although if we in the Green party had our way, it would be raised by taxing extreme wealth fairly, rather than by taxing work. The small amounts of money for social care announced in the spending review are nowhere close to the funding needed to tackle the social care crisis, and the burden is put on local authorities. In the Minister's Department, there is a reduction in the revenue budget for social care and public health. When will her Government stop going slow on social care? When will they hold the long-promised and much-delayed cross-party talks? When will they recognise, as Lord Darzi has said, that we cannot fix the NHS without fixing social care? A truly joined-up approach to health and social care is long overdue.

Karin Smyth: The economics of the Green party are even more fantastical than the economics of the Conservatives and Reform; we all dread to think what things might be like under that party. We see that in the local council in my city of Bristol, and it is an absolute disaster. If the council could just get on with building council houses and social homes, it would help more people to live a better life, and would aid prevention. We are getting on with tackling social care. That was announced in the spending review, and that is what the Casey review will do.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I warmly welcome the largest-ever capital investment in our NHS in the spending review yesterday, building on the Chancellor's

announcement in last year's Budget of the money to rebuild RAAC-infested hospitals such as Frimley Park hospital, which will benefit my constituents. That was committed to by the previous Conservative Government, but, shockingly, it was never paid for. With the Government standing four-square behind rebuilding Frimley Park hospital, does the Minister agree it is time for Frimley Health NHS trust to get on and announce the site for the new hospital?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the Chancellor's statement and our commitment to the NHS. I know he has been working so hard on this issue on behalf of RAAC hospitals and Frimley Park hospital since he became a Member of Parliament last year, and we are four-square behind that work getting on. It is at the beginning of a very long queue in the new hospital programme. It is one of the things we inherited—we wish it was a better inheritance, but we are working with what we have. We have put the new hospital programme on a firm financial footing, and Frimley Park is at the beginning of that queue. We are very keen that people get on with it very quickly, because there are very many other people waiting behind them.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) is absolutely right about social care. We have a system in which healthcare is dependent on social care—Lord Darzi says so, and I think even Ministers have said so—yet all funding is going into the NHS, not into social care. We are fundamentally pouring the money into a bucket with a hole in the bottom. The Minister pretends the exact opposite of the truth. Will she share a more honest assessment with the House? What went on? Labour had 14 years to think about it, and here we are with the funding going into the NHS. As the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), said, the Minister is following on from the last Conservative Government and pouring more and more money into an unreformed NHS with a social care system underneath it that is broken, and she is not doing anything about it.

Karin Smyth: I have already given a history lesson about some of those 14 years. When the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were in the coalition together, we had a commitment, a promise and a cross-party agreement; the Conservatives then got into government by themselves and broke it, so we are where we are. We want to invest in social care, which is why we have announced the £4 billion. We are seeing a very interesting alliance going on between our Green and Conservative colleagues; they agree on something, as we saw in the Lobby last week.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and the excellent work that this Government are doing in bringing additional investment in the NHS and bringing waiting lists down. We have had to make really difficult decisions to clear up the mess left by the previous Government, and I am sure we all agree that we need to protect our charitable adult social care providers. Will the Minister facilitate a meeting with myself and Woodlands Quaker Home in my constituency, which provides non-profit residential social care for older people so that they are able to carry on in the best way possible?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about bringing down waiting lists for his constituents, and we are so pleased to see that that is continuing, as we were able to announce this morning. He also makes an excellent point about social care providers, which do an amazing job for many of us who have close family members supported by them, and it is important that they are supported and work. I am not sure whether an answer to his question about a meeting needs to be from my Department or from my colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I will ensure that he has an answer.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I welcome the funding announced to repair hospitals with RAAC, which will hopefully include Harrogate district hospital in my constituency. It has already received some money to remove RAAC in one building, which has since been demolished, but it still has a £15 million business case waiting with the Department of Health and Social Care for the next round of RAAC repairs. Will the Minister set out a timetable for repairs to hospitals such as Harrogate's and for when we should expect to know if we will receive some of that funding?

Karin Smyth: We are committed to ensuring that those RAAC hospitals are sorted and fit for purpose, and I was able to visit Airedale myself recently. We are asking people on the ground to do a really difficult job, keeping hospitals going and serving patients while remedying the problem of RAAC. I do not have in front of me the exact timescale for the hon. Gentleman's hospital, but I encourage it to work very closely with the team at the Department of Health, which I think is working really well. As long as a clear timetable has been put forward, I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a response to his question.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. The NHS is the No. 1 issue for my constituents, and I know that they will welcome the investment in the spending review. My constituency is a rural area, and one thing people often raise with me is ambulance waiting times, which I am pleased to report have improved in every category over the past year. Can the Minister explain how the spending review will ensure continued improvements in ambulance waiting times, supporting my constituents to get emergency care when they need it?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of ambulances. We ensured that they were a key part of our urgent and emergency care plan, which was issued the week before last, I think—I cannot remember the exact date. We recognise how crucial that issue is, and how much more can be done by ambulances by the roadside. I was privileged to go out with the South Western ambulance service recently; it is so impressive to spend time on the frontline with people who are dealing with whatever comes at them. We know that they can do more, including remotely. We are very keen to ensure that ambulances do not spend time outside hospitals; that is why we have introduced a 45-minute turnaround time through the release to rescue scheme, which has worked very successfully in many parts of the country. We are keen to see that scheme rolled out

across the country, so that we do not have ambulances queuing outside of hospitals with people, but put them back on the road where they need to be.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): We have been here before with Governments of all different political persuasions. Ministers come to the Dispatch Box and trumpet what seem like very attractive amounts of money for the NHS, but the reality on the ground is that that money just about covers pay rises and inflationary pressures. On care, Buckinghamshire council and no doubt all councils are worried that the money being offered up may only just cover things such as the fair pay agreement. Can the Minister confirm from the Dispatch Box that with increasing amounts of councils' budgets rightly being spent on care, they will get funded for things such as the fair pay agreement separately from core social care spend?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman says that we have been here before, and we really have. I was on a primary care trust board under the last Labour Government, so I saw at first hand what good government, working with local systems, can deliver: the best patient satisfaction in the NHS's history, the lowest waiting lists, and the best access to GP and primary care. We have been here before, and that is what we will do again. From the hon. Gentleman's questions, I do not understand whether he wants more spending or less. That is what the Conservative party is still not saying; its Members stand up and ask for more, like Liberal Democrat Members, but they will not identify the means of raising that money—in fact, they oppose them.

To respond to the specific question that the hon. Gentleman asked, over the coming weeks, my colleagues from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will obviously be outlining in more detail how the spending review will fall out.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this brilliant investment in our NHS, which will also be welcomed by my constituents. I know that this Labour Government will ensure that everyone in every part of the country benefits, including women. Last year, I highlighted that women in Norfolk face the longest waits in the country for gynaecological care, with hundreds waiting more than a year for treatment for conditions such as endometriosis. Can the Minister assure me that as we advance these plans for the NHS, we will ensure that we tackle those waiting lists? Far too many women are paying the price for years of inaction under the Conservatives.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend has been such a strong and powerful campaigner for women's health since becoming an MP last year, and she is absolutely right to do that. I am pleased that we have been able to make some progress on conditions such as endometriosis. Many campaigns have been fought by many women in this House—including you, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I may say so—to highlight the importance of this issue. We see women's health as front and centre. We want to learn from the women's health hubs in their different guises and ensure that they are an integral part of neighbourhood health services.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I was really saddened that there was no mention of cancer in the Minister's statement, so I will give her the opportunity to correct

that omission. Will this new money for our NHS ensure that all cancer waiting time targets are met by the end of this Parliament, and can the Minister confirm that those targets will be included in the 10-year health plan? Finally, have Ministers had a chance to read my 11-page letter and accompanying submission on what should be in the national cancer plan?

Karin Smyth: I have a slight “get out of jail free” card, because I think that letter might be with one of my colleagues, not with me. Obviously, though, I look forward to the summary.

The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about cancer. I would have to check, but I do not think I mentioned lots of disease-specific areas, including key manifesto commitments such as dentistry. Obviously, cancer is a huge part of waiting lists overall. We will get those waiting lists down—we are determined to meet that target—and we will issue a cancer plan later in the year.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for supporting the launch of Sarcoma UK’s report yesterday. The recommendations in that report are really important for tackling that awful rare cancer.

I welcome the ambition in what has been presented, but the comparison with what my Edinburgh South West constituents face in Scotland could not be more stark. I have just come from a meeting in which, yet again, I have been trying to defend the mental health provision at Scottish Action for Mental Health’s Redhall walled garden; in contrast, I hear from the Dispatch Box real ambition to support people with mental health problems. People in Scotland are also jealous of the falling waiting lists they see in England, and hope that one day, they will arrive in Scotland. May I ask the Minister to keep on being ambitious, in the hope—because hope is all I have—that some of it will rub off on the Scottish Government?

As Madam Deputy Speaker is feeling a little generous, may I also say that Saturday will mark the 200th Oriam parkrun in my constituency? If we are serious about preventative healthcare activities, parkrun is a great example of how we can improve both our mental health and our physical health. The Minister is welcome to attend, of course.

Karin Smyth: I always shudder a little when I am invited to do any running, jogging, boxing or whatever else people get up to—we all have our own things we like doing. Although my hon. Friend’s fabulous city is a great place to be, I will not be able to join in this weekend, but I wish good luck to everybody taking part.

We all live in hope that the SNP might learn some lessons from what we are doing to fix our NHS. We remain willing to work with the SNP, and with anybody who wants to serve patients and get a better service for their taxes. If the SNP wants to get in touch, it can do so, but the best thing to do is to elect a Labour Government in Scotland, which will hopefully happen soon.

My hon. Friend makes an important point about mental health. We are committed, as we said in our manifesto, to 8,500 more people working in mental health, and to ensure that our schools and young people have the support they deserve.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I thank the Minister for agreeing to visit North Devon district hospital very shortly, and I look forward to welcoming her to my constituency. Despite some welcome extra repairs under the estates safety fund, that hospital now faces many years of make do and mend. What provision have the Government put aside for those years of increasing maintenance costs?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. His invitation has been a long-running one, and sometimes his diary has been busier than mine, but I think we finally have a date to go to North Devon, which I am looking forward to. It is a challenged system—we had a good debate yesterday in Westminster Hall about many of the problems in Devon, and I know he will review that debate carefully. Devon is one of the systems that we are looking closely at. It has had deficit funding this year, but we want to eradicate deficit funding from the system, so we are looking very closely at how every single system uses all of its money. I know that the hon. Gentleman will continue to support the Government in ensuring that his local taxpayers get the best service for their money.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I welcome the comprehensive spending review and its focus on NHS funding. It will deliver on Labour’s election promise to get the NHS back on its feet, which will be of so much benefit to my constituents. Does the Minister agree that nearly one year on, this Labour Government are really tackling the disastrous Conservative-Liberal Democrat reforms introduced under the Lansley legislation?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend has been such a strong advocate for Watford since he came into this Chamber, and in particular for ensuring that that hospital is in the new hospital programme. I look forward to visiting his constituency soon, because I know we lost some time.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not know if he knows this, but others will have heard me say before that one of the terrible consequences of the Lansley reforms was that they made me so angry as a manager in the system that I decided to become a Member of Parliament, and here we are today. We have learned from the lack of focus on the frontline and on patient care. That is why we are so clear—whether in the reforms we have put forward on elective care and urgent emergency care, or in the planned reforms on dentistry and primary care, in the 10-year plan and on social care—that we have to keep a relentless focus not just on taxpayers’ money, but on patients. The people’s priorities are clear. They want the NHS to do better, but they are clear in their demands that we make it work better for them and make sure that every single pound of taxpayers’ money is working to the best effect.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I welcome the Minister’s statement and this Government’s commitment to investing in the NHS, but she did not address how that funding will be allocated across the country. My constituency of Blackburn has one of the worst GP to patient ratios, with more than 3,200 patients per GP. That is placing immense strain on primary care and pushing patients to an already overstretched hospital that is frequently on red alert. Will the Minister ensure

[Mr Adnan Hussain]

that areas with such disparities, like Blackburn, receive targeted support? Will she meet me to address these long-standing imbalances in healthcare provision?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point on primary care, which sees 90% of contacts with the NHS and is where most people experience the NHS. That is why it is very much in our sights to support that work. As part of our 10-year plan, we will bring forward the neighbourhood health service to make sure that people can be seen more locally. That will be built around using primary and community care to best effect. He makes a point about funding formulas. We had a long debate about that yesterday in Westminster Hall, and it is an area of huge controversy. He will see over the coming weeks how the funding is allocated. NHS England did issue—if he has not seen it, I will make sure that he has access to it—guidance on the funding formula and where the different systems are in relation to that. We want to move everybody towards that target, and I am happy to discuss that with him once he has had a look.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): This Government have made phenomenal progress on the elective care waiting lists left by the last Government, but the progress on mental health waiting lists has been stubbornly slow, with 1.2 million people still waiting for treatment. That includes 62,000 people covered by the West Yorkshire ICB that serves my Calder Valley constituency, which I think is the second-highest figure in the country. Can my hon. Friend please assure me that we will use this settlement to redouble the work we have done on elective waiting lists, while also putting a real focus on mental health waiting lists?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on mental health, which is of great concern to all Members. He is right that elective care and mental health are measured in different ways, but we are committed to supporting mental health services with 8,500 extra staff. We are making sure in particular that young people in schools are supported. We know that the situation has been terrible for young people in our country, and we will continue to provide that relentless focus.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Labour Government have committed more money to the NHS, and that has to be welcomed. For that reason, I thank the Minister for her statement today. The Chancellor yesterday announced some £50 million—this does tie in to health—for Casement Park. However, the Government were clear that that was dependent on funding from the Northern Ireland Executive. Does the Minister expect the Northern Ireland Executive to take extra moneys granted to the Northern Ireland Assembly through Barnett consequentials and divert them to a sports stadium? Are the moneys for the NHS ringfenced and protected? If not, how do I look parents in the eye in my constituency of Strangford, when their child cannot receive cutting-edge medical technology because money has to be found for a sports stadium?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman is an experienced parliamentarian, and he understands how the funding settlement for the Department of Health and Social Care is allocated through the Barnett formula to Northern Ireland.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): This investment is so welcome, because my constituents in Cannock Chase have been struggling to access urgent care between their GP and accident and emergency since our hospital's minor injuries unit was temporarily closed in March 2020. Despite the welcome investment in Rawsley surgery, Chads Moor medical practice and Red Lion surgery in my constituency, our ICB plans to kibosh any hope of our MIU reopening. Does the Minister agree that this Government's huge investment in our NHS needs to be felt in the parts of the country, such as my towns and villages, that were so badly let down by the Conservatives? Will she meet me to discuss the worrying urgent care reform proposals for Staffordshire?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the extra support for GP and primary care. I am sure he understands from our urgent and emergency care plan that we have a number of arrangements for making sure that people are seen urgently in local community settings. It is for local ICBs to decide on the best way, within that urgent emergency care plan, for people to be seen locally and treated within the available resources. I am happy to meet him, perhaps at an upcoming surgery, to discuss that further.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): My constituents in Blackpool South will never forgive or forget that the previous Government left us with the worst health outcomes in the country. We have an ICB having to make £350 million of cuts. The hospital that my son and I were born in has been left inadequate and one of the worst in the country. We have dental deserts. People cannot get access to mental health counsellors or GPs. I welcome the millions of pounds allocated to Victoria hospital and to health outcomes in my constituency by this Government, and we are seeing waiting lists finally coming down. Does the Minister agree that we need to continue on this path and give deprived areas, such as Blackpool, more support to get our waiting lists down to an acceptable level?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that his constituents and constituents across this country will not forgive the Conservatives for the state in which they left the NHS. That is clear from Lord Darzi's diagnosis. We have still had no comment from the Conservatives on whether they acknowledge that. We are determined to be about the future, and that is what this settlement and the Chancellor's announcement yesterday are about. It is about putting that extra funding that we raised last year into services and into a reformed system that reaches all parts of this country. We will tackle health inequalities, making sure that people who have not had that access and people who suffer worse health than others are raised up. We must take the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): After more than an hour of diligent bobbing, I call Chris Vince.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Apologies for my premature bobbing earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Minister for her statement today and for her ongoing commitment to the NHS. I welcome the growth in day-to-day spending on the NHS and this Government's commitment to bringing down NHS waiting

times. However, may I gently advocate for Harlow in respect of the future of the UK Health Security Agency? It has a business case, details, designs and a site ready to go, and the estimated timeframe has consistently been assessed as the best value for money and the quickest to deliver.

Karin Smyth: I like how my hon. Friend says “gently”, because honestly no day goes past without him talking about this issue or, indeed, his new hospital. He is right, and he is a fantastic campaigner for the people of Harlow. He has made his point again, and I cannot make any further comment today, but he will be hearing from the Secretary of State soon on that issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for her answers this afternoon. I ask anyone who is leaving before the Select Committee statement to do so quickly and quietly.

Industrial Strategy

BUSINESS AND TRADE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Business and Trade Committee. Liam Byrne will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement; these should be brief questions, not speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Ministers, and that Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

1.39 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I rise to commend to the House the seventh report of our Select Committee and the combined brilliance of Committee members in setting out a plan, a blueprint and a framework for scrutiny of the industrial strategy, which is still to come.

Our report starts with a note of optimism, because the truth is that we stand on the cusp of a once-in-a-century transformation of our economy, from which Britain stands to gain enormously. In the next decade alone, the world economy may grow by something like £25 trillion, and those prizes could be seized by Britain. In the race on which we have embarked, we happen to hold many of the cards. In a world that is building walls, we in this country are building bridges to new markets. In a world that is about to be transformed by artificial intelligence, we are a science superpower. In a world that is crying out for energy, we are on the cusp of building green energy abundance.

Time and again throughout our long history, these isles of wonder have made history by inventing the future. Even now, we have the future potential in our grasp in a way that we have not had for decades, but this report is a sobering read, because its conclusion is that our performance right now is very different from our potential, and promise is not going to be delivery. Unless we remake the state for a new age and renew the partnership between public ambition and private enterprise, we will squander the riches that could lie within our grasp.

Our Committee has found that we are trapped by obstacles of our own making. We have sky-high energy costs that are driving away industry. We have a broken system of procurement that squanders £350 billion every single year—£1 in every £6 of our GDP. We have a chronic skills gap that locks out millions from the potential jobs that they could get stuck into, and which denies firms the skills that they need to grow. We have blocks on innovation diffusion that hoard breakthroughs with superstar firms. We have a finance system that all too often starves scale-ups of capital, and we have a Whitehall machine that is over-centralised, risk averse and too complex to drive change at the speed that the modern economy demands.

Those are not conditions of growth; they are conditions of decline, and this country needs to rally to fix them fast. We therefore argue in the report that the industrial

[Liam Byrne]

strategy has to break through the confines on growth. We need an ambition that is as great as the challenge before us, and we argue that that means mobilising public and private action around the grand challenges—the moonshots that are going to define the next century. We argue that we should maximise domestic demand through a dramatic overhaul of our public procurement system. We need to maximise foreign demand for the things that we make here through the trade deals that we strike with our allies around the world. We need to rewire the institutions of our economy in skills, energy, finance and innovation, and we then need to transform Whitehall itself by devolving power where we can, cutting red tape and putting regions back in control of their own destiny.

In this report, we set out practical steps for how we can achieve every single one of those ambitions, and we then set 10 tests by which the forthcoming industrial strategy could be best judged. There must be vision, so that we can steer effectively. There must be metrics, so that we can judge progress effectively. There should be grand challenges set out by the Government to help galvanise a rally around national purpose and the possibilities of the future. There has got to be procurement reform, so that the £350 billion that the state spends each year drives domestic demand in new ways. There has to be trade alignment to connect our strengths with the global marketplace into which we sell. There has to be far better access to scale-up finance, to stop businesses being lifted and shifted—largely to the United States. There has to be cheaper energy, because we heard overwhelmingly that our energy prices are simply uncompetitive. There must be devolved skills funding where mayoral areas can prove that they are fit for purpose, to help manage and organise technical education. There needs to be much wider diffusion of research in order to spread prosperity. Above all, there has to be leadership from the very top, driven by the Prime Minister himself, and there have to be new ways in which we cut through the incoherence of regulation that bedevils business today.

We propose a bold devolution of power, money and responsibility, particularly to mayoral areas where they can prove that they are up to the task. We propose new legislation to put the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council on a statutory footing, with the Prime Minister chairing meetings at least once a quarter. We propose that the Regulatory Innovation Office be expanded and moved to the Cabinet Office, and that it take on the role of a clearing house to make sure that there is somewhere that business can go in order to highlight ridiculous conflicts between rules and regulations that just hold back growth day after day. We also propose hardwiring the link between the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and the new Council of the Nations and Regions.

Yesterday, we saw some progress on a number of our recommendations—our Committee is nothing if not influential with both the Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade. On capital access, the British Business Bank is now set to receive almost £3 billion in order to crowd in tens of billions of pounds more, and the National Wealth Fund will grow to almost £30 billion, but we have to simplify access to that finance for businesses that need it. On energy, we had confirmation of investments in Sizewell C, offshore wind and small nuclear reactors, but we need lower energy costs in the

here and now. On skills, there will be an extra £1.2 billion by 2028 for 65,000 more learners, but the skills governance reforms that we need were not quite clear enough, and business needs those reforms pronto. On research and development, £22.6 billion a year was promised by 2029, and there are targeted funds for advanced manufacturing, defence innovation, the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, and the new Edinburgh supercomputer.

Those are good beginnings, but without a clear plan to diffuse the best ideas to every corner of our economy, we will not get the uplift in productivity that this country needs. There are without doubt big challenges, but what gave us heart as we took evidence over the course of this year is that business, trade unions and consumer groups are up for the challenge. They genuinely believe that we can become the fastest-growing economy in the G7. In 32 conclusions and recommendations, we set out very clearly the steps that Ministers could and should take in order to unlock the possibilities of the future.

My final message is that we should draw a lesson from our history. Over the course of the last century and since the days of Joseph Chamberlain, there have been geopolitical shocks every 20 to 30 years that have forced us to think anew about the sovereign capabilities that we need, which always leads to conclusions about how we remake the state for new times. We are at exactly such a moment in our history, and yesterday gave us some heart that there is investment going into the things that business needs.

This Government want to invest in growth, good jobs and good wages, but the potential of this country will be squandered unless we now build on the kinds of ambitions that we heard yesterday and implement the steps that our Committee has set out. Above all, I think that our plan is practical, and I have no reservation in commending it to the House.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee for his hard work. It is really heartening that the report has received cross-party support on the Committee and across the House. This is about growth and the economy, which affect every single one of our constituents. Does he agree that the word “practical” is absolutely right in this case? The industrial strategy cannot simply be a Soviet-style tractor production statistics list—it cannot be self-congratulatory. Our report is practical and provides almost a blueprint, and its implementation is absolutely key. The right hon. Gentleman has done an excellent job of setting out the potential that is within our reach. The trick is to make it within our grasp.

Liam Byrne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This report is an awful lot stronger for the raft of amendments that he brought forward, and for the thought and devotion he put into Committee hearings and the interrogation of our witnesses. He is absolutely right because, ultimately, we as a country will not unlock performance that matches our potential unless we think again about the way in which business and the Government work together for new times. That is the only way in which we will both tackle the stubborn challenges of the past, particularly the under-investment that has bedevilled us for so long, and navigate the seminal challenges of the future. There is no ideology in this

report—well, perhaps there is, but the only ideology is a confidence in our country and a confidence that we can be better than we are today—which is a practical blueprint for turning those ambitions into action.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Committee for the opportunity to come in on the topic of this important inquiry, which I was glad to be a part of. One of the best days of the inquiry was the day we welcomed a roundtable of small and medium-sized enterprises in the automotive sector to talk to us about the threat posed to them at the time from the tariffs imposed by the United States and more broadly about the challenges that SMEs face in advanced manufacturing and automotive. Does he agree that, as our report sets out, the industrial strategy must be one for SMEs across all the growth sectors, as well as for the large primes and big organisations?

Liam Byrne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The evidence base we were able to assemble was an awful lot stronger because of her connections with small businesses in her constituency and the insights she was able to bring from the world of labour. The point she makes is absolutely right. Past industrial strategies have sometimes conjured up images of corporate Britain calling the shots, but this country's real potential is actually in abundance in smaller firms. Unless we can make sure that on our islands it is easier to start a business, easier to scale up a business, easier to hire people and easier to give people a pay rise, we are not going to unlock our full potential, and that is what this report sets out to do. We have clearly in our minds the richness and potential of our smaller firms, and we want our economy to be a bigger and better place for them.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his statement and his Committee's report, which is welcome. The summary clearly says:

"Britain's economic institutions and markets—especially in public procurement, energy, skills"

and, critically,

"the diffusion of innovation and finance—must be modernised for new times."

In the spirit of the partnership he spoke of between the public sector and private sector, he will no doubt have been glued to the debate on the Sustainable Aviation Fuel Bill yesterday, when I pointed out that most of the Government's advanced fuels funding is going on foreign-owned technologies. How does he think, and did his Committee consider, the way that the approach to Government grant schemes for innovation needs to change to ensure that we keep talent and innovation here at home?

Liam Byrne: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. We have heard time and again—we heard it in relation to life sciences, defence and clean energy—that we have some of the best thinkers in the world, but they often struggle to get the start-up finance or the scale-up finance they need to turn those ambitions into new businesses. As someone who spent four years building a business before I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got elected to this House, I know that what small businesses need to grow are sales. That is why we need to be doing a much smarter job of

marrying public contracts with access to scale-up finance, but that will take the institutions we have today working very differently in the future.

Perhaps our most shocking evidence session was on the subject of public procurement, when the chief commercial officer of His Majesty's Government was just not clear how many jobs, how much economic growth and what levels of wages were driven by £1 of GDP. That is simply not good enough. I hope that there is cross-party consensus about these reforms because, ultimately, this is a once in 50 years moment. Our recommendations should command cross-party support, because that is how we ensure that they are sustainable for the long term.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) about working across the parties—this is about growth—and about the Chair driving this forward. The 10 tests we have outlined are about how the document has a real-world impact. For me, two of the tests are clear. First, how does an industrial strategy galvanise action across the Government? With previous industrial strategies, good as they may well have been, Departments other than Business did not see it as their responsibility to deliver. We must make sure that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Department for Transport and so on have ownership too and responsibility for delivering the strategy. I am keen to get my right hon. Friend's comments on that. Secondly, how does this industrial strategy create a positive operating environment so that boardrooms in the UK and across the world see the UK as a place to invest and do business? Again, I am keen for his comments on that.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful for that question. Again, the report is a lot stronger for the insights my hon. Friend was able to bring to what was a very sustained inquiry. We must recognise that two problems have bedevilled industrial strategies in this country in the past. One is stop-start—we get some progress, but then we stop, and then we think again. That point was made, with some power, by Greg Clark, whose work I commend and whose evidence I want to highlight.

This is about building a different kind of partnership for a different kind of economy. We have tremendous strengths: we love the rule of law; we are politically stable; we are an open trading economy; and we are a science superpower. This is a great place to do business, but if we are to become the world's favourite place to invest, we must change the way that the Government and the private sector work together. If we get it right, the Industrial Strategy Council could be exactly that place, but the offer our Committee makes to the business community is that where things get stuck, we are here to help.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I can run this only until 2 pm, so can questions and answers be brief, please?

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I thank the Chair for his leadership; we enjoy being under it. To focus on one thing, energy costs are causing havoc around the country, leading to many companies going to the wall.

[*Charlie Maynard*]

Does he think this emergency should be to dealt with by cutting energy costs, dealing with the distortions between gas and electricity, and giving better access to manufacturers so that they can get the power they need?

Liam Byrne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Perhaps the most critical test of the industrial strategy, when it is published, will be whether it brings industrial energy costs down. If it fails that test, it is going to struggle to make progress.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent chairship of the Committee. He spoke about the grand challenges we face. We heard in the evidence sessions how we have such structural challenges—we have just heard about energy, and we could say the same about skills particularly—so could he say a bit more about some of the work being done and the need for a whole-of-Government approach?

Liam Byrne: That is absolutely right. The challenges we face as a country are so large that no one Department, business or sector can solve them on their own. The only way to crack the code of that challenge and to reach our ambitions for the future is by mobilising a whole-of-society approach. Otherwise, frankly, we are going to fail and squander the potential in front of us.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It seems quite radical to suggest, as the report does, devolving responsibility for post-16 technical education and training to local leaders and transferring responsibility for skills to the Department for Business and Trade. Will the right hon. Gentleman briefly expand on that, and explain how it relates to apprenticeships on the one hand and university education on the other?

Liam Byrne: This was an important area of debate when we were framing our recommendations. We felt that where mayoral areas could show ability—that might be a limited number—they might be much better able to understand the needs of business and to ensure that local technical colleges in particular provide the right kinds of skills and of qualifications. Sometimes we take too much of a central planning approach to the skills

system, which means we are just not agile enough for the needs of employers today, and skills gaps therefore loom much too large.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chair for the report, particularly for the framing in which it lands the industrial strategy. From reading the report, I believe there could be greater emphasis on the convening role of higher education—universities—not just as a driver of R&D and skills, but for the industrial clusters in their locality. Does he agree that the strategy could be more focused on building on the role of higher education as a collaborator and a co-ordinator?

Liam Byrne: My hon. Friend is right. We have to be careful not to stray too far into the territory of our sister Committee, but once upon a time we built villages around factories; in today's economy, we need to build local economies around universities. The role of universities in empowering economic change is something we will want to return to in the very near future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Final two questions and answers—very short, please.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I congratulate the Select Committee, the Chair and its members on the publication of the report. Which of the 10 tests ensure that business growth will be ethical, moral and responsible, and which of the tests protect the consumers, the public and the environment?

Liam Byrne: A very clear answer: leadership from the top—and that means coming from the Prime Minister directly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair and the Committee very much for the report. It is incredibly helpful. The Chair referred to growth for all within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the industrial strategy. One of the issues for Northern Ireland companies has been buying into the public procurement process. Perhaps the Chair could tell us how we in Northern Ireland can catch up with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Liam Byrne: We heard this message loud and clear from Harland and Wolff when we were there: long-term contracts, not year-to-year contracts, with real stability so that a genuine partnership can grow and grow stronger over time.

Backbench Business

SEND Funding

2.1 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the distribution of SEND funding.

I am delighted to have secured this debate, as it gives us an opportunity to highlight the situation we are facing in England, where children with special educational needs and disabilities are being left behind due to the inherent regional inequality in the high-needs national funding formula. There is a bigger issue. The more typical thing we talk about is the overall quantum of spending based on overall need, but too little attention is given to the distribution of the funding that exists, whether in healthcare, education, policing or otherwise. I know I am not the only Member being turned to by constituents at their wits' end, trying to navigate what feels to be a broken system; I thank colleagues across the House for their continued advocacy on behalf of some of the most vulnerable children in all our communities.

My argument is a simple yet deeply important one: the current model of SEND funding is not only inconsistent but in too many cases profoundly unfair. It fails to account for genuine levels of need, the realities faced by families, and the systemic pressures that schools and local authorities are under. Unless that changes, we will continue to fail children who rely on Members to make their case and to get this right.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes a profoundly important point. There is a real and urgent need to reform the SEND system, and that of course includes how it is funded. Does he welcome the £750 million ringfenced in yesterday's spring statement for exactly that: to transform our SEND system to make it fairer for parents, better for young people and more sustainable for the future?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman takes me to a point further on in my speech, but he is absolutely right. He makes the case to the Minister, exactly as I intend to: given that we have a broken distribution system and given the severity of its impact on so many children and families, will she ensure that the money in the spending review is, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, used precisely for that purpose and that we target those who are most left behind?

At the heart of this debate, I am calling on the Government to identify and commit to a clear baseline cost for delivering effective SEND support per pupil. The figure must reflect what it genuinely takes, in both urban and rural settings, to support children with complex needs across the country. Only then can we ensure that no child's opportunity is limited by where they live.

I want to bring to the attention of the House a stark example that illustrates the postcode lottery in SEND funding: the disparity between the East Riding of Yorkshire, which covers my own constituency of Beverley and Holderness, at the lowest end of the funding spectrum—we are the lowest funded in the country—and the London

borough of Camden, which happens to be the highest. Camden, by any standard, is a well-resourced inner-city borough with strong proximity to specialist services. It currently receives £3,564.95 of SEND funding for each pupil in its area. Meanwhile, in East Riding—a rural area with fewer nearby services, longer travel distances and greater challenges in recruitment and retention—per-pupil high-needs funding comes in at around £968. That is a gap of over £2,500 for every single child requiring extra support. In real terms, if East Riding's funding was matched not with Camden but with the second most poorly funded local authority, we would have an extra £18 million per year on top of the £43 million we receive in the higher needs block—£18 million extra. If we were brought into line with Camden, we would have an extra £100 million.

Some might argue that urban areas face different pressures, and of course they do, but let us be clear: the cost of delivering quality SEND provision in rural areas is not lower. In fact, it is often significantly higher. Transport costs—colleagues across the House will be aware of children who have to be moved great distances to access their support—for children with complex needs can be astronomical. Recruiting specialist staff, such as special educational needs co-ordinators, to work in isolated schools is a constant challenge. When services such as educational psychologists or speech and language therapists are not based locally, schools and families face unacceptable delays in accessing the assessments needed to unlock further support. Why, then, is rurality not factored into the high-needs funding formula?

What that means in practice is that two children with identical needs, living in different parts of the country, will receive vastly different levels of support. One might have their education, health and care plan reviewed on time, access in-school provision, and benefit from local therapy services. The other might be left waiting months for assessment, with a school already at breaking point trying to bridge the gap. This disparity will have a long-term detriment to children's outcomes.

This is not a criticism of any local authority—Camden, like all areas, faces its own pressures and challenges—but the system we have allows such disparities to persist without sufficient recourse or flexibility. These widely varying funding allocations create a two-tiered system in what should be a national commitment. Colleagues from across the House will be familiar with constituents whose stories lay bare the human cost of this imbalance, whether it is parents desperately trying to navigate the EHCP system, the lack of suitable school places nearby to cope with the measures required by their EHCP, or schools struggling to cope.

This is also certainly not a party political point. Successive Governments have sat over funding disparities and struggled with the politics. They have been unprepared to reallocate, perhaps for understandable reasons. The people you take money from tend to be much angrier than the people you give it to are happy: one marches on Westminster, the other grunts and says, "About time." It is a truly difficult thing. I have been in this place for 20 years and have struggled to get Ministers to accept reallocation and reapportionment. Rather than asking for that demand, which I have so far failed in 20 years of effort to get anybody to implement, I hope to come up with something more practical, if compromised as a result.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on his length of service to this House.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend, the Opposition Deputy Chief Whip—and indeed my Whip—is very welcome. Thanks very much; I am grateful for that.

We have this issue of how we fix a broken and clearly unfair system. Newer colleagues, and there are many of them in the House, might think, “Well, surely people would want to fix it. There is no perfect system and there will always be dispute, but if the Government did a map of need—fundamentally, an assessment of what fair would look like—and then mapped against that line where everyone was, newer Members might think, “The Government might be prepared to do something with those who are most overfunded to help compensate the underfunded.” My experience is that they do not and will not, so I will discuss practical ways of getting change. What typically happens is that despite Ministers’ talk in debates like this one, we end up with the Treasury at a spending occasion like yesterday giving 3%; if inflation is 2.5%, it gives 3% to everybody. That means that the cash gap between one authority and another grows, and in a sense the injustice grows with it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for leading the debate. I am conscious that York is in the bottom third, and that the level of children being diagnosed with SEND is rising sharply. Does he agree that in order to future-proof the system, we need to look at a more holistic, therapeutic and nurturing approach to our education system so that all children benefit? I looked at the situation in Sweden and saw how that not only brought down costs, but greatly benefited the children there.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is two things: she is quite right, and she is tempting me down a path I do not want to go down—I want to focus on the distribution, because it does not get the attention. However, she is absolutely right. Labour criticises the performance of the then Conservative Government, but I think funding for SEND actually grew 60% from 2019 to 2024. She is right that it is not about who is in government—somehow, we need to find ways of capping this demand, which will outstrip any Chancellor, however well intentioned. That is an issue.

I will turn back to the point on which I am focusing, which is distribution. If demand in a system is growing at a scale that no Government can meet, distribution, although ignored, becomes even more important. If a system is straining and struggling, having grossly unfair distribution that no one seeks to or is able to defend—it is not a case of one party or the other claiming they are getting it right; they recognise it is unjust—is a major mistake, and we must find ways to balance it over time. It is not obvious at the moment that anyone is able to stop this imbalance between supply, which is so small, and demand, which is so big.

Colleagues will have local champions back home who do their best to fight against regional inequalities. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Councillor Victoria Aitken in the East Riding, who is the portfolio holder responsible for SEND, and her role with the f40 group. For any newer Members present, the f40 group

fight on the issues of and focuses on the funding formula disparities. It is technical and quite dull, but it is vital for the provision of services to our constituents. In her role with the f40 group, Victoria has been tireless in campaigning to address these issues within the SEND system, but sadly, the work of Victoria and others like her is not enough.

I want to share the story of my constituent Ellie and her son Harry, who is nine and a half years old and has ADHD. From the very start of his education—as early as foundation stage—both Ellie and his teachers recognised that Harry needed extra support. However, without an EHCP in place, the help he required simply was not available, despite the school doing all that it could.

Last summer, as Harry was preparing to enter year 4, Ellie contacted me in desperation. Harry was still only just beginning to read, and was spending his break times playing with children much younger than himself. Ellie had fought tirelessly to secure an assessment so that he could access one-to-one support, but the process was gruelling, and caseworkers were at capacity. Ellie had to give up her job to dedicate herself to the countless hours needed to complete forms, lodge appeals, chase responses and provide support at home. She put her own education on hold and, in her own words, has had to “battle the system” every step of the way.

Just last week, after years of delay, Harry was finally granted an EHCP. However, the school still does not know when the funding will arrive to put the support, which has now been recognised, in place. Harry will start year 5 this September, several years behind his peers. Ellie describes Harry as a kind and lovely boy who has been failed—not by his school, but by a system that delays, deflects and denies the support that children like Harry need. Yet Ellie remains determined to keep fighting, no matter the cost to her or her family, to ensure that Harry gets the help he deserves.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I declare my usual interests: my wife is a special educational needs co-ordinator at a local authority school in our patch, and my daughter has an EHCP and a complex set of disabilities, so I have absolutely fought this battle myself. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that what he has just described is a broken system that needs reform, and that whatever we see in the White Paper in the autumn, we will hopefully see reform that relies in particular on more training for all teachers across the profession? I think that is some of what he has just described.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right. There is a capacity issue, as I say, relating to demand. Getting people—not just specialists, but the whole system and everyone in it—to have a better understanding is really important. The hon. Gentleman will see that in his constituency, as I do in mine. It is not enough just to have the SENCO; it is about getting the leadership, the training and the right protocols in place to ensure that the whole system is better able to meet the needs of children, and that will then reduce some of the other impacts, including cost impacts, on the system.

In recent weeks, I had the privilege of visiting Inmans primary school in Hedon, where staff spoke candidly about the mounting pressure created by soaring demand

for SEND provision—pressures that far exceed the funding currently available. At St Mary's school in Beverley, headteacher Laura Wallis expressed her deep concern at the growing gap between pupils' needs and the resources she has at her disposal, making it ever-more difficult to provide the tailored support every child deserves.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I have met people from about 18 schools, both here in Westminster and at home in the constituency, and, more recently, have heard the voices of young people on SEND in Doncaster. At every single meeting, the first questions asked are about support, capacity, and young adults' transition into work. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that to get the funding right, we need to listen to the voices of people with experience—those at the grassroots—to ensure that we understand their ideas and solutions, and direct funding into the right places?

Graham Stuart: I have to agree with the hon. Gentleman, who makes a powerful point. My appeal to colleagues in the Chamber—particularly, perhaps, to newer Members—is to focus on the distribution. It can be quite hard to get one's head around the many issues that are involved—the overall national issues of quantum, service delivery, training and the rest of it—and distribution can easily get left behind, yet it is vital. I cannot say that it brings a great deal of joy or satisfaction to Members of Parliament to pursue it, because so many people look blank when it is mentioned, but distribution is important, and I hope that colleagues will want to take on the issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Very quickly, some children thrive academically, while some thrive practically. It is all about finding the right place for them, whether as a doctor, a mechanic, a plasterer or a farmer. When it comes to checking on a child's ability, and ensuring that they find their place, we must acknowledge that there is not a standard box for all; it is different for each child.

Graham Stuart: As usual, the hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head.

Many across this House will recognise the stories of the schools I have just mentioned, because the same thing is playing out in constituencies across the country. Parents are becoming de facto care co-ordinators; schools are dipping into ever-shrinking budgets to fund specialist provision; and local authorities are caught between legal responsibilities and budgetary reality.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I was contacted by a parent in my constituency who was forced to navigate a complex and lengthy tribunal process simply to challenge the decision to place her autistic son in a mainstream school, only to have the hearing cancelled at the last moment, and a place at a special school offered. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that education, health and care plans are not a silver bullet, that we should not need complex legal processes to ensure that young people can access good early support, that support must meet the young person's needs, and that the money must follow the child or young person?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I was chairing the Education Committee when the coalition Government introduced the reforms that brought in EHCPs as a replacement for statements. I remember

thinking then that lots of good improvements were made—there were very sincere Ministers working hard at it, and they brought in a better system—but the fundamentals remained as they were. One of the aims was to get away from an adversarial, legalistic process, in which articulate and typically better-off people were able to use sharp elbows to get their child what they needed, but pity the inarticulate single mother unable to engage with the system. What would she get? The then Government's promise was to make that better, but the fundamentals remained.

If demand is so much bigger than supply, this is what we will get. With the best will in the world, local authorities will end up being defensive and saying no as a matter of course, and will give way only when they are forced to. Am I going on too long, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I could not possibly say.

Graham Stuart: For years, I have fought for a fairer distribution of SEND funding, and for years, I have got nowhere, as successive Governments—Labour and Conservative—have lacked the courage to rebalance the system. I hope Labour will not lack that courage again. I do not pretend to have all the answers to this problem, but I know that we must work out what fairness looks like and the minimum per-pupil cost required for SEND support, and commit to meeting that basic need, if not immediately, then at least over time.

This Government need to be prepared to take from those above the baseline and give to those below. Would they be prepared to do that? No previous Government have been, but perhaps this one will. If not, we must find some other way. We could identify, through a mapping exercise, those who have been left behind, and we could say as a matter of principle that whenever there is an above-inflation increase in the Budget—such as the £760 million that the Chancellor came up with in the spending review yesterday—it will always be used first and foremost to lift up those below the line, while doing nothing to cause a below-inflation increase for those who are above the line.

Even if the Minister agrees with that idea, there will still be crisis management. How do we begin to tackle systemic inequality? Above all, it is vital that we revisit the high needs national funding formula, because it does not sufficiently account for regional cost differences, or for the genuine cost of delivering services in dispersed or under-served areas. The formula must reflect both complexity of need and the geography of the area in which that need arises. It needs to account for the added cost of providing services in rural areas. It is vital, too, that the formula moves away from the historical spend factor—the part of the formula that bases current funding on what a local authority spent on SEND provision in the 2018-19 financial year, and how it administratively described that spend. The formula means that a large section of funding is determined by pre-covid demand for SEND services, despite a post-pandemic spike.

The Government have stated their intention to remove that factor, but progress has been painfully slow. Every year that we fail to act, we condemn another group of children with complex needs to struggling without the support that they deserve. The issue is not simply how much money is available; it is also how accessible and

[Graham Stuart]

responsive the system is. Families are forced into adversarial processes, schools are burdened with bureaucracy, and children are too often treated as numbers on a spreadsheet, rather than individuals with potential. We need a system that is focused on early intervention, not crisis management.

I am here not simply to raise a problem, but to call for action. That action would ensure a fairer, more transparent funding formula that reflects real-world costs across the country, accounting for rurality and discounting historical spend. It would establish a clear baseline per-pupil cost for delivering effective SEND support, and ensure that every local authority was brought up to that level—if not quickly, then at least over time. It would create better accountability mechanisms, so that areas that are underperforming on delivering SEND provision can be supported and, where necessary, challenged. At the very least, I ask that the Government recognise the injustice of the system and the inequality that it produces.

Those are not radical asks; they are practical, deliverable reforms that would make a meaningful difference for my constituents in Beverley and Holderness—and, I believe and hope, across the rest of the country. We have a duty as parliamentarians to ensure that every child, regardless of background, diagnosis, or postcode, has the support that they need to thrive. The disparities in SEND funding undermine that duty. If we believe in a truly inclusive education system, we cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the structural inequities built into the funding model. We owe it to our constituents, our schools and, most importantly, the children to fix this.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I inform Members that even with an immediate three-minute time limit, I will still not be able to get everyone in.

2.23 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing this important debate. This issue affects families in Huddersfield and across the country. I recently met SEND parents from Huddersfield to hear their experiences of the system. They are trying to do the right thing, and to get the right support for their children, but too often the system works against them. They told me that the system is difficult to navigate, especially the process of gaining an EHCP and any subsequent appeals processes. I also heard from parents who were struggling to access home-to-education transport, or who were not able to get their children into school due to poor mental health or it being the incorrect educational settings.

These stories are not one-offs. This is happening to too many families across the country, and it is clear that something has to change. I welcome the work of local support services, such as Kirklees Information, Advice and Support Service, which offers free and impartial advice, but it is dealing with a growing number of inquiries. In Huddersfield, we see growing demand for specialist support, but the funding is not keeping pace with that demand. Local services are stretched, schools are under pressure, and families are left to navigate a complex and often frustrating system.

Last week, I visited the fantastic Southgate school, a specialist school for children with complex special educational needs. I spent time with its amazing pupils and teaching staff. The teaching and support staff are passionate about their work, but they spoke to me about the increasing complexities that they are dealing with, and their struggle to access all the emotional and mental health support that they need for their pupils. The transition to post-16 support is a particular issue. They also asked me to raise the need to look again at the pay scale for support staff, who are valued members of the team. The issue of pay is impacting retention.

As the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness has said, there is a postcode lottery. Whether a child gets the help that they need often depends on local resources, not their actual needs. We need to take into account wider need, deprivation and the complexity of children's circumstances. I welcome the Government's recent moves to improve SEND provision. They include: injecting an additional £1 billion into services; investing £740 million in adapting classrooms and building specialist facilities; and restructuring the Department for Education to put SEND at its heart. Local authorities like Kirklees council need the tools and resources to respond properly to the challenges. Without a sustainable funding formula, local authorities will struggle to provide timely solutions.

Schools want to do the right thing, as do councils, but they are often forced to make impossible choices, and that leaves families to pick up the pieces. We need a long-term plan that gives certainty to local areas and puts the voices of parents, carers and children at the heart of decision making.

2.26 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing this important debate, and for his work on this issue. According to the latest figures, there are around 1.7 million school pupils in England with identified special educational needs. That equates to 18% of all pupils. Of those pupils with identified SEN, around 1.2 million receive SEN support, and around 400,000 have EHCPs.

In Huntingdon, the schools that I represent have expressed many concerns about the whole SEND system, and funding consistently underlies many of the issues that they face. Schools pay the first £6,000 towards meeting the outcomes of an education, health and care plan. The rest of the funding is topped up by the local authority. Often the funding provided does not cover the cost that the school incurs in supporting children with needs. I urge the Government to address that as a matter of urgency, as this is stopping schools from providing help to children suspected of requiring SEND support. I thank Yasmine Trace, the headteacher of Sawtry infant school, and Jo Dyke, the school's SEND co-ordinator, for highlighting this matter. I know that they speak on behalf of other schools in Huntingdon, and across the country.

The unacceptably long wait to obtain an EHCP in Huntingdon—one child at Wheatfields primary school waited 62 weeks for a draft—has led many desperate parents to seek to fund them themselves. The cost of a private educational psychologist's assessment in Huntingdon varies, depending on the services required and the provider, but it might be in the range of £900 for a full assessment,

or £450 for an assessment of an under-three. For example, a full assessment could be £775 with a £400 deposit, and one provider offers an assessment for £900 with a £400 deposit. These figures are a significant barrier for most families that I represent. It is yet another burden for parents, and yet another reason why we need more support on offer.

The Government have hinted at sweeping changes to the EHCP system, and I would welcome further detail and clarity for the many parents, carers and teachers in Huntingdon who are uncertain about what these changes will mean. There is a fear among parents that the rug will be pulled from under their feet. I would welcome it if the Minister could confirm the ongoing support for EHCPs going forward.

To conclude, I want all children to get the education, care and support that they need. There are a growing number of children with SEND, and we must adapt to ensure that they are catered for and do not fall by the wayside. I would welcome plans from the Government on how they will support schools in meeting the costs of EHCPs—or of whatever they are replaced with. I wish to hear that parents will be supported throughout the process, and that the Government will not force parents down expensive routes, which most of them cannot afford, to ensure that their children get the education and support that they need.

2.29 pm

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). As it has for many Members, this issue has become a quiet emergency in my constituency; Hertfordshire faces many of the challenges with the funding and delivery of SEND provision that other parts of the country are grappling with.

SEND support should be a lifeline that enables a child to reach their potential, regardless of their diagnosis or circumstances. In Hertfordshire, the system is creaking. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission have said that there are “widespread and systematic failings”, and too many families are losing out as a result.

I have raised a number of stories in the past of constituents who are dealing with this issue. Today I bring to the House the story of my constituent Sarah, who recently told me about her daughter Grace. Grace suffers from avoidant restrictive food intake disorder, alongside autism and dyslexia. After a long and traumatic journey through the NHS, made harder by the lack of a national care pathway for ARFID, Grace spent six weeks at Watford general hospital and a further nine weeks at a mental health unit in Great Ormond Street. Her condition has thankfully stabilised, but her recovery remains fragile. Now her mother Sarah is facing the daunting challenge of securing an appropriate education. She is applying for an EHCP and has requested a place in a specialist setting that would meet Grace’s needs, but like many schools it is oversubscribed.

A mainstream environment, crowded and overwhelming, would simply be unworkable for Grace, whose previous experiences in school have left long-lasting trauma. Sarah is even considering moving countries in search of suitable provision. This is not an isolated case. Families in Hertfordshire are telling us time and again that the system is failing the children who sit in these so-called grey areas—children who require more than mainstream

education can offer but who do not meet the thresholds for the few specialist placements available. Hertfordshire is ranked 148th out of 150 local authorities in per-head high-needs funding. Just 7.5% of our local education budget goes to SEND, well below the national average of 11.5%. We are also facing a projected £30 million deficit in the SEND budget this year.

I finish by thanking Ministers for their engagement on this issue, and for meeting me and other Hertfordshire Labour MPs. I know that the hon. Members for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) and for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) have also been diligently raising these issues. I am glad that the Government are now looking at the national funding formula and how it might be revised, which I hope will mean that Hertfordshire ends up with more support. I congratulate the Government on their pledge to invest an additional £1 billion into high-needs funding, and I look forward to seeing how this benefits all our children.

2.32 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): Hampshire is a county that falls into the f40 group, which are areas that receive some of the lowest per-pupil funding in the country. This disparity is hitting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities the hardest. The cumulative deficit in Hampshire for the dedicated schools grant now sits at £86.1 million. That is not just a number on a spreadsheet but a daily reality in schools across my constituency.

Despite having to find the first £6,000 of funding for every EHCP, schools in North East Hampshire, as with elsewhere, are bending over backwards to do everything they can to support these pupils. A headteacher in my constituency recently explained to me that their budgets this year are so tight, and they have made every efficiency that they can, that they will be forced to reduce the amount of support for the children who do not have an EHCP but who do have additional needs. What is the sense in that, when we know that early intervention leads to better outcomes and lower costs?

Before being elected to the House, I ran a charity for young people with Down’s syndrome and their families. We saw at first hand the impact that early intervention can make in building the fundamental skills for life that many of us take for granted—walking, talking and participating in society. Children with Down’s syndrome will always need an EHCP, yet the families still have to go through a laborious process.

Many children need a bit of extra help at various points without an EHCP, yet the funding formula also works against them because schools cannot afford to fund the support. As Lily’s mum explained after Lily was denied an EHCP,

“The emotional and financial toll is huge, made worse by constant pushback and denial. There’s endless talk of SEND reform, but what about the children like Lily who need help now? Every delay is another failed day, risking long-term harm.”

I welcome the investments in education and training outlined by the Chancellor in yesterday’s spending review, but it is not just schools’ walls that are crumbling; the systems within the buildings need just as much care, investment and resource. One headteacher said to me:

“Of course teachers want to be paid fairly, but that’s not why so many are leaving the profession. We want better funding for the schools, for the kids.”

[Alex Brewer]

I conclude not with the numbers but with a quote from Olivia's mum, a constituent of mine. Olivia is in her 16th month without appropriate educational provision. Her mum said:

"I am increasingly fearful for her future. How can she be expected to participate fully in society—to reach her potential, to build independence, to thrive—if she is denied even the most basic right to an education?"

The national funding formula must be reassessed and made fit for the future.

2.35 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Over the past decade we have seen a 140% increase in the number of children identified as requiring an education, health and care plan. Today we have nearly 2 million pupils in England who are identified as having special educational needs. Unfortunately, the rise in demand has not been matched by a corresponding increase in funding. As of October last year, the Department for Education projected a cumulative deficit of £4.6 billion in the dedicated schools grant by the end of 2025-26, alongside a £3.4 billion gap by 2027-28 between high-needs costs and current funding levels. Our children have for too long been let down by previous Governments, and we have had 14 years of Conservative austerity. We must urgently re-examine the structure and long-term sustainability of our SEND provision.

In my constituency, the pressure is all too evident. Nearly 9,000 pupils are currently receiving either special educational needs support or have an EHCP—around 18% of the total pupil population. If we look at the data more closely, a stark pattern emerges. There is a clear correlation between the level of special educational needs and the index of multiple deprivation, which means that children in our most deprived areas are significantly more likely to require additional support than their peers living in more affluent neighbourhoods. This is not just a matter of education but a matter of social justice. We must invest in early years intervention and deliver a holistic programme of support.

Wolverhampton West is home to five state-funded special schools: Tettenhall Wood school, Broadmeadow special school, Penn Fields school, Penn Hall school—close to where I live—and Pine Green Academy. I am proud of all of them, as they have dedicated staff and specialists educating over 650 pupils. However, even with the tireless efforts of our dedicated school staff, our state special schools are under strain and operating beyond capacity.

I am proud that this Government have put forward £740 million for 10,000 new SEND places, and spending review documents reveal that the Government will spend £547 million in 2026-27 and £213 million in 2027-28.

Graham Stuart: Perhaps my question could go through the hon. Member to the Minister if he does not know the answer. The £740 million is very welcome, but as he says it is frontloaded in one year and then halves the following year, with no indication of where it is going thereafter. Although it may be a welcome short-term intervention, how is it part of a sustainable effort to improve SEN?

Warinder Juss: My point is that we have not had sufficient funding to provide our special educational needs children with the support they require. The National Audit Office has warned that without significant change, the current system is financially unsustainable.

The evidence is damning. Since 2019, we have seen no consistent improvement in outcomes for children with SEND. We must, therefore, take bold, decisive steps to reform our SEND system to ensure that every child, irrespective of their needs or background, receives the proper support they rightly deserve. Only then can we say that we have removed the barriers to opportunity.

2.39 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Before I start my speech, I acknowledge the awful tragedy in India. I am aware of my own constituents being directly affected by it, so my thoughts and prayers are with them at this difficult time.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this important debate. I have spoken many times about education in this place, including about my own experience. As a former governor of a school for autistic pupils, I have always been passionate about ensuring that our children and young ones can fulfil their full potential.

Earlier this week, I was lucky enough to visit one of my SEND schools, Breakspeare school in Abbot's Langley, which is absolutely life-changing not just for the children that it supports and educates, but for the families and the wider network associated with those young, brilliant individuals. I have two other such schools in my constituency, Colnbrook school and Garston Manor school, but I want to focus my comments on Breakspeare.

Breakspeare hopes to move to a different site in Croxley in my constituency. There has been a change of administration at Hertfordshire county council, but I know from the plans of the previous Conservative administration that funding would have been put in place for that new school, because the current one does not have the capacity to meet the demand associated with it, not just in South West Hertfordshire but in the wider area. The school supports predominantly Hertfordshire children, but also those from Buckinghamshire and London. I am grateful that two fellow Hertfordshire MPs from across parties—the hon. Members for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) and for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins)—are in their places, acknowledging that SEND remains an apolitical but very important issue for all our residents. Today, I urge the county council to do all it can to ensure that that school breaks ground as soon as possible. The current location is not fit for purpose, not just because it is an old building that was not built for SEND provision, but because the significant demand for such provision in Hertfordshire means that it will quickly be out of date and not able to accommodate sufficient student numbers.

I hope that the Minister will provide not just additional support, but—going back to my right hon. Friend's earlier suggestion—fair funding for those areas that really need it. There is a perception that Hertfordshire is an affluent county, but as someone who has not always been based there, I know it is still a significant concern for my residents that across Hertfordshire, we do not receive the average provision that other counties benefit from. If the Minister was willing and able to speak to

Treasury colleagues, I am sure she would get cross-party support in her long-overdue fight to right this wrong. We all want to ensure that children in our communities do better and fulfil their potential.

2.42 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Decisions on SEND funding in this Parliament directly affect the availability of resources for additional support needs education in Scotland. One of the best experiences of my career was working with the pupils, parents and teachers at the Royal Blind school in Edinburgh when I was at the charity Sight Scotland. There we created a happy and supportive environment to help blind and partially sighted pupils to reach their goals in education, and to gain the vital life skills they need to manage their visual impairments throughout their lives.

Such support should be available in every school—in every mainstream setting—but it simply is not. That is because the presumption of mainstreaming policy in Scotland has not been anything like adequately resourced. In February of this year, Audit Scotland concluded that the Scottish Government and councils must

“fundamentally evaluate how education is funded, staffed and assessed to support all pupils”,

including those with additional support needs,

“to reach their full potential.”

The right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart)—we very much welcome his securing the debate—has mentioned the disparities in funding between local authorities. That is an issue in Scotland as well. Repeated poor funding settlements from Ministers for our councils have resulted in a number of local authorities cutting additional support needs budgets again and again. The impact on pupils, parents and local charities has been dramatic and, frankly, intolerable. The number of pupils who need such support has gone up by 32% since 2019, but the number of specialist teachers has increased by just 2%.

Sight Scotland and RNIB Scotland have reported falling numbers of specialist teachers for visual impairment. The National Deaf Children's Society in Scotland reports a 40% decrease in the number of specialist teachers for the deaf. The brilliant charity Autism Rocks, which is based in Buckhaven in my constituency but supports families throughout Scotland, told me that in one school, the number of support staff has been cut from nine to four. I have seen the huge difference that specialist educational support can make for disabled young people. Specialist teachers give pupils the time and skills they need to have a level playing field in the curriculum. The brilliant Stepping Up programme run by Enable, another charity that I have worked with, helps pupils to manage that difficult transition from school to further education or work.

Because of the actions of this Government, we are finally seeing increases in funding for SEND, and therefore in Scotland for additional support needs, but for two decades SNP Ministers have presided over a crisis in additional support needs provision in Scotland. It is children, families and staff who are suffering as a result—a sorry decline in a Scottish education system of which we were so proud for so long. That is why we urgently need a new direction in Scotland's schools to ensure that all our children have the support that they need—that is their right—to achieve their full potential.

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for setting the scene for us all incredibly well. I am going to give a Presbyterian sermon; for those who do not know what that is, it comes in three parts.

First, some children thrive academically and others practically. Some brains think in one way and others in different ways. We need all of them for a functioning society. We need mechanics as well as doctors; we need plasterers as much as farmers. It takes all sorts, and we need to train children not to fit into a standard box, but to find the box that fits them. That is becoming increasingly difficult for teachers to manage when the range of children is so wide and the pressure is so extensive.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees that under the current model, families must first endure an unnecessarily prolonged, complex and emotionally draining diagnostic process before resources finally begin to trickle in. That is a reactive approach, which not only delays the sense of support but undermines the principle of educational equality and inclusion. Does he agree that we must recalibrate the system so that diagnostic services are prioritised, adequately funded and made accessible locally for every family in need?

Jim Shannon: The Minister is listening, and I am sure she will respond positively to the hon. Lady when the time comes.

SEN is not about writing off a child's ability, but about ensuring that they find their place in the system in order to achieve their potential.

The second part of my Presbyterian sermon is about the stats for Northern Ireland. I know they are not the Minister's responsibility, but I will give some figures and talk about a solution that I hope might be helpful. In Northern Ireland, SEN costs £65 million a year, but that figure is about 14% less than what is needed this year. The number of children with special educational needs has risen since 2017 from some 18,000 to some 27,000. In the same period, the number of children enrolled in special schools increased by some 25%. Funding is not meeting need, and we must look at other ways of doing that. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland is looking at units attached to mainstream schools, which provide a best-of-both-worlds approach. I hope that that solution can be of some help. The Department is looking at how well that can enable children to be a part of mainstream and better equipped to move forward.

The units provide additional specialist facilities on a mainstream school site for pupils with an EHC plan. They focus on specific needs such as speech, language, communication or autism. The classes are smaller, and there are more teachers to help each student. The teachers are trained to work with pupils in the designated area of need, the classrooms are adapted to suit pupils' needs and the pupils spend a minimum of 50% and a maximum of 100% of their teaching and learning time in the unit, joining mainstream peers' classes when appropriate.

That is one of the solutions that Northern Ireland Education Ministers and education authorities have come up with to try to address the issue when funding is lower. I am conscious of time, so I conclude by saying

[Jim Shannon]

that perhaps that unit approach is the way forward. I hope that there will be buy-in from staff throughout the United Kingdom. The goal is a UK-wide education system that is fit for all and accessible for all needs. The pressure is great, but so too is the reward in teaching, and we need to find a way to get the greatest reward for our teachers, classroom assistants and all who are involved in school life. That can only come with appropriate Government support, which I know the Minister is always ready and willing to give.

2.49 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): For far too long, families across my county of Staffordshire, and indeed across the country, have been failed by the very system that was meant to support them. The breadth and depth of the crisis in SEND provision is such that this has to be one of the most, if not the most, frequently debated topics since the general election. Since becoming an MP, I have spoken with dozens of parents who are forced to travel long distances, often across county borders, just to get their child the support to which they are legally entitled.

Recently, my team helped a family who had been waiting nine months to get into the school of their choice; others have been waiting for years. I have heard stories of poor communication, of documents being illegible to parents, who feel like outsiders navigating a system designed to exclude them, and of families having to repeat their stories multiple times due to layers and layers of decision making.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): My constituency of Ribble Valley sits under Lancashire county council, which recently received a damning Ofsted report for its SEND provision. One parent, Selina Shaw, told me that her son Monty lost two years of education while the council spent more than £146,000 on a school he never attended, as the council did not seem to understand that that school could not meet his needs. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government and local authorities must listen seriously to the voice of the child and to parents to improve SEND provision and must stop wasting precious resources in the immediate term, as well as providing the long-term financial improvements that the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) proposes?

Josh Newbury: I am sorry to hear about Monty's story and I fear that we will hear stories like his from Members across the House in this debate. It is a perfect, but shocking, example of how the system is so broken that we are wasting huge amounts of resources. Money is leaking out of a system that is already inadequately funded. My hon. Friend is right to highlight that. It is awful that we are in such a situation.

Children, particularly those with high needs, are having to wake up before dawn and travel for over an hour, finding themselves exhausted when they reach school. That is not choice; that is a scandal. It is not just the children with the most acute needs who are suffering; many children and young people could thrive with targeted, mid-level support if only it were available. The number of children with education, health and care plans has exploded since 2015, in reflection of a genuine

increase in need and greater recognition of mental health issues and neurodivergence. Yet funding has not kept pace, resulting in a deficit of around £33 billion in high needs budgets within local authorities.

I welcome the Government's acknowledgment that the current SEND system is not fit for purpose and the recent commitment of £740 million to deliver 10,000 new SEND places, particularly in mainstream schools where specialist units can offer much-needed support closer to home. Following yesterday's spending review, I look forward to the schools White Paper that will come out in the autumn, with details of the Government's approach to reforming the SEND system.

We must ensure that the money goes where it is truly needed. I share the frustration of the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), as Staffordshire is also chronically disadvantaged by the outdated funding formula, with specialist schools in my constituency receiving £8,000 per pupil less not than Camden but than the national average. A fair, needs-based funding system must reflect the actual costs of specialist provision, not assumptions or averages.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): That is partly about the specification of need and the quantification of how we meet it. Government can be helpful in that. I first took an interest in the matter as a county councillor more than 30 years ago and then as a shadow Schools Minister more recently—some 20 years ago. The Government can provide support through guidance. Guidance can get right the specification of need, and some of the problem that the hon. Gentleman has described can be addressed.

Josh Newbury: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing his expertise and long experience to the debate. I am sure that that message has been heard by the Minister on the Front Bench and that she will look into it.

We must recognise that every child's needs are different. Reforms must deliver on three major fronts: early intervention, so children get support before problems escalate and not after they have already struggled for years; inclusive schools, with proper funding for specialist units and trained staff in every community, not just in a lucky few; and fair access to transport, because no child should be denied education due to postcode lotteries or long, exhausting journeys.

Before I conclude, I want to take a moment to highlight the number of young people with SEND who go into employment later in life. In Staffordshire, only 2.1% of adults with learning difficulties were in paid employment in 2019-20, compared with an average of 5.4% for all English regions.

I am proud to support the Government's investment for children with additional needs, but families in Cannock Chase now need to see change on the ground: to see parents and children listened to, not dismissed, and to see them respected, not exhausted. We cannot build the fairer, more inclusive country that we all want to see while SEND families are left fighting for support.

2.54 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for bringing forward the debate, and I appreciated his speech. I also appreciate the interest of everybody in

the Chamber in this matter. That stems from our experiences on the doorstep, where we have met far too many parents going through hell. We see a mix of determination, frustration, helplessness and betrayal. They look at me and at each hon. Member and say, "What are you going to do about it?" We are not doing enough, and their comments motivated each of us to be here today to do what we can.

Primary schools in my constituency—just dealing with the As, we have Alvescot, Aston and Appleton—do not have the spaces and the provision to provide for their children and the SEND needs that are going through the roof. In the secondary schools, it is the same story. We have no high needs provision in the constituency, which means that lots of children are being taxied God knows where, far too far away, on a daily basis, which is terrible for the kids and terrible for the whole system for obvious reasons, economic and otherwise. We are desperately trying to find routes through that and to find solutions.

In Oxfordshire, we are headed for a £100-million high needs block accumulated deficit this year, which is obviously completely unsustainable. That is just one county, and I am sure that it is repeated across all our counties. To quote the chair of the County Councils Network, we are

"nine months away from a financial cliff edge when these multi-billion deficits are placed onto councils' budget books, potentially rendering half of England's county and unitary councils insolvent overnight."

Oxfordshire county council asks for three things, and I think many of us will agree with them. The statutory override, which will run out in nine months' time, needs to be extended. Frankly, extending it for one year makes little sense; let us have some perspective and length on this. We need a write-down or a write-off of the high needs block deficits across local authorities. We need to have some borrowing potential for local authorities. That needs to be explored, so that they have flexibility to settle any remaining deficits over an affordable period.

2.57 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I will speak about the deepening funding crisis, and the crisis in general, for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, including the failure of our national curriculum to meet the needs of all learners.

Since the curriculum reforms introduced in 2012, we have seen a return to a rigid, academic model of education—one that might have suited a mid-century grammar school but fails to deliver for a modern comprehensive system. The curriculum is simply inaccessible for at least a third of our pupils, both those with SEND and many others who thrive with practical, creative or vocational learning. Too many children are being told, implicitly or explicitly, that their job is to, "Just get a pass and forget about it." That is not a curriculum that inspires or includes, it is not a curriculum that recognises or nurtures diverse talents, and it is certainly not a curriculum fit for the 21st century. It also ignores the cost of adequately educating children with special educational needs. This narrow focus does more than limit opportunity; it damages self-esteem, confidence and emotional wellbeing. It restricts the gifts and potential of our young people, particularly those who already face the greatest barriers.

Critically, schools have lost the flexibility they once had to tailor education to the needs of their pupils. They are now judged on a narrow set of outcomes, forcing a one-size-fits-all model on to a hugely diverse student body—again, a cut-price way to deliver our education system. That has consequences. We can draw a direct line from the rigidity of the curriculum to the crisis in school attendance, and from there to the rise in NEETs—those not in education, employment or training—who are vulnerable to exploitation or even to entering the youth justice system as they are exploited by organised crime. Too many young people with SEND are being failed by a system that offers them no real route to thrive, and when school stops being a protective factor, the risks grow.

That situation is being made worse by how SEND funding is distributed. Local authorities are under incredible pressure, with funding that simply does not reflect the growing complexity and volume of need. We see huge disparities between areas, and often between schools within the same local authority, where children miss out on vital support not because their needs are different, but because of postcode lotteries in funding.

Fair and adequate funding is a matter of educational justice. If we are serious about inclusion, we cannot continue to under-resource the very system meant to deliver it. We urgently need to reimagine our education system not as a funnel toward academic exams alone, but as a foundation for every child's success in every form it might take. I hope the Minister will listen to the parents, carers, teachers and young people themselves calling for change.

2.59 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): SEND provision in our schools is in a state of deep and growing crisis. In my area, West Sussex county council is already struggling with a £130 million SEND deficit this year—a figure likely to rise to £224 million by next year. That huge figure is one of the worst in the country, but what is truly concerning is that so much overspend has not even bought us a satisfactory service. Complaints from parents and schools have filled my postbag ever since the election.

Only half of EHCPs nationally are issued within the legal 20-week timeframe. In West Sussex it is even worse: just 12% now meet the deadline—and that is after a big push to get the waiting list down. It is hard to believe that slow processing is not a tactic. An EHCP gives parents the right to access educational support, but that support does not actually exist, so the local authority's solution is to create deliberate bottlenecks in the system so that many families will never get all the way through. That is particularly unfair at the nursery level, because educational psychologist assessments can take so long that the child is all the way through school before they get one.

More and more families are forced to go to appeal—tribunal appeals are up 53% in one year—but the fact that councils lose almost all those cases tells us that things should never have got that far in the first place. In effect, that discriminates heavily against parents who, for whatever reason, are less able to fight their case all the way through the system.

I have met many parents with SEN children and the emotional cost is enormous. Sometimes I feel like I myself need counselling afterwards. Parents have to watch their

[John Milne]

children drift away from mainstream schooling when early intervention might have saved them. Families are breaking up under the strain. One couple told me that a third of marriages do not survive the experience.

Of course, the pressure on staff is no less severe. Our teachers—particularly SENCOs—are exhausted, unsupported and leaving the profession. One Horsham SENCO told me:

“We are seasoned professionals, but we are at breaking point.”

Mainstream schools face manifest injustices. One school told me about a child who was refused by a specialist school because their needs were said to be too great. What happened? The child was allocated to an ordinary mainstream primary without any specialist support.

I realise that the demands on the Government’s budget are endless, but I hope that the current review will lead to swift action. Any further delay means we risk losing all the educational progress that teachers have worked so hard to deliver over the past 10 years.

3.2 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing the debate.

It is clear that the special educational needs and disabilities system is overstretched, underfunded and increasingly out of step with the reality faced by children, parents and schools. I will share with colleagues two local examples from Bolton West that illustrate the strife that the current system has caused parents.

One mother, Jo, wrote to me after I visited her children’s school in Lostock. Her children are both bright, engaged, full of potential and autistic, but they are all too often excluded from the very activities designed to inspire them. When the school organised a high-profile enrichment trip to London, her eldest was not chosen. It is not the fault of the school, which is operating under challenging financial constraints; rather, it is a symptom of a system that fails to see autistic children as leaders or participants in national life. After all, as Jo reminded me, representation is not just about being present, but about being expected.

Another mother, Victoria, wrote to me distraught about the possibility that education, health and care plans may soon be restricted to children in specialist settings. Her 10-year-old son, who has complex needs, is in mainstream education. He cannot learn without tailored support. His EHCP is not a luxury; it is a lifeline. Without it, he would not be in school; without it, he would not be learning.

In Bolton alone, more than 9,000 young people have identified SEND needs, and over 20% of them rely on EHCPs, so I welcome the £1 billion increase to SEND and alternative provision that was announced for 2025-26 in the autumn statement last year. I commend the Chancellor for her announcement in yesterday’s spending review of another £547 million in 2026-27 and £213 million in 2027-28 to reform the special educational needs and disabilities system, to make it more inclusive and to improve outcomes ahead of publishing a schools White Paper in the autumn.

However, can the Minister reassure my constituents and me that, whatever happens with EHCPs, parents and teachers will be closely consulted to ensure the best

outcomes are secured for children across my constituency and up and down the country? I am very concerned about the potential knock-on effect of any reforms for teaching assistants. From visiting schools, I know how vital their role is in ensuring children can maximise the time they have to learn in classrooms, whether it be at Ladybridge primary, the Gates in Westhoughton or Beaumont Primary, to name but a few.

I know from speaking to a local head just this morning that the current situation simply cannot go on. She told me that headteachers were having to go cap in hand outside the school to seek alternative funding and that she has never found it so tough in seven years of being a head. We owe it to all our children to give them the ability to realise their ambitions, so I hope the Minister can address my concerns and those of my constituents.

3.5 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this important debate. Given the limited time that has been allocated, I will speak about the state of SEND in my area and then suggest how the Government can address some of these challenges.

The Dewsbury and Batley constituency sits in the authority of Kirklees, which ranks very low in terms of funding per child in the high-needs block of the dedicated schools grant. According to recent reports, Kirklees is the second worst funded council for high-needs funding per capita. Kirklees has nearly 9,600 disabled children and young people between the ages of nought and 24. Since 2016, there has been a real-terms spending cut of £717,000 on services for disabled children in Kirklees. Given the lack of funding, it is not surprising that in June 2022 a joint SEND inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission reported two priority areas of action, which, as far as I am aware, are still unresolved. Without the necessary funding, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the council to address these challenges.

In Kirklees, one in eight EHCPs were processed within the 20-week legal timescale, compared with the national average of 50%, making it one of the worst rates nationally. Kirklees is part of the Department for Education’s safety valve programme, which helps local authorities with their SEND deficits, but that may pressure councils to limit EHCPs, adding barriers for families seeking essential support for their children.

I completely agree that the Government’s plans for major SEND reforms are necessary and overdue. However, current rumours and media leaks have alarmed many families. The Disabled Children’s Partnership, which represents 130-plus charities, royal colleges and parent groups and supports early intervention, has warned that reforms must not disrupt current placements or support arrangements; they must not remove EHCPs for children with complex or unmet needs; they must not abolish the SEND tribunal, which is a vital legal safeguard; they must not remove support after the age of 18 before young people are ready; and they must not redefine SEND in ways that narrow eligibility.

3.8 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for bringing this important issue to the Chamber for a full and thorough discussion.

I want to highlight a few issues in Suffolk Coastal. I recently had quite a large conversation with many parents in my constituency. Nearly 100 parents filled in my survey and told me the extent of the issues they are facing as a consequence of battling with special educational needs provision. Some 60% of those who filled in the survey told me that they have had to withhold their children from school for up to a year because their children could not access education in a setting that was right for them. Nearly a quarter of those children have been off school for over a year.

It will not surprise anyone in this Chamber or any parents listening to the debate that many families are struggling with the mental health consequences of this crisis. One in two parents told me that they are battling with mental health issues as a consequence of their battles with SEND provision. In many conversations that I have had across my constituency with schools, parents and young students, we have also explored some of the recommendations that could be brought forward, and I have spoken at length about that in the past. We have a dual badge in Suffolk: we are a member of f40 and also an area that is being let down regarding SEND. Our county council is effectively in special measures.

Sir John Hayes: That is the truth that dare not speak its name. It is often the most disadvantaged or poorly educated parents who struggle to navigate a complex system. Middle-class parents are at an advantage—let us face facts—but that is never really recognised, and it needs to be. Those people need support and guidance to navigate the system, and to get the education that their children rightly deserve.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman, which is why I and so many Members are passionate about this issue. Those who cannot articulate or fight for themselves need people to stand up and fight for them.

In many discussions I have had, I have worked with my constituents and with schools to come up with six key recommendations that we think will be innovative. We know there is a funding issue, and I welcome the Government's investment and commitment to that. However, we need to relook at how we deliver special educational needs. Education, care and health plans are just one part of the problem, but fixing those will not fix the situation that parents are facing.

A school in Saxmundham closed down last summer, because of the declining population in that area, two years after more than £1 million was spent on its SEND unit. It is a great facility whose footprint could facilitate primary and secondary education. I have been urging the Government to look at that—I have written to the Minister, and I will continue to urge the Government to look at that provision and take it forward.

We need a national conversation about SEND and about funding. I welcome Members from across the House talking about the need to bring the voices of parents and young students to that national conversation. We must hear from them why it is failing, and how adversarial the system has become.

Iqbal Mohamed: Statistics published today by the Government show that there are more than 482,000 children with ECHPs but 1.284 million children without

ECHPs who require SEND support. Although the £750 million is welcome, does the hon. Member agree that it is a drop in the ocean and that the Government need to invest more?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Perhaps the hon. Member will agree with what I am about to say, which is that, yes, funding is part of the issue, but we need to look at the entire system to solve it at the scale that is needed.

In rural areas—the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness spoke about this at the beginning of the debate—the issues are different to those in urban areas. There are declining populations in many of my primary schools. One primary school has just 15 students and spare classrooms, because the population does not match the capacity. We have capacity within those schools. I have put forward a recommendation, which has been supported in principle by my county council, that where we have declining populations in rural areas, we could operate with a special educational needs unit alongside mainstream provision, acting separately but within the same infrastructure. That SEND unit could bid for separate funding, and have a separate, wider catchment area than the primary school.

What is incredibly exciting about that idea is that the provision does not need to stop in year 6. We know that small, cute primary schools with tiny populations have a huge challenge with students moving from year 6 into huge class sizes in secondary school in year 7. If we were to go ahead with the proposal, there is no reason why the SEND unit in a primary school could not hold students in years 7 and 8, enabling a much more gradual transition to a secondary school setting. That is something I have been pushing passionately. I have written a report about it, which I published in my constituency. I am having loads of conversations with my schools, and I will continue to have a conversation with the Government. I welcome everyone's contributions today.

3.13 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to speak on a matter so close to the hearts of parents, carers, teachers and pupils in Bognor Regis, Littlehampton and across West Sussex: the urgent need for equitable and sustainable funding for special educational needs and disabilities.

Since 2015, the number of EHCPs in West Sussex has risen dramatically, from 3,362 to 7,684 in 2024, an increase of 128%. That surge mirrors an England-wide trend, where the number of EHCPs has grown by over 70% since 2018. That equates to about 180,000 additional high-needs pupils. Local mainstream schools, like Bishop Tufnell and Edward Bryant, report being stretched to capacity. They rely on fundraising from charities merely to maintain basic SEN provision, while increasing staff shortages and rising national insurance costs exacerbate burnout. Nationally, high-needs spending has risen to roughly £11 billion, but with pupil numbers growing faster than funding, per pupil support has actually fallen by a third in real terms.

The Government have recognised that pressure. A capital investment of £740 million aims to support the creation of 10,000 additional SEND places, including in specialist units in mainstream schools, and a further

[Alison Griffiths]

£1 billion is being allocated to support 44,500 mainstream school placements by 2028 under the high-needs national funding formula. However, even with that funding, experts warn of a ticking time bomb, as councils, including West Sussex, face soaring deficits that could reach £5 billion by 2026. Until 2018-19, the council was in a surplus, but since then, the exponential rise in need has put immense pressure on the system.

I have asked the Leader of the House to facilitate a debate on a sustainable model for SEND funding that ensures that local authorities like West Sussex receive adequate per-head resources; that delivers timely funding adjustments as EHCP numbers grow; and that supports retention of specialist staff and inclusive practices in mainstream settings. I urge the House to commit to sustainable and future-proofed funding.

3.17 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): As many right hon. and hon. Members have outlined, there is no doubt that there is a crisis in our SEND system in this country—a crisis that we inherited from the previous Government. However, funding is still too low to keep pace with the rate at which children are being diagnosed with SEND, and many families and teachers are struggling to get the help that children desperately need and deserve. Unfortunately, families in my constituency of South Dorset experience the same. According to figures set out earlier this year, 18% of pupils in South Dorset receive SEND support, roughly 5% more than the national average. That is why I want to increase the number of SEND places in special school settings.

We have three state-funded special schools locally, Harbour school, Westfield college and Wyvern academy, whose staff do a truly brilliant job delivering specialised and individualised support for every child. However, following conversations with mums and dads at the school gate and teachers in the classroom, I am all too aware that, put simply, there are more SEND pupils across South Dorset, primarily based in mainstream schools, than there are special SEND places in special school settings.

Warinder Juss: In 2023, the Department for Education said that demand for special school places nationally outstripped available places by at least 4,000, so does my hon. Friend agree that we need more special school places?

Lloyd Hatton: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and we really feel that in South Dorset. There are simply not the places needed to support every child with SEND. We urgently need the Government to move further, faster, to ensure that every child with SEND gets the education, and the school setting, that they deserve. I once again ask Ministers at the Department for Education to get the SEND school at the Osprey Quay site on Portland open—we waited for years for that to happen under the previous Government—and to finally rebuild the buildings at Dorset Studio school. If we can get those two projects over the line, we can really start to deal with the crisis in South Dorset.

Funding for a new SEND school was promised for so many years; that is what is most frustrating for parents in my constituency, particularly those living on

Portland. In 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, they were promised a solution that did not come, and once again we are waiting. Parents on Portland need that school on the Osprey Quay site opened as soon as possible.

Every child, no matter their educational needs, should have the opportunity to do their best, but they can do that only in the right school, with the right support. I know that this Labour Government recognise that reality, which is why I look forward to hearing from the Department for Education on the future of those two schools in my constituency, and to hearing a little more from the Minister at the end of this debate.

3.20 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Schools in my constituency are among the lowest-funded in the country, and there is a lack of resource for early intervention work before children get to the point of needing SEND support or an EHCP, which means that more children will need a higher level of intervention later. It is a vicious circle. The lack of money to act early means that more money must be transferred from the schools block to the high-needs block, reducing still further the funding for early intervention.

South Gloucestershire is one of the local authorities that entered into a safety-valve agreement with the previous Government. It faces a cliff edge when that agreement ends next April, and as yet there is no certainty about what comes next. A great deal of work has been done by the council and schools working in SEND clusters, but the deficit has continued to increase. The agreement was signed pre-covid—we all know about the impact that the pandemic had on demand for additional support—and as a result the targets in the agreement are completely unachievable. Safety-valve agreements have not worked. Will the Government write off those historical deficits and find a new fairer funding formula?

I support the Government's focus on inclusion, early intervention and preventive support to make that possible for more children. However, we need to recognise that there are children and young people already in the system who did not get that support, and schools need the funding to support them now. One of the reasons for the historical deficit in south Gloucestershire is the lack of specialist places locally, which has resulted in high numbers of expensive out-of-area placements. Those are bad for children, who would be better off being educated in their local community, so that they did not face excessive travel or need a residential place, and they are bad for the school budget.

Iqbal Mohamed: The hon. Member makes a really important point about early intervention. The current funding models respond only to high-level need and EHCPs, which leads to an over-reliance on costly EHCPs and new special school places. Does she agree that we should look to allocate a ringfenced proportion of the high-needs funding to early intervention in mainstream schools?

Claire Young: That is one approach, but we need to ensure that it does not take away from the high-needs approach. The point is that we have to fund both early intervention and the high-level needs that have resulted from the lack of early intervention.

The previous Government declined to fund an additional 200 special school placements when they signed the safety-valve agreement. When I met the Minister for School Standards, she did so too, saying that the focus is on providing places in the mainstream. Increased inclusion is a sound ongoing policy, but pupils cannot make the switch overnight. We need a fairer distribution of capital funding as well as revenue funding.

Another issue with SEND funding is the notional £6,000. To give one example, a headteacher locally told me that more than 60% of their allocation goes on the high number of children with EHCPs they have on roll, leaving less than 40% to support all the other children on the record of need. School funding does not recognise that there can be great disparities between communities and schools, even in the same local authority area. Some acquire a reputation for being good at supporting those with additional needs and suffer financial consequences, and some communities in an authority have greater need than others. The formula for distributing SEND funding and more general schools funding does not reflect that, and it means that schools in different parts of the country with similar cohorts are treated very differently.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): This is clearly a national crisis. Cornwall ranks 144th out of 151 local authorities for per-pupil SEND funding, and children with SEND needs in Cornwall get almost half the funding of those in Middlesbrough. Does my hon. Friend agree that this gross funding unfairness should be urgently addressed?

Claire Young: Absolutely. South Gloucestershire is in an even worse position, and I am sure all the authorities in the f40 group would agree.

Yesterday, I raised with the Prime Minister one of the impacts that lack of support for SEND has on families. He did not take up my request for a meeting, but I hope he will consider meeting me to discuss this aspect of the issue, and meeting charities that represent parents who are in this situation. Of course, the lack of support for children with special educational needs has many other impacts; I simply do not have time to go into all of them today.

We need overall SEND funding to reflect the level of need. We need more funding during the transition to greater inclusion, to reflect the fact that we will be supporting people with a high level of need, as well as funding early intervention. We need a national body for SEND to end the postcode lottery, and to fund the very high-need cases that cost over £25,000 a year, and schools need funding to be distributed in a way that reflects their needs, not some overall and potentially flawed perception by their local authority.

3.25 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this debate. This is an issue close to my heart. I used to be a school governor as well as a college governor, and I remember setting up—along with other teachers and professionals—a specific learning unit, as well as a general learning difficulty unit. Of course, having been a constituency MP for the past 15 years, this is an issue that I have dealt with many a time, and when I have been trying to assist

families, I have noticed that they feel utterly exhausted, not only by their caring responsibility, but by a system that seems to place obstacles in their way.

My council, Bolton, has made real progress. Its “Belonging in Bolton” strategy is helping to create more local SEND places, and it was rightly praised in its most recent Ofsted and Care Quality Commission inspection. In the area covered by Salford city council, parts of which now come into my constituency—it now covers Walkden—the council has also been working really hard to improve provision for children with SEND, but of course, all these councils have limited resources. In Bolton alone, over 9,000 children have a SEND issue, an increase of 27% since 2015. One headteacher in my constituency recently told me that their school spends £333,000 a year on teaching assistants to support children with special needs, but it receives only £155,000 in education, health and care plan funding. That leaves a gap of £178,000 every single year, around 7% of the school’s total budget, which they have to find somewhere. That is before we factor in the costs of behaviour support, speech and language therapy, or educational psychologists.

We need a proper plan that would increase the outdated £6,000 top-up threshold; invest in local authority teams to ensure that EHC plans are issued on time, giving families the certainty they need; and target capital funding at where demand is greatest, including in Bolton South and Walkden, to make sure that children can get support closer to home. Children in Bolton South and Walkden need support, and that must not be like winning a lottery.

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

3.28 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this vital debate. I would like to start with the words of Berkhamsted student Hermione:

“I believe, without a doubt, that the school system needs to change. But more than anything, it needs to change for SEN students—because right now, it is failing them...The system broke me down completely. Instead of supporting me, the system left me feeling isolated and overwhelmed.”

Last week, I met Hermione at Egerton-Rothsay school in Berkhamsted. She has complex needs, and has found solace in her new school after years of struggling. That is why, for her English oral exam, she was compelled to write a piece called “The school system needs to change: especially for SEN students”. She happened to send it to her headmaster on the day I visited. It is an eloquent piece about her experience, and I wish I had time to share it in its entirety. She concludes by saying:

“I know I’m lucky to have the support I do, but it’s still not enough. The system needs to change—not just for me, but for all the students still being let down, and for the future of education itself.”

She calls for improved teacher training, for a more flexible curriculum and assessments, for schools to listen to SEND students and for properly funded and staffed support. I would like to tell Hermione that Parliament is listening, and this debate will dive into why that proper funding is so vital and how it can be improved.

[Victoria Collins]

The Government must heed the call of parents and children to tackle this issue head on. The Public Accounts Committee reported in January that despite the 58% increase in the Department for Education's high needs funding over the past decade, it has not kept pace with demand. The current funding model, which sees top-up funding for students requiring more than £6,000 a year of additional SEND support, has not been updated, even given the changes in real-term value. That is crippling local schools and authorities, with 38 unitary and county authorities having racked up debts exceeding £2 billion this year alone. That has resulted in high-needs spending being consistently higher than available funding by between £200 million and £800 million a year between 2018 and 2022.

Hertfordshire was given the worst rating for SEND provision under the previous Conservative Administration. The funding formula under the Conservatives meant that children in Hertfordshire have been burdened with the third-lowest per capita funding for high needs funding and far less than just next door in Buckinghamshire. A three-year-old in Hertfordshire with SEND needs would have to finish all their formal education before they would get equal funding to a similar child in Buckinghamshire. The new Government must stop this postcode lottery, as eloquently put forward by the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), and ensure that those previously left behind get the support they need.

Kyle's family in Markyate told me that the system treated them not as kids with hopes and dreams, but as just another name on a piece of paper. Jess in Tring made the difficult decision to remove their six-year-old from school to home-educate and told me that seeing their five-year-old struggling was "heartbreaking". Those are not isolated cases; they reflect the story across constituencies up and down the country, the real consequences of underfunding and the postcode lottery of unfair distribution.

The Liberal Democrats have a clear plan to fix this broken system. We call on the Government: to establish a national SEND body to end this postcode lottery and to fully fund costs above £25,000 per annum, ensuring that children with complex needs receive the tailored support they require; to increase funding for local authorities to reduce the financial burden on schools after the Conservatives left local councils underfunded; to extend the profit cap from children's social care to SEND; to provide cash towards the cost of EHCPs to tackle the disincentives creating this adversarial system; and, to reform that broken national funding formula.

This crisis cannot go on. Every child, no matter their needs, deserves the opportunity to succeed with the right support in place. The Government must urgently clarify their reform plans. SEND families deserve certainty, not to be drip-fed information about their children's future. As Hermione says:

"To anyone who thinks, 'The system works fine as it is'—fine for who? If it doesn't work for all, then it doesn't truly work."

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

3.33 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow such excellent contributions from Members from all parts of the House in this important debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this vital debate. I pay tribute to the parents, the carers, the schools and all those who have battled tirelessly to secure funding for SEND students.

I was one of those SEND students who benefited from my parents tirelessly campaigning for me to have the disability support I needed in school. It has only taken me this long to finally say thank you. Such support plays a vital role in children's long-term success. Members from all parts of the House have raised this issue today because they can see the merits in fighting for children's chances, particularly in primary school, to increase their success overall.

We know that finding the right provision can be difficult and bureaucratic for children with SEND and their families. Securing the right assessment of a child's needs, getting their education, health and care plan, and finding the right provision takes huge effort and far too long. Many parents who have come to me have been absolutely choked and suffocated by the system. Too often, children with SEND face a postcode lottery, with suitable provision too far from their home or, in the worst cases, no suitable provision at all.

According to the 2024 data, we now have 1.67 million children who have been identified as having SEND—18.4% of all school pupils. We know that the number has grown significantly over the last few years, which is why the Conservatives opened 108 new specialist schools, committed to a further 92 and delivered over 60,000 new special needs school places. The growth in children with SEND is why getting the distribution of funding correct really does matter. We know that not enough of the funding is reaching schools and the children who need it the most. We know that as the number of children with SEND has increased, the deficit from the high-needs block has become financially unsustainable, as many Members have alluded to today. That is why we must confront the challenges facing local government when the statutory override ends in March 2026, and we would like to hear what assurances the Minister can give on how councils can address the deficit.

Sir John Hayes: As I expected, my hon. Friend is making a powerful and compelling case. Will she also ask the Minister to address the issue of special needs not being static? Many needs are dynamic—children change when their needs change—and that dynamism needs to be built into the system so that flexible funding can follow need.

Joy Morrissey: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that excellent point. Many Members have raised this issue, and perhaps we can have another debate in Government time on how SEND funding can follow the student, rather than just having it allocated. The needs of a SEND student will change over time, which is why parents often change educational providers. Children may go into independent school settings and then come back to state settings, and parents are constantly battling the system. It is worth looking at whether we can have a model in which the funding follows the student.

Many parents have come to me, and I am sure to other Members, to ask for VAT not to be charged on independent school fees, because over 100,000 pupils with SEND who were being supported in that educational setting now have to go back into the state sector, which cannot cope with rising costs and the number of students entering the system. I ask the Government to urgently look at that and to U-turn on the policy of charging VAT on school fees, because SEND children are falling through the cracks as a result.

For SEND students in primary school, it is very important that they have educational support through teachers. Primary school teachers are some of the most important teachers. They changed my life and helped me cope with my disability, and I would not be here today if I had not had them. The Government claimed that they would recruit 6,500 more teachers, but we have now heard that they will not do so. The truth is that there are now 400 fewer teachers than there were a year ago. Promises have been made, but this promise seems to have been broken.

However, it is even worse than that. When it comes to SEND, primary schools play a vital role, but this Government have had to quietly drop primary school teachers from their promise to recruit 6,500 teachers, and I honestly want to know why that is. Primary schools are where children with hidden SEND will first present. If there is early intervention, the journey to provide them with the right support is much easier. Having that support yields high levels of return, but if it is not put in place in time, we see high levels of exclusion and ultimately see children disengage from education and learning.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that the problem begins even earlier? Nurseries receive no dedicated SEND funding, which means that essential early intervention is provided by schools and the funding is overstretched. That is neither sustainable nor fair for the children or for the schools trying to support them.

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Member makes a wonderful point about the fact that early intervention is underfunded, but such funding actually reaps huge benefits for students. I should declare that I worked at the Centre for Social Justice, where we looked at early intervention as one of the most important ways of turning around the lives of children. Especially for children with special educational needs, early diagnosis and early intervention can make all the difference in their not falling behind when they enter main education. It is rare that I support additional funding, but I do for early intervention because it is life-changing. The years during which we can change a child's life are those from four to seven. It is such a small window during which we can erase trauma and help with any disability, but that will help them for the rest of their lives, so early intervention makes all the difference for such children in the long term.

I ask the Government to listen: to listen to the children, families and schools telling them that SEND funding is not making it to the children who need it; to listen to the local authorities that need clarity urgently on the future of high-needs blocks and the statutory override; to listen to the parents of children at independent schools who are being ripped from settings that work for them because of an Education Secretary who will

not listen to the evidence that those schools are the right place for those students at this time; and to listen to the primary schools that are now short of teachers, but are trying to provide SEND support for these children at the most vital stage of their education. It is time for the Government to listen and to make the changes our children with SEND so desperately need.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this debate on this important subject. I know he has a strong interest in special educational needs and disability, and I commend him for his 20 years of advocating for change. He spoke widely about many areas, but especially about distribution. I also thank the many Members across this Chamber for their passionate and sincere speeches, which all advocated for their constituents and the children they care about.

Among the many Members who have spoken, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) talked about the difficulties for parents navigating SEND. The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) spoke about the challenges involving EHCPs. My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) gave some case studies, and like other Members mentioned these precious children and their experiences, which were all very vital and pertinent to this debate. I thank them for those case studies about Grace, Olivia, Hermione and others, which I really appreciate and acknowledge. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) spoke about the Government investing in early years, and that is absolutely what we are doing.

I will seek to address as many as possible of the issues and challenges that have been raised and brought to my attention, but I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for his strong advocacy for SEN provision in his area, which has been noted. However, I will push back against the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who raised many issues to be addressed. I gently say to her that, given the past 14 years, we did not need to be in this position with SEND—we did not need to be here—and this Government have been left to fix the foundations. We do have a plan for change, and I will mention as many of the areas as I can.

The Government are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity and giving every child the best start in life. That means ensuring that all children and young people receive the right support to succeed in their education and to lead happy, healthy and productive adult lives.

Graham Stuart: Will the Minister give way?

Janet Daby: I would like to make some progress before I begin to give way.

Members from across the House will be aware of the challenges facing the SEND system—a system that is difficult for parents, carers and young people to navigate, and where outcomes for children are often poor. That has been mentioned by many Members. The Education Committee has undertaken its own inquiry aimed at solving the SEND crisis, which underscores the significant challenges we face. Improving the SEND system is a

[Janet Daby]

priority for this Government. We want all children to receive the right support to succeed in their education, and to lead happy, healthy and productive adult lives. The hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) quoted Hermione, who said that SEND needs to work for all, and I just wanted to acknowledge that.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. She will be aware that the title of this debate, despite what it says on the screen, is “Distribution of SEND Funding”. I hope, therefore, that she will focus primarily on that particular technical point. The distribution of SEND funding across the country is, according to f40 and campaigners across the House, unfair, broken and needs to change. Is that the Government’s view and the Minister’s view? That is the first answer, and then we can turn to how it can best be fixed. The most important thing is to recognise whether it is broken or not. I feel it is unfair and broken, and I would like to hear the Minister say so, if she agrees.

Janet Daby: I hear the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but he does need to allow me time to proceed. It would be wrong of me not to also respond to other Members from across the Chamber who have mentioned concerns with regard to the reason we are here.

Members across the House will be aware of the challenges facing the SEND system. Improving the SEND system is a priority for this Government. As I said, we want all children to receive the right support. We are prioritising early intervention and inclusive provision in mainstream settings. We know that early intervention prevents unmet needs from escalating, and that it supports all children and young people to achieve their goals alongside their peers.

These are complex issues that need a considered approach to deliver sustainable change, and we have already begun that work. We launched new training resources to support early years educators to meet emerging needs, and announced 1,000 further funded training places for early years special educational needs co-ordinators in the 2025-26 financial year, which will be targeted at settings in the most disadvantaged areas. We have extended the partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools programme to support an additional 1,200 mainstream primary schools to better meet the needs of neurodiverse children in the financial year 2025-26. That investment builds on the success of the programme, which was delivered to over 1,650 primary schools last year. We have already established an expert advisory group for inclusion to improve the mainstream educational outcomes and experiences of those with SEND.

All that work forms part of the Government’s opportunity mission, which will break down the unfair link between background and opportunity. We will continue to work with the sector as essential and valued partners to deliver our shared mission and to respect parents’ trust. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) mentioned, parents need to be respected, not exhausted.

The Department is providing an increase of £1 billion for the high needs budget in England in the 2025-26 financial year. Total high needs funding for children

and young people with complex SEND is over £12 billion for the year 2025-26. Returning to the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness, of that total, East Riding of Yorkshire council is being allocated over £42 million through the high needs funding block of the dedicated schools grant—an increase of £3.5 million on 2024-25. The high needs block is calculated using the high needs national funding formula. The NFF allocation is a 9.1% increase per head for the two to 18-year-old population on the equivalent 2024-25 NFF allocation.

I will turn to the many issues raised by other Members. We know that families face issues with education, health and care plans, and that even after fighting to secure the entitlement, support is not always delivered quickly enough. EHC plans should be issued within 20 weeks and are quality assured for a combination of statutory requirements, local authority frameworks and best practice guidelines, but the latest publication data showed that just half of new EHC plans were issued within the time limit in 2023. Where a local authority does not meet its duty on timeliness and quality of plans, we can take action that prioritises children’s needs and supports local areas to bring about rapid improvement.

This Government believe that a complex legal process should not be necessary to access good, early support for children and young people, which is why we need to focus on addressing the overall systemic issues to make SEND support easier to access. We are continuing to develop the ways in which we protect support for the children who will always need specialist placements and make accessing that support less bureaucratic and adversarial.

Mr Adnan Hussain: Does the Minister acknowledge that early support must be given to children when they are at nursery? If we identify those needs at that point, we could save money in the long run.

Janet Daby: The Government are very much committed to early intervention and prevention work.

Ben Obese-Jecty: It was strongly suggested the other day that the Government were going to look at changing EHCPs and possibly even scrapping them completely. Can the Minister give some reassurance to the House, and to constituents who may be watching this debate, that EHCPs will remain extant and will be worked on?

Janet Daby: As far as I am aware, EHC plans will continue.

We know that children’s earliest years make the biggest difference to their life chances. As I have already said, we believe in early intervention and recognise the importance of high-quality early years education and care, which can lead to better outcomes for children. Having access to a formal childcare setting allows children’s needs to be identified at the earliest opportunity, so that the appropriate support and intervention can be put in place to allow children with SEND to thrive.

Arrangements are in place to support children with SEND to access Government funding in early education, including funding for disability access and special educational needs inclusion and the high needs NFF allocations to support local authorities. We are reviewing early years SEND funding arrangements to assess how suitable the current arrangements are for supporting the needs of children with SEND.

The additional funding for schools of more than £4 billion a year over the next three years announced in the spending review will provide an above real-terms per-pupil increase in the core schools budget, taking per-pupil funding to its highest ever level and enabling us to transform the SEND system. We will improve support for children, stop parents having to fight for support and protect the support that is currently in place. Details of the Government's intended approach to SEND reform will be set out in the schools White Paper in the autumn. The Government will also set out further details on supporting local authorities as we transition to a reformed system as part of the upcoming local authority funding reform consultation.

Sir John Hayes: The point was made earlier about rural areas. My county of Lincolnshire has a sparsely distributed population, which makes travel and access difficult for parents of children with special needs. Will the Minister address that in the new funding formula to ensure that rural areas do not lose out?

Janet Daby: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. As I have already said, the Government intend to set out our SEND reforms in the schools White Paper in the autumn. I will make sure that a further response is also provided to the right hon. Gentleman on that point.

The investment in the spending review is a critical step forward in our mission to support all children and young people to achieve and thrive, and to support teachers and leaders to deliver high and rising standards across every school for every pupil.

On travel, which has been raised by many Members across the Chamber, local authorities must arrange free travel for children of compulsory school age who attend their nearest school and cannot walk there because of the distance, their SEND or a mobility problem, or because the route is not safe. There are additional rights to free travel for low-income households to help them exercise school choice.

Where a child has an EHCP, the school named in the plan will usually be considered their nearest to home for school travel purposes. We know how challenging home-to-school travel is for local authorities at the moment. That is due in large part to the pressures in the SEND system itself.

Central Government funding for home-to-school travel is provided through the local government finance settlement, administered by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The final settlement for 2025-26 makes available over £69 billion for local government, which is a 6.8% cash-terms increase in councils' core spending power for 2024-25.

We have committed to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, so that more children can attend a local school with their peers. This will mean that fewer children will need to travel long distances to a school that can meet their needs, which will reduce pressure on home-to-school travel over time, meaning that we will be better able to meet the needs of those who still need to rely on it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you want me to draw to a close. I reiterate that the Government are urgently looking at reforming the SEND system, so that it better serves children and young people and their

families. We have noted all the contributions that have been made this afternoon. This will take time, but we are working at pace and will be setting out our plans to do that in the White Paper in the autumn. Members can rest assured that our approach is rooted in partnership, and that all our work will be guided by what children, their families, experts, leaders and frontline professionals tell us. We can transform the outcomes of young people with SEND only if we listen and work together on solutions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Graham Stuart to wind up.

3.57 pm

Graham Stuart: I thank all colleagues for coming to the Chamber on this Thursday afternoon, because this issue is just so important. We have heard really interesting and reflective speeches from right across the House, as Members have sought to champion the children who probably most need help in our society, so it is right that we should be here.

I thank the Minister for her response. I was slightly disappointed, because the title of this debate is "Distribution of SEND Funding", and it is important to ask whether the distribution is right. Do the Government think that it is, or that it is not? I do not think that the system is defensible as it is, and it would be good to hear that said. Once one has recognised that the system is broken and unfair, the next question is: how shall we fix it? We did not get an answer to that, because we did not get an answer to the first question.

The Minister's response morphed into what we talk about generally, which is SEN overall, what the Government are doing, the £1 billion extra and all the other things, many of which are welcome, but the question underneath that is whether the distribution is right. If it is not, are we going to do something about it, while making these other changes? We did not get an answer to that.

My appeal to the Minister—I think colleagues across the House will welcome this; I might even get a nod from some on the Government Benches—is to make sure that, in the White Paper, there is an opportunity to make the distribution fairer, if not immediately, then at least over time. We must recognise the problem and look to level up over time. That is not to penalise those who might be technically overfunded today, but to make sure that every child has a fairer and better chance of getting whatever we can best provide from the system. That is an important element of the overall discussion about SEND.

We will doubtless hear more about this topic. The Minister did not seem absolutely clear whether EHCPs were here to stay. Resisting my own strictures on sticking to the subject of distribution, I will use the few seconds that I have left to talk about the EHCP system. When a child gets an EHCP, they get a better outcome. Perhaps that is driving parents to push their children to get one, and that may be contributing to the financial unsustainability of the system that we have today. It would be enormously controversial to look to remove it. At the moment we have a system that from 2019 to 2024 was increased by 60%. The Government are putting in another £1 billion, and another £760 million was announced yesterday, and that is welcome, but if we do not find a way of stabilising the system, we will still have

[Graham Stuart]

those who are sharp-elbowed getting something for their kids and those who are not losing out. That is not a system that anyone across the House should be satisfied with.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the distribution of SEND funding.

Covid: Fifth Anniversary

4 pm

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I bet to move,

That this House has considered the fifth anniversary of the covid-19 pandemic.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the Backbench Business Committee for granting my request for this debate. I also thank all hon. Members who supported my application. I approached the Committee because it is important that we mark the fifth anniversary of the pandemic.

It was an extraordinary time in our lives and for the nation. In some ways it feels like a dream. Five years on, it seems hard to believe that we actually went through such a period of disruption. The impact has been huge and long-lasting, even if we do not acknowledge that on a day-to-day basis.

I should say that I do not intend to talk about, and neither do I hope this debate becomes about, the origins of the pandemic, the way it was handled, personal protective equipment, the then Government, or any of the inquiries or legalities. There will be plenty of time for those discussions, and no doubt this House will have plenty of opportunities to talk about those things in future. I want this debate to be about people and communities.

We lost a lot of people to covid, and the impact on those who lost loved ones was significant. It cut across communities, ages and faiths. Most of us will have had covid. All of us will know someone who has been affected. Many of us will know people who died and will understand the impact of the grief and loss combined with the shock of a pandemic. There were funerals unattended and people who had to die alone. As the current Prime Minister said at the time,

“People are frightened by the strangeness, anxious about what will happen next. And we have to remember that every number is a family shaken to its foundation.”

It is not just those we lost whom we must remember. The country kept going through the incredible hard work and bravery of our frontline workforce, but it also carried on because of schools, community groups, places of worship, volunteers and people just being good neighbours. Without them, we could not have kept going. I know from experience in my community that the work of volunteers was vital. They put their community first, above and beyond their own needs, as did our frontline workers, from those in the NHS and care homes to bin men, social workers, the emergency services and transport workers, to name just a few. There is a danger as we get into the politics and the legalities that we will forget the many workers on whom we quietly relied, or that we will allow their contribution to be underappreciated. They deserve to be recognised and for their efforts to be applauded.

During the lockdowns I was a member of the Newham council cabinet, with responsibility for much of the public realm, including waste and recycling. I remember the posters attached to the wheelie bins thanking the bin men for their work and for coming out during the lockdown to clear rubbish. In normal times we perhaps do not think about the people who collect our bins, other than to curse a little if it is an early morning collection or mildly panic on realising that it is bin day

and the bins have not been put out. In this time of stress, the role they played was emblematic of so many of our key workers, and it was great to see residents sharing their appreciation.

Across Newham, over 650 residents volunteered their time with the council's #HelpNewham initiative to support the borough's most vulnerable. There were also more than 500 covid champions, who helped to distribute information and advice to their communities during the pandemic to keep people informed. Those are the people who made such a difference and provided vital support to the local council at a time when it was stretched by delivering vital services in a borough with a high number of vulnerable people and a high rate of infection and casualties.

We often talk about the numbers, but it is important that we understand the sheer scale of the impact that the pandemic had on our communities. My borough lost more than 1,000 people to covid. It was one of the worst-hit places in the country, and at the beginning of the pandemic it was the worst-affected place in the UK. It is extremely easy to lose sight of the impact when we talk about the numbers, and the larger the number, the greater the danger that it becomes a statistic and the individuals behind it are lost. Behind those numbers are real people, real stories and real lives, and we must never forget that. That is backed up with stories of compassion and kindness from families, friends and NHS doctors and nurses. It is vital we find ways for their names and faces to be remembered, and for their families to gain comfort from that memory.

The inspiration for this debate came from my staff during a visit to Plaistow Park. It is there that Newham has created its permanent memorial to covid. In the middle of the crisis, I was certain that we would need to find a way to mark it for local people. It was clear from the scale of the pandemic and the lives lost that there would be national and regional memorials. Indeed, Newham hosts the London blossom garden, a memorial for London, in the Olympic park, which is in the constituency of my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran). The national memorial wall has also offered much to many people.

Given the impact on Newham, however, we needed something dedicated to our local people. A monolithic memorial felt wrong. This was not a war memorial; it needed to be something that reflected the nature of the people who were impacted. It needed to be a memorial for all—young or old, single or with a family, religious or not. It had to be a space for everyone. What was designed was a memorial garden in one of our parks, created with the help of our parks team, landscape architects and local artist Matt Ponting. Importantly, it was created in consultation and discussion with local people, and designed to work for all in our community. It is a landscaped area in a previously little-used part of Plaistow Park in my constituency, in the centre of our borough, with trees and flowers, seating and its own paths and works of art, in which people can sit quietly, pray, reflect or enjoy it with others. On the day of its opening in 2023, more than 100 local people turned out, including one local resident who had lost his father. Still grieving the loss, his appreciation for having a place that he could visit, and that meant that his father and those who died had not been forgotten, is something that struck me and that I remember vividly.

All politicians hope that they will have a legacy, and we all have ideas of what we might like to achieve. I did when I started as a councillor, and I even realised some of them. But if I had to leave just one thing behind me, I think it would be that garden. Sadly, there is no database of memorials, and no online guide to what has been put in place, but we will all know of something that has been done to recognise the impact of covid. We need to create some form of guide or register so we can ensure that such memorials are not lost for the future. We know that good work has been done.

Researching the background to this debate, I came across some wonderful examples, such as memorial gardens in Telford, Oldham and Enfield, memorial woodlands in Wokingham and Hornchurch, and a memorial mosaic in Barrow. I hope we will hear more examples from hon. Members this afternoon. These spaces are vital, not just for now, but for the generations that come after us. We cannot allow the legacy of the pandemic to be the preserve of documentaries, textbooks and history lessons. It should be a legacy rooted in our communities, celebrating the sacrifices and contributions that were made and remembering those who are no longer with us—not as the statistics they are recorded by, but by the lives they lived.

This year is the 85th anniversary of the beginning of the blitz, which started in my constituency. It was in the east end of London that the phrase "blitz spirit", which we still use, emerged—a spirit of standing firm and working together as a community. We saw in 2020 how strongly that still existed and, when the chips were down, the strength of our communities. Perhaps we should now be talking about pandemic spirit, and talking with pride about how that spirit shone through across our communities.

Today, I hope that we can contribute to that spirit in this House. I hope the debate will provide comfort for those who are remembering loved ones. I hope it helps to ensure that all who went out to work to keep things going in those difficult days get their recognition. I hope it helps to shine a light on the army of volunteers who stepped up and helped when it was needed most.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Colleagues can see how many Members wish to contribute. There will be a speaking limit of three minutes.

4.8 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for securing the debate, and for the eloquent and passionate way in which he spoke. I agree that it has been hard preparing for this debate, because in many ways I think we have still to come to terms with what happened. For me, it was particularly strange as a new MP, as I was at the start of 2020. I arrived in this place expecting everything to be seen, debated and understood through the lens of Brexit, because that was how it had been in the recent years up to that point. Just three months after my election, we saw covid and national lockdowns, and everything changed. I recruited staff, handed them laptops and did not know when I would see and engage with them again.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

This place was diminished too. The benefit of developing cross-party relationships is so valuable and we do not realise that until there is no opportunity for it. In the same way the hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton thanked those in his community, I recognise the staff here who did so much to facilitate the sitting of this House and the work that needed to be done.

Every day, as I come here, I walk past the national covid memorial. On a couple of occasions I have seen people updating or enhancing some of the fading that has taken place—and it is important that we do that. The memorial is across from this place, and we take this moment to remember the 200,000-plus people who died from covid-19 in the UK. The memorial is a daily, poignant reminder of the cruel, devastating and terrifying disease that covid was, especially in those early months. For those affected, the pain of that loss is still acute.

As a Scottish MP, I want to touch on how policy responses to the pandemic highlighted that often we do not have four-nation thinking and decision making. In those early days, everything was aligned and we saw the strength of intergovernmental thinking and decisions. As hard as it was, there was one set of rules and they applied everywhere. There is no doubt, however, that as time went on, the rules got more complex—inside, outside, work, two metres, rule of six and tiers—and they differed between the four nations. I had to have covid apps for Scotland and for England, and occasionally got pinged in different places by different apps. Another example from my constituency was the impact on golf and tourism, and that included the impact of the different rules.

We need to learn those lessons, and I am pleased to see that there is better intergovernmental working between the Scottish and UK Governments. However, where we have different policy responses, we always need to ensure that they are good, they are clear and they are for the right reasons.

4.11 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for securing this debate. The covid-19 pandemic had a global reach, yet the impact was not felt equally. On a local level, the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on some of the most vulnerable in society. The elderly, those with pre-existing conditions and people living in the most deprived areas saw some of the highest fatality rates. The covid-19 pandemic in the UK and globally displayed for all to see—or all who cared to see—the damning consequences of societal and economic inequalities.

Globally, covid-19 is estimated to have directly caused 7 million deaths and many millions more indirectly. The global response was unequal and unjust, with many countries starved of essential vaccines, tests and treatments. Though some spoke of covid-19 as being a once-in-a-lifetime event, that is not necessarily true. A key way of honouring those who died, those who were left bereaved and those who suffered in so many ways is to focus on having a plan for the next pandemic. Studies suggest that outbreaks caused by diseases moving from animals to people are happening more often and with greater impact. That said, there are reasons for hope in that area.

A number of initiatives and projects are working to ensure that the next outbreak does not catch us unprepared. One example is the 100 Days Mission, which is a global initiative that aims to have safe, effective and accessible vaccines, tests and treatments within 100 days of the next pandemic. It is estimated that had the world deployed vaccines, tests and treatments within 100 days for covid, rather than within 300 days, we could have prevented 8.3 million excess deaths and avoided trillions in economic losses.

It is welcome that the UK Government continue to support that mission and more general global health research and development. Research in that area and in so many others is so important. We live in an age where some decry experts. I suggest that we need more expertise, research and science, not less.

We need to remember those who suffered and those who died, and we need to mark that by a commitment to ensure that we are better placed than ever before for any such eventuality in the future.

4.14 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for securing the debate, which takes place five years after covid-19 swept across the country. It is right that we take a moment to reflect not only on what we have lost, but the duty we have to those who continue to carry the burden of the pandemic. Today I speak for some of the families who caught covid and never recovered. For them, the pandemic is not history, a chapter from their past; it is still very much with them today. I speak particularly for those in my constituency who did the right thing, followed the rules, took the vaccine and were harmed.

In particular, I want to share the story of Adam Bounds, who came from Axminster. He was 41 years old. He was a devoted father, a hard-working man and deeply loved by his family. On 20 May 2021, he received his first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, and 11 days later he died of vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia, which is a rare but now medically recognised side effect—essentially, blood clots. My constituent—Adam's father Leslie—has fought a dignified and determined campaign to get compensation for Adam's son, his grandson, through the vaccine damage payment scheme. It has taken two years and considerable stress and anxiety. The family has now received the £120,000 payment, and Leslie has dealt with it all, causing him an enormous amount of trauma, frankly—two years of form filling, chasing departments and reliving that awful historic period.

If we want people to have faith in vaccines, and I do, we must ensure that we have a proper, functioning compensation system that is swift, supportive and responsive to the needs of grieving families. Justice is about not only those who died, but those who live with the aftershocks. In Devon, 20,000 people are reported to have long covid.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): My hon. Friend speaks passionately about an issue that also affects constituents of mine, such as Anna in Harpenden, a 12-year-old who lives with long covid. She has headaches and stomach issues day in, day out. Does he agree that we need to have a covid register and care pathway to ensure that those living with the consequences of covid are properly looked after?

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A covid register makes good sense. She mentioned symptoms, and those can also include tiredness, struggling for breath, memory problems and heart palpitations. We should remember that many of the people affected by long covid are the very people who took the brave decision to expose themselves right at the beginning. They are the people we pay tribute to, such as care workers, shop assistants, health staff and teachers—those who kept society going while others were isolating.

Last month, I was speaking with residents in Sidmouth and met a constituent who shared the impact that long covid continues to have on his daughter. She was somebody who was hard-working and determined but now finds that her energy has almost vanished. She is unable to work and is often confined to her bed, and her social life has disappeared. Like thousands of others across the UK, she faces the potential hammer blow of the Government's proposed welfare reforms. Most people with fluctuating invisible conditions like long covid or ME will not be eligible, as we understand, for personal independence payments under the new assessment.

According to the Office for National Statistics, 3.6% of adults say they have experienced long covid at some point. If we want a society that is prepared for the next crisis, we must learn the lessons of the last one. We owe it to Leslie Bounds and others in Sidmouth and to everyone across the country who suffered from covid.

4.19 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for securing this debate. We have rightly spoken about those who died during the pandemic, but covid also did something else: it made it much harder for people to earn a decent living. Those who were already struggling—the low paid, the young and people in places outside London—suffered the most.

First, covid hit low-paid people in jobs such as bartending, which could be done only in person because they required complex manual movements, while those in high-paid jobs could use Zoom to reach the office. The low paid were hit and far more likely to be laid off or placed on furlough.

Secondly, the young fell behind while the wealthy baby boomers continued to pull ahead. In the two decades leading up to covid, house prices went up by 100% while wages grew by only 20%. That is why the young cannot afford homes. During the pandemic, quantitative easing, low interest rates and pensioners not spending cash meant that baby boomers started to buy homes again, and house prices are up 25% since covid began, while some 40% of 18 to 30-year-olds are living at home with mum and dad.

Thirdly, London continues to pull ahead. Zooming to work enlarges London's effective size, while places outside the capital lose out. More and more people and economic activity are sucked into the capital. The people who already could not make ends meet are pulling away not only from mainstream parties but from this House itself. The economically insecure are 50% more likely to have stopped supporting the Labour party, but they are also leaving almost every party in this House.

We can reshape our nation so that everyone can earn enough, but we will do it only if the Government act. For the low paid, we must invest to create good jobs and

to get bills down. For the young, we must build far more homes. For the rest of the nation, we must invest outside London. We are at this moment a nation deeply divided, and the pandemic widened those divisions.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Thousands of self-employed people and business owners were excluded from Government support because of the arbitrary eligibility criteria. They paid their taxes but were left unsupported during the crisis. Does the hon. Member agree that it is disappointing that those people are still struggling five years on?

Dr Sandher: Indeed, huge numbers of people were hit so hard during the pandemic. We agree that although support was broad, it certainly was not perfect.

On top of the suffering, the pandemic widened existing inequalities and divisions in our nation. Those who could not earn enough—the low paid, the young and people outside London—were hit the hardest. They were already turning away from us in this House; they are now turning away more quickly. We can bring them back only if we act to ensure that every single person can earn enough for a decent life, if we create a nation in which we recognise that our strength is founded in each of us doing well—a nation of unity, common purpose and connection. It is for us to build that nation, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton rightly noted.

4.23 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for securing the debate and for his tribute to public service workers.

We should never forget that in places like Edinburgh, everyone—from bus drivers to bin lorry drivers—took huge risks at the start of the pandemic because the consequences and transmission of the virus were not understood. At this point, I must mention my lovely wife, who worked in end-of-life care as a nurse all the way through, as well as the fantastic Hannah in my office, who worked in a care home.

Covid has not disappeared. The fantastic covid memorial wall across the river from this building tells us that. The number of hearts on it is slowly growing. I hope that, when she responds, the Minister will give us an update on any plans to make the memorial permanent and acknowledge the fantastic work of the friends of the wall.

Covid has not gone away yet. In one week alone in Scotland last year, 443 people were hospitalised with covid. Long covid is now just as prevalent as strokes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and atrial fibrillation.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing up long covid. The organisation Long Covid Kids, which was founded by my constituent Sammie McFarland, highlights the experience of young people with long covid. Does he agree that we must ensure we give long covid the consideration it needs alongside other illnesses when we develop health policy, even though we are five years on from the pandemic?

Dr Arthur: Absolutely. I hope I will be able to expand on that in the time I have remaining, but that organisation sounds fantastic, so I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning it.

[Dr Arthur]

One of the most powerful things about being an MP is the people we meet, particularly in our constituencies. One of those people is Sophie, who attended my surgery in the fantastic Fountainbridge library. Her story starkly portrays the reality of living with long covid. Sophie enjoyed a full and active life before the pandemic. She used to run to her office in the mornings, where she oversaw a small, dedicated team of designers—I am sure she was not too sweaty after her run to work. She now relies on a wheelchair to get around and is largely housebound. She says,

“I am desperate to get back to my career and live again”, but doctors have been unable to help her.

Sophie is one of a small but growing number of constituents who write to me with stories that highlight the seemingly irreversible impact that a covid infection has had on their lives. With no proven treatments or a cure in sight, we cannot afford to treat covid as old news. We need to keep talking about it, and particularly about those people who are suffering from long covid. It should not be an economic argument, but the impact of long covid on our economy is significant: it is estimated to cost us £4.2 billion up to 2030.

As long as treatment options remain limited and new patients continue to join the thousands already grappling with long covid on a daily basis, we need to do just three things to help them and reduce the burden on our NHS: we need to empathise with those who have this condition and treat it seriously—too often, they are seen as working the system, and I know through the people I have met that that is completely untrue; we need to invest in new trials and research; and we need to recognise that while the threat of covid may have diminished, we have to take it seriously and ensure that vulnerable groups are vaccinated.

4.27 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I declare my interest in this debate as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vulnerable groups to pandemics.

“Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.” It is almost surreal, five years on, to say those words aloud today. Most of us had never heard of social distancing or imagined a Britain under lockdown. Overnight, vibrant communities turned still. Our high streets, once filled with life and laughter, became eerily silent, like scenes from a Hollywood sci-fi. But this was not fiction; it was our shared reality. The consequences were real and the sacrifices immeasurable. Today, as we reflect on that time, we carry a duty to not just remember but learn the lessons for the future.

For many of us, the covid pandemic feels like a closed chapter. The lockdowns have ended, the pubs are open, the masks are off and life has almost returned to normal, but for over 1 million people across the UK, normal never really returned. Those are people who are immunocompromised. They cannot mount an effective response to mRNA—messenger ribonucleic acid—vaccines. The very tool that pulled so many of us out of lockdown—the vaccine—simply does not work for them. That means today, in 2025, they are still living with the same risk that the elderly and clinically vulnerable faced in those terrifying months in 2020. They are still shielding, still isolated and still left behind, and the toll on those people and their families is appalling.

A recent report by the campaign group Forgotten Lives UK found that 93% of family members of immunocompromised patients are still shielding to protect their loved ones. Three quarters of those families are in the clinical range for anxiety and depression. Half of all patients are missing medical appointments, and a third are facing financial hardship. I know the Secretary of State has met with immunocompromised patients and representatives from the Forgotten Lives UK group. I welcome that engagement and echo its call for better support. However, I must express my disappointment. As chair of the all-party group on vulnerable groups to pandemics, I wrote to the previous Minister and the current Minister, asking them to meet me and those immunocompromised patients. To date, I have not received a response, so I would be grateful if the Minister would follow up on that matter directly.

In conclusion—I am flipping through my well prepared speech, Madam Deputy Speaker—we need a whole-Government approach to addressing this issue, and tangible assistance to help people reintegrate into work and public life; and we need to educate society about the risks that covid-19 continues to pose to immunocompromised individuals.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We will not get everybody in unless I drop the time limit again down to two minutes.

4.30 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) on securing this debate, so that we can learn from the covid years. I first pay tribute to the amazing health workers, volunteers and key workers who supported us through that turbulent time, and I will focus my brief contribution on the often overlooked impact that covid had on maternity services and pregnancy, and on the lived experiences of women. We know that women were shut out of the highest levels of decision making during the pandemic, and their voices were sidelined. Research from the London School of Economics and Political Science found that the Conservative Government consistently failed to consider gender in their response to covid-19.

During covid, the Maternal Mental Health Alliance reported a sharp rise in maternal anxiety, and the already concerning gaps in perinatal mental health services widened further. Informed support networks, which are so vital to new mothers, were decimated by lockdowns and restrictions. The withdrawal of home birth services and the closure of midwife-led units during the pandemic curtailed women's autonomy over how and where to give birth. That shift saw many women forced to deliver in hospitals where covid-19 was actively being treated, heightening the health risk for mothers and newborns. Post-natal services also suffered immensely. A coalition of 13 pregnancy and baby charities gave evidence about covid-19, and they spoke about the way that the needs of mothers and new parents were consistently overlooked in critical healthcare decisions. For instance, one-year assessments were done by video call; there was a lack of replacement for in-person baby classes; and there were no health visitors or community practitioners.

We are running short of time, so in conclusion, I remind the House that roughly 1.85 million babies were born during the UK pandemic years, and all those children have mothers who had to face that time alone, confused and forgotten. We owe it to every parent, midwife and newborn to ensure that never happens again. Let that be our legacy—not just remembrance, but the resolve to build a health system that is resilient, compassionate and prepared. The next generation deserves to be welcomed into a world that has learned from its past and strives for better.

4.32 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asper) on securing this debate. It may be five years since the pandemic began, but those years cast a long shadow. Regrettably, the effects will be felt for many years to come. Across my constituency in and around Bolton, the pandemic left a deep scar, with thousands of lives tragically cut short. Those were not numbers on a board or figures on a screen; they were neighbours, parents, siblings, children, mums and dads, aunts and uncles, family friends and loved ones. Their memory must be honoured, not just with fine words in the Chamber today, but in our commitment to learning the lessons from the covid pandemic, so that never again do we find ourselves wholly unprepared for a public health emergency.

We would be doing all those people who lost or risked their life a huge disservice if we did not learn the lessons of the pandemic, so I implore the Minister—I hope we will make progress on this—to look at how it was possible that our frontline workers were sent into battle against the virus without adequate personal protective equipment. There was PPE that was deemed unfit for purpose, PPE that was not delivered in a timely manner, and PPE that was not manufactured to NHS requirements. PPE contracts awarded by the previous Government meant that millions of pounds of taxpayers' money were squandered through a cavalier approach to procurement, and serious questions were raised about integrity, probity, and value for money. Five years after covid first hit these shores, these issues continue to wind their way through our courts. Of course the Government needed to act at speed—nobody denies that—but what went on is, in my view, inexcusable. Leading anti-corruption charity Transparency International UK produced a 2024 report, "Behind the Mask", which found a total of 135 high-risk covid-19 contracts, totalling £15.3 billion. Many of those were awarded without competitive tender, and were rushed.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): In Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, up to 1,400 people died because of covid, and many in my constituency are living with grief, trauma and long covid. When I speak to GPs, they are rightly pleased with and proud of their role in vaccinating our town and country, but they feel that this role has been forgotten. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must remember the contribution of our GPs as vaccinators, and send the signal that this House thanks them?

Phil Brickell: I welcome my hon. Friend's contribution. We should thank not just GPs, but all the key workers who were vital in ensuring that our country could keep going, and who kept us safe during those terrible years.

Returning to the point about Government procurement, the VIP lane disproportionately favoured companies with political connections, rather than prioritising value for money or capability to deliver. The National Audit Office found that suppliers on the VIP list were 10 times more likely to secure a PPE contract from the Government than those who came through the ordinary lane. That would be all well and good if those contracts had provided any sort of value for money, but the Good Law Project revealed that such contracts were 80% more expensive than other suppliers were. Indeed, some contracts were agreed at more than four times the average unit price.

To close, in order to truly honour the legacy of the hundreds of thousands who tragically lost their life in the pandemic, we must act on the lessons learned during those awful few years. We must ensure that there is a proper Government procurement system that can secure public trust.

4.35 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Hon. Members have mentioned the memorial wall on the banks of the Thames, opposite this place, on which 240,000 hearts denote individuals we lost during covid-19. I want to mention one of those individuals: my grandad Bill. We lost him in June 2020, five years ago next week. He went into hospital with something else, but he contracted covid on the ward and he passed away. He died on his own in a hospital bed. None of us was allowed to see him, because we were following the rules, and the next time I saw him, he was in a coffin, in an empty church. The reason I remember that date in June 2020 so viscerally is not only because we lost my grandad in a way that meant it was impossible to properly grieve, but because on that very same day, the then Prime Minister had a birthday party in No. 10.

Many people across this House and this country will have stories like that. While we followed the rules, made sacrifices and lost people, others acted with impunity. I do not want to make my comments party political—I know that there will be Conservative Members who will also feel angry about what happened—but as we mark this anniversary, I hope all of us commit to ensuring that the bond of trust between politicians and the public is rebuilt, and is never again frayed and broken in such a fundamental way.

In the remaining seconds that I have, I pay tribute to all our key workers, everyone in our NHS and all our communities, particularly those in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. They came together during that pandemic, as we always have in times of hardship, but in a way that we have never seen before.

4.37 pm

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): In the time I have available, I will focus on education and care provision during the pandemic. I was serving as North Lanarkshire's chair of education when the Scottish Government directed the closure of schools in March 2020. Within days, the entire country was locked down, and we moved to home-schooling and virtual lessons.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern for the children in all our constituencies who, after losing nearly two years of face-to-face schooling, are still suffering set-backs in their learning and their social skills? Will he join me in

[Maureen Burke]

calling on the Government to channel investment into those who were at school during those years of disruption, to ensure that there is not a lost generation in this country?

Frank McNally: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK Government are investing significantly in skills and apprenticeships for some of those young people who were impacted by the pandemic, and we need to see that in Scotland as well.

For children transitioning from early years to primary 1, and from primary 7 to secondary, it must have felt like experiencing an alternative universe, given social distancing, the expansion of digital learning and the use of PPE. Sadly, despite the best efforts of those on the frontline, young people lost learning, and we have to tackle that head-on. However, they showed resilience. Sadly, that resilience and those efforts were trampled on when the Scottish Government sought to downgrade the higher results of 2,900 children from my local authority area. Some 46% of young people were discriminated against based on their postcodes, rather than recognised for their ability. Thankfully, young people successfully fought back on that.

I will also touch on the role of carers. Like so many frontline workers, they showed up and put their health and wellbeing on the line to serve some of the most vulnerable in our communities. They did so despite, at times, limited and faulty PPE, entrenched low pay, and poor policy decisions that saw frail patients discharged from hospitals and into care homes untested, contributing to 5,000 care home deaths.

There can often be a focus on Downing Street parties or deleted WhatsApp messages, but at the forefront of our minds must always be the victims of covid, including those who died unnecessarily and those who live with long covid and the psychological impact of the disease, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) said. There are also those who delivered the ultimate act of service, including refuse collectors, police officers, nurses, shop workers and many others from the voluntary sector and religious establishments. As we recognise the fifth anniversary of covid, their efforts in the face of such hardship, their resilience and their sacrifice must be the true and lasting legacy of such an unprecedented pandemic, which we must all fight to ensure that we never experience again.

4.40 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I will follow on from my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter). I have been meeting a group of clinicians who approached me, led by Dr Rae Duncan, a consultant cardiologist and long-covid physician and researcher at Newcastle hospital. She has provided me with a detailed briefing note; the two-minute limit will not allow me to do any justice to it, so I will circulate it to hon. Members, but its message is very straightforward. The team want to get across the message that covid is not over. It is not seasonal, and it is not just a cold. It is a long-term, substantial and chronic burden.

Lloyd Hatton: I will be brief. This is Diabetes Week, and we are rightly looking at the impact that diabetes has on children. Does the right hon. Member agree that

a similar approach must be taken for long covid? We must look at the unique impact it has on children and young people, so that we can better understand it.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I think the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) needs to respond to the first intervention. I appreciate what is happening, though, and he may wish to take the second intervention shortly afterwards.

John McDonnell: I have never seen an intervention on an intervention. I will follow on from that point. The clinicians are trying to get across to me that, as others have said, covid doubles the risk of a heart attack. We have seen heart attacks, strokes, pulmonary embolisms and deep-vein thrombosis. In addition, the team is trying to get across the message that long covid is not simply fatigue. It is an umbrella term for a range of chronic, multi-system pathologies that have an effect.

There is one issue that affects children in particular. The work of Dr Danielle Beckman has shown that covid breaches the blood-brain barrier. As a result, it infects the neurons and causes persistent brain inflammation, thereby imposing cognitive impediments.

Lillian Jones: My right hon. Friend is speaking about children. Does he agree that the covid pandemic really affected children who were going through school? All of a sudden, they could not see their friends for many, many weeks. I worked in the NHS. When we are living in the moment, we do not think of these things, but when we reflect, we think, "Oh God, what a time we lived through." That struck me when I was with my niece, who was running through the park, and she saw her friend—she was 10 years old. They ran and hugged. It was fantastic to see. They had not seen each other for so long. That act of kindness, friendship and coming together of spirit really lifted me, because even children of that age were feeling something huge that they had never felt before. That was an inspirational point for me during covid, and the same point hit me when carrying out my NHS role.

John McDonnell: The intervention on an intervention was definitely worth it.

I will briefly raise another issue. One of the messages the clinicians wanted me to get across was exactly that: children have not been spared. Some of the research they have done, for example, indicates that covid doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes in children as well. A recent study in America indicates that up to 20% of children at the moment are endangered and experiencing long covid symptoms.

One of the other issues that came out of my discussions with the clinicians is that repeat infections are cumulative and dangerous, resulting in long covid that increases the risk of cardiovascular, neurological, gastrointestinal and endocrine diseases. These clinicians are trying to get across how challenging the situation is. The problem we have at the moment is that the Office for National Statistics' covid infection survey has been shut down. I can understand the argument for doing so at the time,

but the figure coming out of the recent GPs' survey is that 3.2 million people are experiencing long covid at the moment—again, a staggering figure.

A number of recommendations have been made, one of which is to restore national infection surveillance as quickly as possible. Exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West has said, we should fund research and clinical services for long covid. We should implement public health mitigations to reduce infection, particularly in places such as hospitals, classrooms and so on. We benefit from air circulation in this building; others should as well. Finally, as my hon. Friend said, we should protect vulnerable populations—including children—from the chronic disability that covid can impose.

I will circulate the briefing paper to all Members, and we can have another discussion at another time. I was hoping no one would turn up today and I would have longer for my speech.

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

4.46 pm

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Today, we mark five years since the start of the covid-19 pandemic. Just under 227,000 people in the UK died with covid-19 listed as a cause on their death certificate. Every one of those statistics is a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a child, a neighbour or a friend. Thousands were separated from their loved ones, and that loss and grief may never fully heal.

Yet in the darkest of times, the British people shone with immense compassion and courage, and a sense of community spirit. Doctors, nurses and carers worked punishing hours, often risking their own lives; teachers, council workers and others worked in the toughest of conditions; and volunteers came forward in droves to collect and deliver prescriptions, shop for the frail and elderly, staff temporary centres to administer vaccines, and check in on neighbours. That resilience and solidarity showed the very best of who we are.

Sadly, that same spirit of public service was not reflected in the highest offices of Government. The findings of the first covid inquiry, led by Baroness Hallett, laid bare the truth that the UK was ill-prepared for dealing with a catastrophic emergency, let alone the coronavirus pandemic. We had planned for the wrong pandemic, one based on flu; we ignored the risks associated with other potential pathogens; we ignored warnings; and then we failed to act on lessons from past civil emergency exercises and outbreaks of disease. These were systemic and political failings that worsened people's suffering. Let us be frank: the most vulnerable paid the highest price. There was cruelty in the rigidity of restrictions, with families kept apart even in their loved ones' final moments. All of this was made more painful by the bitter hypocrisy of partygate, a betrayal of trust that mocked the sacrifices of millions.

The Lib Dems called for an inquiry in 2020, and we continue to demand answers. The full facts must be known about every aspect of the Government's poor response. This is not born out of a desire for vengeance; the British people deserve to know the truth, and they deserve far better in future. We now have a moral responsibility to act, and this Government must commit

to implementing the inquiry's recommendations in full and without delay. Patients and care home residents must have a legal right to maintain contact with their loved ones; a comprehensive civil emergency strategy is essential; and the new UK Resilience Academy must train 4,000 people in resilience and emergency roles, as promised. Can the Minister give us confidence that this will be delivered?

The voices of frail and older people must be heard at the heart of Government planning. We call for a commissioner for ageing and older people, to ensure that their needs are never neglected again. Public officials must be held to a duty of candour—the Government's promise of a Hillsborough law remains unfulfilled. Can the Minister say when survivors and families will see the legislation for which they have waited so long?

We must also confront a hard truth: our nation was less resilient because health inequality has left our population quite simply less healthy. Years of cuts to public health services under the Conservatives left us more vulnerable. The Lib Dems are calling for urgent action to increase the public health grant and allow communities to co-produce plans; establish a health creation unit to lead cross-Government efforts to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequality; improve access to blood pressure checks in community spaces and expand social prescribing; introduce a new kitemark for health apps and digital health tools, ensuring that they are clinically sound; create a new levy on tobacco company profits to fund healthcare and smoking cessation services; and pass a clean air Act to tackle pollution and improve air quality.

Lastly, we must not forget those living with the consequences of the virus, as Members have mentioned. We call for a long covid register. As we remember those whom we lost, we owe it to them and to future generations to ensure that these lessons are not buried in reports and left on shelves, but lead to real changes that make improvements in our constituents' lives. The British people were courageous, generous and selfless; they deserve a Government who act to match that spirit.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

4.50 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asker) on his speech and on securing this important debate. The vast majority of contributions today have been measured, thoughtful and non-political, and I think they have done this House proud. It is right that we remember, reflect and learn. It is the least we owe those who lost loved ones during the pandemic.

As someone who during the pandemic was doing the job of the Minister, I recall it incredibly well, as will so many in this House and outside it. The hon. Gentleman said—I know what he meant—that with the passage of five years, sometimes what happened then can feel a bit like a dream. It is something that still catches me in mine at night. I often wake with a jolt, suddenly remembering vividly something that took place then—something that we did or had to do, or a particular moment as a Minister. I suspect that that is true of many up and down this country in many different walks of life, particularly those who were on the frontline.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My wife was an obs and gynae doctor, and she still is. She was one of those people on the frontline whom the shadow Secretary of State describes. Does he agree that there needs to be a study into the long-term impact on the wellbeing of staff who were on the frontline dealing with these traumatic situations, so as to understand the impacts on health and productivity within the NHS?

Edward Argar: That is important, because people up and down this country still live with the impacts of the pandemic through long covid and mental health challenges. We see that huge impact still today on individuals and the NHS. We must remember how the country came together in the face of unprecedented events, about which we learned more every day. We had to adapt our approach to that changing knowledge. I am grateful to all Members from all parts of this Chamber for what they did.

A few Members in the Chamber were in the House at the time, and they will remember the work of Jon Ashworth, which I recognise in particular. He was in this place at that time, and I remember his cross-party approach to so much that was done. I pay tribute to the emergency services, to councillors and to the people of this country, particularly those who worked in health and social care and those who lost someone.

It was a traumatic time for the whole country. There are lessons that must be learned about planning for future pandemics and supporting those with long covid. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) was right—like so many, I have constituents who lost loved ones and family members who were affected by the vaccine, as has been recognised by a coroner. They have been dignified and courteous, but they call for the Government to review the vaccine damage payment scheme. I hope that the Minister will take that suggestion in the spirit in which it is intended.

We owe it to this country to make sure that we are better prepared for any future pandemic. We owe it to those who lost loved ones and those who suffered in so many different ways: those with long covid, those with mental ill health, kids who were unable to attend school, domestic abuse sufferers and those who still suffer today. It is right that we remember, reflect and debate, as we do now, in order to learn.

As a former Health Minister, I have memories that continue to surface. We will all of us live with our memories of that time till the end of our days. The least we can do is to ensure that this House and this country always remember and reflect carefully on what we can do better next time.

4.54 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am short of time, but the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), who leads on this issue, has footed it from Committee and will take up any issues that I do not address. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for securing what has been a moving and popular debate. As he says, we have to remember the people and communities behind the numbers. My thoughts, and those of everyone, are with the families and communities who lost loved ones because of the pandemic. We have heard the magnitude of that grief expressed

today, as well as the pain of families who were unable to be with their loved ones in the normal rituals of grief and bereavement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) spoke about the loss of his grandfather. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) talked about the loss of Adam, and we understand the battle to get compensation payments. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley (Maya Ellis) talked about women's experiences of pregnancy and birth. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) for the work that she is doing on the APPG, and I will make sure that she gets a response to her letter.

It has been heartening to hear of the many ways that communities have commemorated the losses and sacrifices experienced during the pandemic. The Government will bring forward a programme of covid-19 commemorative activity, and we will set out full details in response to the recommendations of the UK Commission on Covid Commemoration. I thank Baroness Morgan of Cotes and all the commission members for their consideration in recommending how to mark this period, and for their ongoing engagement with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which will lead on the commemorative activity.

DCMS is working with a range of partners, including my Department, and regularly engages with the covid-19 bereaved family groups. I thank those groups for their ongoing support and commend them for their strength and resilience, and for the support that they provide to other grieving families. As part of the commemoration of the pandemic, the Government supported the Covid-19 Day of Reflection in March, when more than 200 events took place. I can confirm that the Covid-19 Day of Reflection 2026 will take place on Sunday 8 March, and I hope that Members will support activities in their constituencies.

As we have heard, across the river from this House stands the covid-19 memorial wall. I certainly remember the first time we stopped at that memorial after we lost my father-in-law, Brian Davies. It is a really moving and powerful tribute to the lives lost, with almost 250,000 hearts lovingly painted on the wall. For families, it is a really important space where they can remember. I agree with the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) that it is a poignant reminder when we pass it every day, and I know that my colleagues in DCMS are working with the Friends of the Wall on that long-standing commemoration and will update the House in due course.

Together we remember the courageous sacrifices made by frontline workers across the country, and we have heard about many of them today. There are too many people to mention, but they include NHS staff, train and bus drivers, refuse collectors, and supermarket and delivery staff. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) that many on the frontline were the poorest and lowest paid, and they were disproportionately affected. We must continue to make sure that that does not happen again.

The pandemic demonstrated the remarkable work of civil society. An estimated 12.4 million people volunteered in some way, including as vaccine volunteers, befrienders and carers, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally).

I will briefly turn to the steps that we are taking to ensure that the United Kingdom is better prepared for a future pandemic, which remains a top priority for this Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) made a crucial point about learning lessons on PPE, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell). Later this year, we will conduct a national exercise to test our ability to respond to a pandemic, and this will involve all regions and nations of the United Kingdom, with thousands of participants. The outcome of the exercise will inform how we approach a pandemic in future.

We have heard about long covid, and I would talk more about it if I had more time. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke about that, as did many others. Since 2020, NHS England has invested significantly in supporting people with long covid, including through specialist post-covid services for adults, children and young people, and it has invested over £57 million in long covid research, which will remain hugely important.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton for securing this important debate. As we mark the fifth anniversary of the pandemic, together we will ensure that lessons are learned, that our losses are honoured, and that as a nation we do not forget.

4.59 pm

James Asser: In the few seconds I have, I just want to say that I thought it was important to have this debate so that the fifth anniversary did not pass without being marked. It is clear that we have merely touched the surface of what could be said, but I thank hon. Members across the House who have contributed. Much has been said, and there is clearly much more to say. I put on record my thanks to my constituents for all they have done. I hope that all the families and all those affected who have been watching will feel that this debate has been important in recognising the past five years, acknowledging that there is more to be said and that we will talk further about it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the fifth anniversary of the covid-19 pandemic.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank all Members, and I especially thank the Minister for being so swift at the Dispatch Box.

Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy

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

5 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for what I think is her triple shift at the Dispatch Box today.

A few months ago, I met three really great young lads—Benjamin, Eli and Jack. We had a great conversation, and they had me laughing and joking along with them for a very long time. I slightly disappointed Eli when I first opened my mouth because, listening to me, he recognised where I was from, and he asked if I could introduce him to Sam Fender. The north-east is quite small, but I do not know everyone, and I could see the disappointment on his face. One of the things we talked about was what they want to do in the future. Eli is considering being a musician, and Jack said he would like to do something involving public speaking or, who knows, even be a politician. It was really great to see that level of ambition, but for me it was tinged with sadness; I knew that they were unlikely to realise their ambitions, because Benjamin, Jack and Eli are unlikely to see their 30th birthdays.

Benjamin, Jack and Eli all have Duchenne muscular dystrophy. It is a disease that affects only boys, and about 100 baby boys are born with it every year. Diagnosis is normally at the age of three or four, and at that moment the parents find out that their son has a life-limiting condition that cannot be treated, and that he will probably need a wheelchair by the age of 12 and a ventilator by the age of 20. There is no cure for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, but there is hope now with a new drug called givinostat.

Givinostat was developed by an Italian company, Italfarmaco, and it is an example of the brilliance of our UK life sciences sector that it decided to develop the drug here in the UK. As it has been trialled here, Italfarmaco has given the national health service a unique option to prescribe givinostat through an early-access programme entirely free of charge. The NHS can offer this drug to boys in the UK completely free of charge, and the early-access programme has been available since November last year. Members might think that such an opportunity would be seized quickly by the NHS, but sadly it has not been. Many families have had their hopes raised, only for them to be dashed when they find that they cannot access the treatment. Patients, families and charities are now calling for urgent access to givinostat, as are many Members of this House.

My constituent Tracy is one of the many who have been fighting for their child's right to live, and for the treatment that has been proven to slow down the progression of Duchenne. Her son, Tom, is 14 years old, and she tells me that he is deteriorating. Givinostat has market authorisation for all boys with Duchenne over the age of six. It has been proven to slow its progression in clinical trials. It is not a cure—the families realise it is not a cure—but it could help boys and young men to keep walking and use their muscles for longer.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I have a constituent, Jamie Tierney, who, sadly, suffers with Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

[Graeme Downie]

Recently, he has been able to begin treatment, as have other patients in Scotland, but it took a lot of work and in some cases intervention by lawyers to get that. Jamie's family tell me that "Time is muscle". Does my hon. Friend agree that the sooner we make givinostat available across all parts of the UK, the better it will be for those people?

Chris McDonald: Yes, I do agree with that very timely intervention. In fact, the slogan of Duchenne UK is "Time is muscle", and it is absolutely right that every day and every week makes a difference to these boys.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. He and I spoke about it the other day. I have some constituents who have had a brave few years with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The problem is that the opportunity of this drug has never been there for them, but it needs to be. Up until now in Northern Ireland, Duchenne treatment has included corticosteroids, physical therapy and other supportive therapies, while access to newer treatments, such as vamorolone or givinostat, are being worked on—we in Northern Ireland have not had access to them either. It seems to be almost a postcode lottery. Does he agree that these drugs could give those young boys a life-changing opportunity that they would never have otherwise, and that, with great respect to the Minister, the Government need to move and ensure that they all get these drugs?

Chris McDonald: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I am very pleased that he has intervened and I think the comment about a postcode lottery is exactly right. I noted, when I looked at the figures, that currently the Belfast health and social care trust is not offering the drug to lads in Northern Ireland, because it is claiming that it will cost £309,000 for 13 patients. That is different from the rest of the country by an order of magnitude, so I would be grateful if the Minister looked very carefully at the situation in Northern Ireland.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I have been engaging with the Oxford NHS trust, which is not yet providing givinostat to boys in Oxfordshire. Its own business case suggests that it would cost less than £2,000 per boy and £66,000 in total for the 35 boys. Clearly, as a country, we should be able to afford such a sum. Does he agree that a hospital that wants to be world-leading should be providing it? Does he further agree that this is exactly the sort of thing we need Government intervention on, so that these boys can get treatment as soon as possible?

Chris McDonald: I do agree. I recognise the figures from the Oxford university hospitals NHS foundation trust. It is quoting around £2,000 per lad treated, which I understand is very similar to other areas of the country. I see that as quite a small amount of money for the 35 lives that could be saved.

Despite, as we have heard, givinostat being available for more than seven months, there has been a very inconsistent approach across the UK. A very small

number of ambulant people living with DMD have so far received the treatment, and no non-ambulant boys have been treated with it yet.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I, too, thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I met a family in my constituency whose son is suffering with Duchenne. He is at that key stage right now where he still has his mobility, but he is starting to lose it. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as the campaign says, time is muscle? If we act now, we can prevent further deterioration of his mobility.

Chris McDonald: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. Time is muscle, as she says. Sadly, because the drug is currently only available, in the areas where it is available, to lads who are ambulant, the waiting time has meant that some lads out there who would have qualified for the drug now no longer do so. That is, frankly, heartbreaking. Of course, the use of one's legs is not the only thing people are concerned about. We need to be able to use our arms to be able to dress ourselves, feed ourselves and brush our teeth, and givinostat could help with that.

It is very disheartening that while coping with all of this, families, parents and carers and so on are having to fight for access to the drug on a trust by trust basis. They have done that with the support of all the Members in the Chamber tonight. I am very grateful for the fact that they have turned up, because I know families are watching.

I also want to mention some Members who have approached me who would have loved to have been here but cannot be due to other commitments in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) has campaigned on this subject for many years and chaired the all-party parliamentary group. A constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy), who has the disease, visited Parliament on Monday and was so pleased to see on the Annunciator that we were having this debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (Mr Frith) and for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) worked together to ensure that Manchester university NHS foundation trust does now provide the drug to their constituents. William from Codicote, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia), is living with Duchenne. The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) has been supporting Mr and Mrs Binns, whose son Jack has Duchenne. They do not yet have access to givinostat and are trying to get it. I have also had representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon), the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand).

We can see that there is broad support across all parties in the House, with Members working with their constituents to try to secure this drug which is free of charge—free of charge—to the NHS. We have heard that provision is very patchy across England. There is some central co-ordination in Scotland, but no lad in Northern Ireland can access the treatment.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. It is important to acknowledge quality of life with this drug, but we also

have to acknowledge that many people with Duchenne are living with 24/7 care needs, including my constituent, Dylan Phillips, who lives at the excellent care home in Glenbervie. Does my hon. Friend agree that those living with Duchenne in Scotland should be protected as they would be in England under continuing healthcare schemes, rather than having to bear the cost of their social care and living on only £35.90 a week with universal credit and adult disability payment, as they do not qualify for continuing healthcare in Scotland?

Chris McDonald: The important thing for us to consider here is that with only 1,100 or 1,200 lads and young men in the country living with the disease, and only 500 boys eligible for the treatment, we could at least expect some consistency in approach across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): To build on that point, I recently met the parents of a young man in his 20s who absolutely reinforced the need to get givinostat funded properly across the country. I was also struck by how the lives of both parents—they are teachers—and their other child were deeply affected by having to support their son and brother. Does my hon. Friend support my plea to the Minister to reassure my constituents that adult social care services will continue to support people like them, so that their lives can be enriched?

Chris McDonald: It is really important that we remember the parents, families and carers—the big support network around these boys. It seems to be such a small thing that we need to do from the point of view of the NHS.

There are some very good examples: Leicester royal infirmary is leading the way as the first hospital to dose a patient. However, as we have heard, some large specialist children's hospitals in many areas have been slow to commit, and only a few have actually started dosing patients, although some are still working to make givinostat available. The barriers that we hear about are a lack of capacity and resource constraints. Clinics say that they need small amounts of additional consultant time for pharmacy support and extra blood tests, but really, in the context of the number of blood tests that are carried out in the NHS on a daily basis, this number is really quite small. However, some trusts still insist on telling families that they cannot deliver the treatment because of that. Given that some trusts can and some cannot, I would like to hear from the Minister what we might do to even out the service across the country.

Some trusts have expressed concern that after starting patients on givinostat, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence might subsequently not approve it at its upcoming meeting in July, and trusts would have to withdraw the treatment. Well, they would not need to do so: Italfarmaco, the previously mentioned pharmacy company, has made it clear that in the event of a negative decision from NICE, it will continue to provide givinostat for those already enrolled on the early-access programme for as long as it is deemed clinically beneficial to the patient. Continuity of supply letters have been signed between hospitals taking part in the early-access programme and the company to ensure that this is in line with NHS England guidance.

There are two reasons now to accelerate the roll-out before NICE's decision in July. The first is that every day and every week makes a difference to these young

lads; the second is that every lad who gets on that programme before July will be guaranteed this treatment for the rest of their lives, if it is not approved by NICE.

When I met Benjamin, Jack and Eli, I had already disappointed Eli by not being able to introduce him to Sam Fender, so I thought I would try to redeem myself. I said to them, "Look, I've come to see you, but clearly, when you came to Parliament, you didn't want to meet the Member for Stockton North. Who would you most like to meet?". They all said they would like to meet the Secretary of State for Health, not primarily because he could help them with their disease, but apparently they like him—he is a very popular Member of Parliament. I said, "I'll see if I can sort that out," and I did manage to sort it out. The Secretary of State very generously gave a lot of his time—I think his private office thought he had vanished off the face of the earth, because he had a great time chatting to Benjamin, Jack and Eli. I know that his intervention really cheered them up, but it also gave them hope for their futures. I want sincerely to thank the Secretary of State for Health for his generosity in sharing his time on that day and for the difference that he made to those boys.

I turn to my requests of the Minister. In the short term, what these families need is for hospitals with specialist neuromuscular services across the whole of the United Kingdom—in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—to implement the early-access programme swiftly, and for it to be rolled out to non-ambulant patients, too. The free availability of the drug from the manufacturer means that cost alone is not the barrier here; the barrier is bureaucracy. My simple ask to the Minister is to act with the urgency needed to roll out the medicine across the country as quickly as possible. Every day and every week matters—the lads with Duchenne do not have time to wait.

5.14 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a real pleasure to respond to this moving debate. I know that many people with Duchenne muscular dystrophy and their families will have wanted to tune in to hear what was said this afternoon. I thank Members who have contributed in different ways to the debate. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), who secured this debate and advocated so powerfully for these families. He really brought to life the experiences of Benjamin, Jack and Eli, and I commend him for doing so.

I first acknowledge the profound impact that this debilitating disease has on those living with it, and their families, and the urgent need for new and effective treatments. As has been said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care heard at first hand from people affected by this condition earlier this year, when he attended an event hosted by Duchenne UK. He met many young patients and listened to what they said about the challenges that they face. As we all know, meeting families and individuals from our constituencies leaves a long-lasting effect on us, and it is important that we continue to meet them.

Timely and equitable access to innovative medicines for the treatment of DMD and other rare diseases mentioned today is of the utmost importance. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is the independent body responsible for assessing whether

[Karin Smyth]

new licensed medicines can be recommended for routine use in the NHS, based on a thorough assessment of their clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. Through this process, many thousands of patients, including those with rare diseases, have been able to benefit from effective new treatments at prices that represent value to the NHS. NICE has been able to recommend two medicines for the treatment of DMD: ataluren, recommended in 2023, and vamorolone, which was recommended in January this year and is now available on the NHS to around 1,700 eligible patients, in line with NICE's recommendations.

As my hon. Friend has said, NICE is appraising givinostat, and the first NICE committee meeting is scheduled for July this year. If the medicine is recommended, the NHS in England will be legally required to fund it. I am aware that a small number of patients in the UK have been receiving treatment with this drug through a company-led early access programme, established by the pharmaceutical company Italfarmaco, as we have heard. It is important to note that participation in these programmes is decided at NHS trust level, and although the drug is free to patients taking part in it and to the NHS, NHS trusts must still cover administration costs and provide clinical resources to deliver the EAP.

NHS England has published guidance on free-of-charge medicine schemes, such as the givinostat EAP, providing advice on financial, administrative and clinical risks. NHS England cannot, however, centrally direct NHS trusts to participate in company sponsored EAPs like this one, or in any other private activity. To issue any form of national direction around participation in EAPs would both pre-empt and undermine the role of NICE, whose purpose is to advise the NHS on whether particular treatments should be made routinely available on the NHS.

Even when there is an agreement that a company will continue to provide a drug free of charge in the event of a negative decision by NICE, participating trusts remain liable to cover the significant costs of delivering that service, including the cost of the clinical resources and staff time needed. That would be outside their funding allocation and in addition to paying for any subsequent NICE-recommended treatments that they would be mandated to fund.

Chris McDonald: I thank the Minister for her response, to which I am listening very carefully. I appreciate her point that it would be inappropriate for the Department of Health and Social Care to direct what trusts should do, but what we have heard from the trusts is that they would like to issue this drug, but have certain issues and problems. Perhaps it might simply be a matter of the Department giving help and support, and facilitating information-sharing between trusts that have made this work and those that have not. Perhaps it could be more encouragement than direction.

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive suggestion. We need to wait to see how the NICE recommendation goes in July. With this disease and so many others, it is important to share learning and information, and trusts should be encouraged and supported in doing so. We will work with him on that constructive recommendation.

I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the fact that non-ambulant patients are not yet able to access givinostat, but it is important to note that the eligibility criteria for participation in the early access programmes have been determined by the pharmaceutical company. NHS trusts that decide to participate in the EAP must only provide treatment in line with the criteria, which state that patients must be ambulant. A clinical trial is being carried out by the pharmaceutical company to evaluate the safety and tolerability of the drug in non-ambulant patients, and to further explore the efficacy of the drug in this population. I know that for the patients and families affected, it will be disappointing to hear that there is no access to the drug for ambulant patients before a NICE decision, or for non-ambulant patients prior to clinical trials being concluded. I want to assure my hon. Friend that we have arrangements in place to support rapid access to new medicines.

Freddie van Mierlo: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I will not; I want to finish in the time available, and I think Members want to hear the full response.

Outside of company-led EAPs, there are established routes for patients to get access to new, innovative medicines prior to them being licensed. The early access to medicines scheme, or EAMS, helps give people in the UK with life-threatening or seriously debilitating conditions early access to new medicines that are not yet licensed where there is a clear unmet medical need. EAMS is supported by key partners, including the MHRA, NICE and NHS England, and is a key part of this Government's commitment to accelerating patient access to innovative, life-changing treatments, in support of the UK's position as a global leader in life sciences. In fact, since the scheme launched in 2014, over 50 medicines, including for this disease, have benefited from being accessed early through EAMS.

The innovative medicines fund has also made available £340 million of ringfenced funding for the NHS to fund early access to medicines that NICE has recommended with managed access. Through this process, licensed treatments that demonstrate substantial clinical promise but still have significant uncertainty around their clinical and cost-effectiveness can be funded. Further evidence is then collected on the drug for a defined period of time. That is considered by NICE in determining whether the drug can be recommended for routine NHS funding.

The Secretary of State has been clear that if givinostat is recommended by NICE in draft guidance, NHS England should aim to work with the pharmaceutical company to provide early funding through the innovative medicines fund. This could potentially speed up access by up to five months, and the treatment could be funded as soon as this summer, if recommended.

This scope of this debate is wider than just access to new medicines. It is important to note that while rare diseases are individually rare, they are collectively common. One in 17 people will be affected by a rare condition over their lifetime. The UK rare diseases framework outlines four priorities, based on engagement with the rare disease community. They are: helping patients to get a final diagnosis faster, increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals, better co-ordination of care, and improving access to specialist

care, treatments and drugs. In England, we publish a rare diseases action plan annually. These detail the specific steps we are taking to meet the shared priorities of the framework. I am pleased to highlight the 2025 England action plan, which was published in February this year on Rare Disease Day. One such action is reviewing the effectiveness of early access schemes, such as the early access to medicines scheme, the innovative licensing and access pathway, and the innovative medicines fund. They are all designed to help make innovative treatments available earlier to patients who need them. We are specifically considering how well they support access to treatment for people living with rare diseases like Duchenne.

NHS England, NICE and MHRA will meet annually to continue to discuss progress on these schemes. These meetings will include representatives from patient advocacy groups and from industry, and clinical researchers, and the next one will happen in the summer.

Managing a complex rare condition can be challenging, and it often means interacting with many different specialists and providers of health and social care. It can mean travelling across the country to access highly specialist care from experts. All of that can add up to a significant emotional and physical burden, and it can deepen inequalities. Co-ordination of care can minimise this burden on patients and their carers, and it can ensure that healthcare professionals work together to provide the best possible care, as we have discussed this evening.

In the 2025 action plan, we have introduced a new action to incentivise providers to run clinics for multi-system disorders, in order to reduce the number of appointments and improve co-ordination of care for families. The NHS is also working to include the definition of “co-ordination of care” that is set out in the CONCORD—co-ordinated care of rare diseases—study in all new and revised NHS service specifications for patients with rare diseases.

I recognise how hard it is when patients want access to these new treatments. I also recognise the distress and worry it causes, not only to patients, but their families and friends. Hon. Members have articulated that well on behalf of their constituents this evening. The Government are committed to providing access to the most innovative medicines, but it has to be at a price that provides value for the NHS, and it has to be clinically safe and effective. That is why we are working hard with industry, NICE and MHRA to make that happen. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North will continue to work with the Government and providers to make that happen. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate on such an important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

5.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 June 2025

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Humanist Marriage

[Relevant Documents: Correspondence between the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, on humanist marriages, reported to the House on 23 April and 19 March.]

1.30 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the recognition of humanist marriages.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I start by declaring an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary humanist group, to which Humanists UK provides the secretariat. Many Members present are also members of the APPG.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the joining of the hon. Member for Tamworth, my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), who jointly requested this debate to discuss our wish to see humanist marriages made legal throughout the UK. We are grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate.

Humanists UK trains and accredits celebrants who, just this morning, will probably have conducted at least four weddings and a funeral. I pay tribute to such celebrants, one of whom conducted my grandmother's funeral, but this debate is about humanist marriage. Why? Because despite conducting tens of thousands of ceremonies every year, including weddings, they are legally recognised in only some of the UK jurisdictions in which they operate, and are not legally recognised in England, Wales or the Isle of Man.

Humanist weddings are non-religious wedding ceremonies conducted by accredited humanist celebrants. Humanists UK defines humanists as non-religious people who rely on the scientific method to understand the universe. Humanists make ethical decisions based on reason, empathy and concern for others, and believe that meaning in life is something that we all discover for ourselves through seeking happiness and contributing to the wellbeing of others.

Humanist ceremonies are a manifestation of that philosophy—an expression of self-created meaning and shared happiness. Those ceremonies should be a profound reflection of the participants' values and beliefs, their relationship, their families and friends, and their place in the world. Central to the ceremony is a focus entirely on the couple, ensuring that it is deeply personal, while remaining inclusive of all of those attending, irrespective of their diverse religious beliefs. Humanist weddings are a manifestation of the couple's non-religious beliefs and identity, and they are built collaboratively with their loved ones to reflect all of their contributions.

It is rare for most non-religious people to express their beliefs publicly, and unlike religious people, there is no compulsion to attend a place of worship on a weekly basis. For those who choose to have a humanist wedding, it is an opportunity for a rare public expression of their beliefs, which makes their wedding feel all the more significant and makes it all the more tragic that such weddings are not legally recognised in England and Wales.

In creating such a ceremony, humanist celebrants can dedicate up to 40 hours—sometimes more—to working closely with the couple. That substantial time investment is focused on getting to know the couple so that the celebrant marrying them is not someone who they have just met on the day, but someone who they have a solid, personal relationship with. It is focused on a deep understanding of the couple, their shared values and their feelings for one another, enabling the creation of a ceremony with enduring impact. It is more than the one-time commitment that can be associated with other forms of marriage solemnisation.

The location of the ceremony often holds particular significance as well. The focus is on finding the place that will be most meaningful, which could be where the couple met, where they fell in love or where they got engaged; it could be a garden, their local beach or where they go on holiday. For example, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) had a humanist wedding. His partner is Scottish, and he told me that they picked Scotland over England for their marriage partly for that reason, but also because they wanted the marriage to be legal. They got married in the highlands in a place of huge personal significance for them.

Humanist marriages have legal recognition in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Jersey, Ireland and Guernsey, but we have inequity within the UK because Wales and England remain the exception. The Welsh Government have long championed the change, but progress ultimately hinges on the UK Government's willingness to act.

Humanist marriages have proved incredibly popular where they are legally recognised, with more humanist than religious marriages currently taking place in Scotland. The number of such weddings in Ireland and Northern Ireland has also grown enormously, but in England, the lack of legal recognition suppresses the huge demand.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. When it comes to equity, I am sure she is aware that the High Court ruled five years ago that there was an issue of discrimination. The approach since then has been that we need to wait for wholesale marriage reform, but this is a very simple change. Does she agree that the Government should just take it forward, given the overwhelming case for it, and not wait for wholesale marriage reform?

Sarah Edwards: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. I will go on to give more detail about the challenges that we are facing, and about the easy option that we have for the Government. I hope that, after today, they will take that forward and I look forward to hearing more about that.

Thousands of people still have humanist weddings each year, but to do so, they must also undergo a separate civil marriage ceremony to gain legal status. That frequently imposes a significant financial burden,

[Sarah Edwards]

with weekend civil marriage fees often exceeding £600—a cost that religious couples do not face. The alternative statutory low-cost ceremonies can cost just £57, but they are increasingly difficult to access, with many authorities restricting their availability and location, and even limiting attendee numbers.

I can attest to those challenges, because my mother, Rosi, got married this year to her partner, Henry, in England. The limitations placed on the choices available for the civil ceremony were stark, and the restrictions meant that only my brother Joe and I were able to attend. There were just a handful of slots available in a six-month period, so the choice of a humanist wedding would have been welcome.

Beyond the financial and administrative burdens, the current dual-ceremony requirement creates distressing ambiguity for couples regarding the true date of their marriage. It is inadequate that the ceremony that holds the most personal and emotional significance for a couple is not recognised as the legal date of their union.

Why has legal recognition not yet been granted? Parliament gave the Government the power to introduce legal recognition for humanist marriages through a simple order under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, but the Act required a public consultation before any action could be taken. That consultation took place in 2014 and revealed overwhelming support—over 95% of people were in favour of legal recognition—but rather than acting on that clear mandate and drafting the necessary statutory instrument, the then Government referred the issue to the Law Commission for a broader review of marriage law, delaying the process indefinitely.

The main reason given at the time was concern about where those marriages could take place. The then Government argued that allowing humanist or other belief-based weddings in unrestricted locations might be unfair. They pointed out that most religious groups are limited to registered places of worship, and they worried it could seem unfair to non-religious, non-humanist couples who might want the same freedom of choice.

Although it is clear that flexibility of location holds particular importance in the humanist tradition, using that as a reason to block legal recognition has always felt disproportionate. In fact, Humanists UK recently obtained a briefing from Melanie Field, who has deep expertise in this area. She was the lead civil servant on the 2013 Act, and before that, the Equality Act 2010. More recently, she served as chief strategy and policy officer at the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Her view is clear that

“The case for removing the discrimination against humanists by making an Order under the existing power in the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, even if done as an interim measure pending wider reform, is overwhelming.”

She goes on to say that allowing humanist marriages to take place anywhere would not create new inconsistencies and, in fact, would align closely with the existing rules for Quaker and Jewish weddings. She sees no legal barrier, no disadvantage to other groups, and no reason that the Government cannot act.

The decision not to proceed in 2014, and the failure to act since, has meant that tens of thousands of couples have missed out on the kind of ceremony that truly

reflects who they are. That injustice continues today. The 2014 decision led to a review in 2015, which led to another, broader review from 2018 to 2022. Each time, the scope expanded. What began as a simple consultation about humanist marriages—something that could have been resolved with a single statutory instrument—has now become a full-scale review of the entire marriage system. Even if that wider reform were worthwhile, it cannot be right that humanists have been left waiting all this time when a straightforward solution has been available from the start.

No end is in sight. In the 2020 High Court ruling, following a judicial review brought by six couples, the judge was clear that

“the present law gives rise to...discrimination”.

The court further stated that the Secretary of State could not

“simply sit on his hands”.

At the time, it accepted that Government inaction was only because the Law Commission review was under way—but that was five years ago. Is that justification still valid?

I hope that the Minister will be able to provide some positive news on the position that this new, progressive Labour Government are taking on the issue, because Labour Governments are at the forefront of moving the dial to reduce inequality across society and have always challenged discriminatory practices. I am proud of that legacy and I encourage the extension of our values to humanist marriages.

Let us not wait any more. The previous Conservative Government had ample time to resolve the issue, even after the Law Commission published its findings, yet despite the evidence, the public support and the legal clarity, they failed to act. Now, the responsibility and the opportunity rest with this Labour Government. This is not a complex or controversial reform; it is an easy win.

The legal recognition of humanist marriages led to a rise in the number of weddings in Scotland, and it would have excellent benefits for the wedding industry, boosting local economies and supporting small businesses. It will be hugely popular, and who does not love a good wedding? Polls consistently show that the majority of the public and, indeed, the majority of MPs support the legal recognition of humanist marriages. That support is growing as more and more couples are able to choose humanist ceremonies each year. Recognition would give the Government a legacy to be proud of—a legacy on a par with the legislation of same-sex marriage, as a moment of progress, of fairness and of aligning the law with the values of the peoples that they serve.

Let us not forget that that is what Labour promised: from 2014 to the last election, the Labour party made a clear and repeated commitment to lay the order once in power. We are keen to do that, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), who is unable to attend today's ceremony but said he would join us post nuptials at the reception, as he wishes to add his support. We request haste to end this discrimination and deliver a change that would give thousands of couples the right to have their deeply meaningful and humanist wedding legally recognised in every part of the UK. I ask the Minister: can we lay this legislation? We have had a very long engagement. Minister, will you marry our ambitions with your Government's agenda? Can we finally set the date?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I do not think that I need to remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. As everyone can see, a large number of people would like to speak, so rather than impose a rigid timescale, I will be grateful if you could all be kind to one another and speak for approximately four minutes.

1.43 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I am delighted to co-lead this debate. Many problems that face this country and indeed the world are difficult to solve, but marriage equality for humanist weddings—as the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), my constituency neighbour, pointed out—is something we can fix simply with the stroke of a pen. I therefore urge the Government to do so.

I will reflect on my own marriage, which was a humanist marriage. I am not religious, but I was raised going to church on Sundays and I went to a Catholic school, so I am familiar with the Catholic faith and have great respect for it. When it came down to it, however, a religious marriage did not feel right for me or my wife. The words someone needs to say at a church wedding just did not ring true for me, and the last thing I wanted to do on my wedding day was to lie.

The words we say on such a day are special and should be meaningful. The alternative to a religious marriage, in a place that is wanted, is therefore to have a registry office marriage with a celebration after, but I wanted the celebration to be the marriage—to combine, as religious ceremonies do, the legal act of marriage as defined by law and the deep and meaningful declarations of love made on the day.

That is why we decided to get married in Scotland. As my name suggests, I do not have ancestral connections to Scotland, but I often wear a tartan tie in this place because I am now so fond of the country in which I got married. I am today wearing the same tie that I got married in four years ago. Our humanist celebrant, Lesley, was absolutely wonderful. She guided us through the whole thing perfectly and even offered us a bit of advice on the snow gates in Braemar in December.

Everyone in England and Wales should have the same opportunity that has existed in Scotland for 20 years. Twenty years ago, Humanist Society Scotland wrote to the Registrar General and asked them to read the law as relates to religious marriages as also providing for humanist marriages. They were persuaded that, from a human rights perspective, given freedom of religion or belief, that had to happen, so they reinterpreted the law in exactly that way. No legislation was required, and so, on 18 June 2005, Karen Watts and Martin Reijns were married by a humanist celebrant at Edinburgh zoo.

When Scotland passed the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014, the decision was made to update marriage law to put humanist marriages on a proper statutory footing. The first two same-sex marriages in Scotland were both humanist, and humanist marriages have only continued to grow in popularity since.

It is not just Scotland that has left England behind. In 2017, Laura Lacole and Eunan O’Kane applied to the Registrar General in Northern Ireland to ask for

their marriage to be a humanist one. They asked for the law to be read similarly to the way it was read in Scotland. This was declined, but a court later found in their favour. As in Scotland, humanist marriages have since exploded in popularity in Northern Ireland.

To finish my tour of the home nations, the Welsh Government have repeatedly written to the UK Government over the years asking for a humanist marriage order to be laid or, failing that, for marriage law to be devolved to Wales. I am proud that my party has been committed to that for many years, and that it was a commitment in the last Liberal Democrat manifesto. I am also proud that the Liberal Democrats were in government in Scotland when humanist marriages were introduced there. The Liberal Democrats of course have a very good record on marriage reform. We can debate the merits of the coalition—as I am sure we will again and again—but one of the standout achievements was same-sex marriage. It is worth noting that the couple who had the first same-sex marriage in England and Wales, Peter McGraith and David Cabreza, are humanists and said they would have liked a humanist wedding.

Legal recognition of humanist marriage would especially benefit and support same-sex couples. LGBTQ people are significantly more likely to identify as non-religious, and many religious groups still do not allow same-sex marriages. Humanists UK tracks whether the ceremonies its celebrants do are for opposite sex or same-sex couples; as a result, we know that every year since 2013 more same-sex couples have chosen to have a humanist wedding without legal recognition than have had a religious same-sex marriage with legal recognition. That which there is clear demand.

Labour committed to action when in opposition; now they are in power, I urge the Government to listen to this debate. I would not change my wedding for the world, and Scotland now has a very special place in my heart, but would it not be lovely if a legacy of this Government was that such special memories can be made in England and Wales too?

1.48 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. Marriage is one of the most profound commitments we can make. It offers us a lifelong partner to grow with, a loving relationship to strengthen us and mutual support throughout our lives. When two people choose to marry, it matters that they can do so in a ceremony that reflects their beliefs.

I declare an interest: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary humanist group, to which Humanists UK provide the secretariat. However, I speak today not on behalf of any organisation or formal grouping, but on behalf of people like me who share strongly held beliefs and convictions about the world and their place in it.

I am sure that most people in this Chamber are familiar with what humanism is, but it is worth briefly setting it out. Humanism is the belief that this life is the only life we have, and that the world is a natural phenomenon that we can understand, with no supernatural side. It is a worldview grounded in reason, evidence and compassion—a commitment to living ethically and meaningfully, not because of fear or doctrine but because of a shared humanity and a belief in people.

[Lizzi Collinge]

For those of us who hold these beliefs, they shape the biggest moments of our life, including marriage. Humanist weddings are personal, thoughtful and deeply meaningful. They are conducted by celebrants who share the couple's values and are co-created to reflect the couple's commitment and outlook on life. They are no less significant than religious ceremonies, yet right now humanist couples in England and Wales face a fundamental unfairness, because their weddings are not legally recognised.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) set out, the Government already have the power to right this injustice. The reform does not require primary legislation and it does not need a review. The Secretary of State already has the power, under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, to lay an order, and a draft order already exists. It would require just 90 minutes of debate in each House. We could be done tomorrow—well, maybe not tomorrow; we are all a bit busy tomorrow.

Instead of the Government using that existing power, there have been delays and the issue has been referred for more and more reviews. The latest was the Law Commission's full review of marriage law, which produced proposals that, in my opinion, would be difficult and slow to implement. The High Court made it clear that once the review was finished, the Government should act, but rather than taking that straightforward step, we have new proposals that complicate the process unnecessarily.

I fundamentally disagree with some of the proposals, and I will highlight my concerns in the hope that I might influence the Minister's thinking about any new legislation. I am particularly worried by the Law Commission's proposal to permit commercial celebrants—anyone, regardless of training—to become authorised wedding officiants with the same powers as registrars. I understand the impetus to expand choice, but this risks turning weddings into Las Vegas-style free-for-alls, which would be unprecedented in Europe.

Marriage is a binding contract between two people and the state. It is a choice that takes huge commitment and should not be entered into lightly. It is of such significance that we cannot reduce it to a mere transaction or moment or entertainment. We have to safeguard the integrity of the marriage ritual. Call me old-fashioned, but I think that how we get married matters. It signifies the seriousness of the contract we enter into. That obviously does not mean that it needs to be dour or cheerless—my wedding very much was not—but we need to safeguard the integrity and meaning of the ceremony itself.

Humanist celebrants are carefully trained. They are insured, accredited and supported through continuing professional development. That commitment is what gives their ceremonies the weight and respect they deserve. It is not just humanists who have concerns; the Church of England and local registrars share them. I rarely use the word “sacred”, but here it is entirely fitting. Allowing a free market for celebrants risks undermining the solemn and profound nature of the marriage contract. I should also highlight the aspects of the commission's proposals that I support. For instance, the move away from the building-based system is a positive step.

As society is changed, so too is marriage. As a woman, I am very aware of the changes in both marriage and society. However, the values that marriage represents—love, commitment and stability—are fundamental to the fabric of our society, and I do not think that anyone in this room would challenge their importance. If we want to truly uphold and embed those principles in our society, they must be accessible to everyone, regardless of belief or background.

Marriage rights should reflect the profundity of the commitment made. Put simply, every citizen of this country, whatever their belief system, should have the same right to equal recognition of their solemn commitment, made in accordance with their beliefs. I hope we can act on this opportunity and finally introduce this long-overdue change.

1.53 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I thank the hon. Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) for securing the debate.

I declare an interest: in September 2011, I had a humanist wedding. We chose a beautiful setting in the countryside and got married in a carpentry workshop, where my husband had worked for many years before all his workmates beautifully transformed it into a unique setting for a wedding. Many guests said it was one of the most special weddings they had been to, partly because it was so different from a traditional wedding. The kids loved the ice-cream van that gave out free ice creams all afternoon. The vows were written by us, the ceremony was designed by us, and we were both able to include our children in the ceremony, which was very meaningful. Having lost my first husband to cancer eight years before, the ceremony was a really special and joyous occasion marking the beginning of a new chapter for all of us after some very bleak times.

But we did have to get married two days before in a registry office, because our ceremony was not legal, so I now have two wedding anniversaries, which is complicated enough—three if we count the first one as well. The occasion that I remember as my wedding was not actually my wedding, and that feels wrong and outdated in a modern society.

I would like to compare the situation here with Scotland, where humanist marriages have been legally recognised and have exploded in number. There are more humanist marriages there than all the other faith and belief-based marriages combined. It is hard to unpick cause and effect, but in Scotland the legal recognition of humanist marriages coincided with the end of a long-term decline in the number of marriages there. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame talked about how he travelled to Scotland so that he could have a legally recognised humanist marriage. No doubt thousands of others have done the same thing—the modern-day equivalent of eloping to Gretna Green—but that really should not be necessary. It is time for England and Wales to catch up with Scotland and Northern Ireland, where humanist marriages are recognised.

It is well past time to allow people to have a humanist ceremony recognised in law. The 1,200 couples a year who have humanist weddings here should have the same opportunity to marry in line with their beliefs as their

religious counterparts. It is needed under the Human Rights Act 1998. The High Court ruled in 2020 that the lack of legal recognition is discrimination, and said the Government have to act.

As we have heard, 95% of respondents to one consultation supported it. A 2025 YouGov poll found 70% in favour and only 15% opposed, and there was also a majority of every religious group in favour. This is not a controversial decision.

It is also good for marriage: freedom of information data from Scotland shows that couples married in a humanist ceremony—I am very pleased to read this—are almost four times less likely to divorce compared with all other types of marriage.

Lastly—the Government will like this bit—it is free. Laying an order under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act would cost nothing. All it needs is a positive affirmation.

1.57 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Many thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and others who secured the debate.

The speakers we have heard already have spoken so powerfully about why this simple change in the law needs to happen. The hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) talked about what must have been a cost to friends and relatives to have to go to Scotland to have both parts of the event in one place. As the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) just said, the logistics of having to organise two functions are not great. She said she would have liked to have both parts—the formal legal part and the celebratory part—as one.

I must declare that I am a member of the all-party parliamentary humanist group, although I am actually a Quaker. As far as I can see—I think I am right in this—marriage in this country is, at its minimum, when completely stripped down, the public signing of a legal document between two people, with witnesses. It is just a legal document. But most of us end up adding to it the faith element, the friends and family element and the celebration.

There is an inequality in England and Wales. For many, traditionally, the faith component is important. Most weddings in this country can happen in the place of faith in one and the same event. In England and Wales, civil and religious marriages are permitted, but it is not possible to have a humanist marriage, or one conducted according to any non-religious system or belief. They have to be in two parts.

Quakers, for historical reasons, have had the right to hold formally agreed marriages anywhere, including outdoors—as can Jews—according to our rites and ceremonies, with a registered member of the congregation officiating. Actually, thanks to the wording of a Quaker wedding, the couple can in effect marry each other, because we do not officially have any people who are closer to God than anyone else; we are all equal in the sight of God. The wording is: “Friends, I take this, my friend Laura, to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto her a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live.” [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) and I are both married to other people—

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Not any more!

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): There are lots of witnesses.

Ruth Cadbury: Anyway, I fully support the Humanist Society’s position to allow a couple to be married by a celebrant who shares the couple’s values and beliefs, one that works in Scotland, Northern Ireland and many other jurisdictions across the world.

I would have some concerns if the law was opened up to any non-religious belief organisations. There needs to be solemnity and dignity in the process. I would also have some concern about the potential for celebrants to sell their services as a commercial transaction, so there are some aspects of the Law Commission proposals that concern me. However, one part of the Law Commission’s recommendations that I support is for marriage to be based on the officiant rather than the building. As I have said, for Quakers, there is no such thing as a consecrated building or space in our faith, so as long as the local Quaker who is trained and formally registered is present, the marriage is legal. It can be done out of doors. I know that many humanists value nature and choose to celebrate their weddings out of doors but do not want to have a two-pronged celebration and the official bit as is currently the case. I therefore support a change in the law.

2.2 pm

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I also declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary humanist group. I rise to speak about the arguments advanced in the past against legal recognition of humanist marriages and why I do not think they hold much weight. However, I will start with my personal situation.

I got married last year. My husband and I would have loved to have had a legally recognised humanist marriage, but because of the previous Government’s endless delays, we were denied that chance. A couple of years ago, I wrote to my MP—not me, but the former Conservative Member for Stourbridge—asking that the matter be resolved following the High Court ruling. The response I got was positive, saying that there was an ambition to remedy the situation, but clearly they were not ambitious enough.

My husband and I chose to marry at the Thomas Robinson building in Stourbridge, which is a beautiful old chapel converted to a register office. We asked about having a humanist celebrant lead the proceedings but were told that would not be possible. We would have needed a separate ceremony, which would have meant not only an additional cost to our budget and organising another event, but that our legally recognised marriage would not have been meaningful to our beliefs.

The registrar offered us a choice of wording for the ceremony from extremely religious to completely neutral. The neutral wording suited us best, but it stripped away all meaning and sentiment along with the religious references. As humanists, we believe in compassion, reason and ethical approaches to human life, giving people the right and responsibility to give meaning to shape their own lives, which makes the denial of humanist marriage even more ironic.

[Cat Eccles]

In opening the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) referred to a new briefing from Melanie Field about why the Government should legally recognise humanist marriages. If anyone is an expert on this matter, it is Melanie. She literally led for the civil service on the Marriage Act and our Equality Act 2010. Her time at the EHRC further demonstrates her human rights expertise and no one else has been as intimately involved in both bits of legislation, so when she says that the case for making a humanist marriage order is overwhelming, that should surely carry some authority.

In Melanie's briefing, she considers the 2020 High Court judgment. As we have heard, the judge ruled that "there is a continuing discriminatory impact upon those who seek to manifest their humanist beliefs through marriage",

but that it could be justified, "at this time", by the then ongoing Law Commission review. Melanie says that this may now be different. Five years have passed since that judgment and three since the review concluded, and no action has since occurred. Obviously, that is first and foremost the fault of the previous Government, but the upshot, Melanie thinks, is that it is possible that the Court would now reach a different conclusion should a further case be brought, and that the case for removing the discrimination against humanists by making an order under the power in the marriage Act, even if done as an interim measure pending wider reform, therefore seems overwhelming.

Melanie considers various concerns raised against that course of action, mainly in a 2014 consultation run by the Conservatives. I will run through them briefly. First, a concern was expressed that the change would lead to inconsistencies with outdoor marriages. Those inconsistencies already exist, as we have heard, with some religious groups already able to hold outdoor marriages. Civil marriages also started happening outdoors in 2021. Secondly, she considers the concern that it would be unfair to allow humanist marriages on approved premises when religious groups cannot have them. She thinks it would be lawful because humanists may have intrinsic belief-based reasons to want their marriages on approved premises.

Thirdly, Melanie considers concerns that there may be other belief groups who could try to gain legal recognition, but no such other groups exist or have been identified. Fourthly, she refers to the supposed risk of commercialisation. Again, no evidence is offered that that would happen, and, as we have heard, in Scotland and Northern Ireland there are laws prohibiting profit and gain by religious or humanist celebrants. Finally, she considers the desirability—or otherwise—of piecemeal reform, and any added complexity that might arise in the law, but she thinks that this concern is insignificant when set against the context of people being denied their human rights.

Melanie also notes that the supposed solution to this issue, the Law Commission reforms, have been criticised by religious groups and others, including for devaluing marriage in a way that means they do not in fact appear to be a simple solution. She also notes that the previous Government pursued many piecemeal marriage reforms while saying that they were against such measures.

In conclusion, the humanist marriage order is not complex. It is a simple, cost-neutral change. It just recreates for humanists the legal provisions that already exist for Quakers. They are tried and tested, and they should be extended so that other couples are not refused their rights as I was.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I am afraid that I will now impose a four-minute limit on speeches. I apologise to people for coughing, and will endeavour not to. Please do not be too distracted by me.

2.8 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I am sorry about your sore throat, Dame Siobhain; I hope it does not trouble you too much. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), and the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), for securing the debate. I have put on the record previously that I am a humanist and a member of Humanists UK. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale for taking on the baton from me to become chair of the all-party parliamentary humanist group. She will be a great champion for its work. Might I add that it is very nice to be surrounded by more "out" humanists?

As a humanist, I believe that we have one life, and we shape that in the here and now. My values are based on reason, empathy and concern for other human beings. In line with that, I believe that everyone should have the right to live the life they choose. I believe that every person, whether religious or non-religious, has the right to get married in accordance with their own personal beliefs. A humanist wedding is a non-religious ceremony. It differs from a civil wedding in that it is reflective of the humanist beliefs and values of the couple, and conducted by a humanist celebrant. Unfortunately, in England and Wales a glaring inconsistency remains. The law, as it stands, means that couples who choose a humanist wedding ceremony must still have a separate civil ceremony to make their union legally binding.

Humanist marriages are legally recognised elsewhere in the UK. Since 2005, they have been recognised in Scotland; indeed, we have heard that they now account for more weddings in Scotland than those conducted by any single religious denomination. Northern Ireland followed suit in 2018 after a landmark legal case and there was further legal recognition after that in Jersey in 2019 and in Guernsey in 2021. So, why is there not recognition in England and Wales?

The current system effectively discriminates against non-religious people by denying them the legal recognition given to religious ceremonies. It is not merely a matter of paperwork; it is about equality. Legalising humanist marriages could be done with ease, as has been argued so well by many others. The Government could act on the High Court ruling of 2020, which said that the current law is discriminatory, and lay an order so that humanist couples and celebrants can have legal recognition of their ceremonies.

That would also be a popular choice. A 2025 YouGov poll found that 70% of the public support the change. It is also supported by many of us, from all parties in the House, as well as by legal experts and human rights

advocates. In fact, in this debate, in this Parliament, double if not triple the number of people support a change in the law than oppose it.

The last time that I participated in a debate on humanist marriages in this place was in January 2022, at which time the Minister answering for the then Conservative Government stated:

“The Government will carefully consider the Law Commission’s recommendations when the final report is published, and it is right for us to await the outcome of that.”—[*Official Report*, 27 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 440WH.]

As we have heard today, that review was subsequently published in July 2022 and recommended reform of marriage law to allow for more inclusive ceremonies. Almost three years later, it is very disappointing that we have still not seen that change come to fruition. The Minister has stated that

“The Government will set out our position on weddings reform in due course.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 153.]

For humanists in England and Wales, continued dither and delay is extremely frustrating; indeed, it is not just frustrating, but discriminatory. I hope that our Government will now act and not delay justice any longer. Let us stand up for equality and for freedom of belief in all its meaningful forms.

2.12 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): First of all, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Dame Siobhain. Secondly, it is also a pleasure to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) set out in this debate the reasons for humanist marriages and why they should be recognised.

On the question of humanist marriages being recognised, I ask myself why they are not. What is the problem? My hon. Friend made what I think amounts to an unimpeachable case as to why marriages of this nature should be facilitated, as other types and classifications of marriage are, and I thank Humanists UK for the briefing that it sent. I thought, “Shall I throw in some facts and figures?” No, I think other people are much better at that than I would be. It still comes back to the question of why we are debating this issue so many years on. I am not quite sure why we should have to reiterate this request time after time after time. But we are where we are, so I decided to participate in the debate with my tuppence-worth.

I wondered what my approach should be. As you know, Dame Siobhain, we think very carefully about these matters. As I said—facts, figures, statistics? I decided not to do that. Rhetoric has its place in debate. Who has not used rhetoric in their day? What about a little bit of polemic? Should I throw a little bit of polemic in? I decided not to. What about an historical examination of the nature of marriage going back thousands of years, because marriage predates, for example, any current religious timeline in relation to the concept? I decided not to do that, either.

Perhaps taking a different perspective might add a different angle to the debate—on the nature of marriage, so to speak. Indeed, who is impartial to a quote here or there from literature in one form or another? I began to think laterally, which I have to admit is a big challenge for me in most circumstances. I looked to my constituency for inspiration—it is a fantastic place to do so. A number of streets that date back to the 19th century that are

named after characters in Shakespearean plays. On the surface, they are just street names. But lo and behold, they are named after characters who were married and who faced terrible challenges in getting married.

What has that got to do with what we are talking about today? That is a fair question. It elucidates that the debate must, in part, be about the nature of marriage, the commitment of marriage, and marriage in good faith. It must also be about the wishes of the people concerned to marry as they see fit, without duress and with, of course, appropriate safeguarding mechanisms. It is also about giving those who choose to do so the capacity to marry as they see fit, and for the process to be recognised as other marriages and ceremonies are.

Shakespeare uses marriage as one of the most prominent themes, if not the most prominent, in his repertoire. Does he talk about the service? No. Does he talk about the legalistic nature of it? No. He focuses on the personal nature of marriage: the relationships, the tensions, the feelings, as Beatrice and Benedick realise when they acknowledge, reluctantly, that they are to become partners in marriage. So, let us leave the last words to Shakespeare:

“Marriage is a matter of more worth

Than to be dealt in by attorneyship.”

This debate should not be much ado about nothing.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Just to warn the Front Benchers, I am going to reduce your time to nine minutes in order to keep the time limit for Back Benchers at four minutes.

2.16 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dame Siobhain. Like others, I commend the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) and my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) on securing this debate.

In 2009, I got married in the National Glass Centre in my constituency, in a humanist ceremony. Because, as other hon. Members have mentioned, that ceremony was not legally binding, we had to get legally married two days earlier in Sunderland Civic Centre. Choosing a humanist married reflected the shared values of my wife and me. With our humanist celebrant, we thoughtfully worked through what we wanted to say, and the commitments that we wanted to make to each other.

I would love to say that every marriage ends in a “happily ever after”. The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) was right to draw attention to the lower divorce rates statistic. Unfortunately, my marriage has resulted in a separation. That is a cause of sadness for me, but the shared humanist values that we committed to when we embarked on our marriage still provide an enduring basis for a positive relationship between my wife and I to co-parent our children. Even if, unfortunately, “happily ever after” is not possible in every marriage, humanist values and celebrations have significant value in bringing children up, as other hon. Members have stated in this debate. I intend to do further work in this Parliament on positive parenting in separated families.

For the meat of my contribution, I will highlight how society has changed over the last 12 years, since the Government first gained the power to enact legal recognition of humanist marriages. Others have mentioned the

[*Lewis Atkinson*]

steps made in nations of the UK other than England and Wales. I highlight the ongoing growth in the number of census respondents who are humanist or non-religious. The share of people ticking “no religion” in the census rose from 25% in 2011 to 37% in 2021—a significant rise. Around two thirds of people who get married are between the ages of 25 and 39, and among that group 48% of people ticked that they had “no religion” in the census.

The current law essentially means that around half of people of normal marriageable age are being denied the choice of having a legally binding marriage that conforms with their beliefs. More widely, we have seen other advances for humanism in the last 12 years. Humanism is increasingly becoming a recognised part of the school religious education syllabus. Humanists are now officially included in national moments, such as the service of remembrance and Holocaust Memorial Day. They provide input into the moral and ethical issues of our time. I worked in the NHS during the covid pandemic, and humanists were officially consulted on, and contributed to, some of the advice that we received from the Department of Health and Social Care’s moral and ethical advisory group.

A lot has happened in 12 years, yet humanist marriages are still not legally recognised. As others have said, it is overdue that we change that. The order is drafted and ready to go. We have had to wait far too long for this already. I look forward to hearing how we can get this done as quickly as possible.

2.19 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), as well as the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), for securing the debate.

It is a timely debate for me, as it was exactly this week 11 years ago that I had my humanist wedding. It was one of the most wonderful days of my life—my husband and I, surrounded by family and friends, on a beautiful, windswept and, fortunately, sunny beach in Devon, marking and celebrating our decision to spend our lives together. I had not really heard of a humanist wedding before I started planning one, but once we realised the constraints of a civil ceremony—the limits on readings, songs, numbers of guests and locations—we quickly decided that we wanted something else: a celebration of not just our formal commitment, but our beliefs and values.

Personally, although I have every respect for people of all faiths and none, it is through humanist values that I try to make sense of the world. For me, this is the one life that I have, and I try to live in the here and now, making decisions on what I feel and see that are based on logic, reason and evidence, and rooted in compassion, dignity and respect for other people. Because my husband sees the world in the same way, a humanist wedding was the right choice for us.

I pay tribute to our incredible humanist celebrant, David Pack, who sadly passed away a few years ago, but will forever remain a central part of our special day. He helped us to create a ceremony that spoke to our values, and I want to borrow his words about why humanist weddings are so important. He said:

“A lot of couples say they find it hypocritical to make promises before a god they don’t believe in...As humanists we believe that we can find a way of living and behaving decently without needing reference to any divine authority, drawing on our own human qualities: reason, emotion, experience and empathy”.

That is what a humanist wedding enables a couple to express at that key moment in their lives. We had wonderful feedback from our guests, many of whom had never been to a humanist wedding before but found it to be a very open, inclusive and moving ceremony, from the songs to the vows and the readings, many of which we had written together.

Although I could happily be sucked into reminiscing about my wedding, I will turn to the point of today’s debate. For me, that starts with the fact that, although this week is the time we celebrate our wedding anniversary each year, it is not in fact my official wedding anniversary, which comes at the end of May, marking the date that we went to an unremarkable registry office in London to do the official bit. We felt somewhat resentful at the time, and still do to this day, because it came with extra costs, extra admin and that nagging sense that the wedding we had invited everyone to a few weeks later was somehow not the real deal. That is why I am so pleased that this debate is happening, and I am so pleased to speak in support of the legal recognition of humanist marriages.

I want humanist couples to be able to marry with a British Humanist Association celebrant of their choosing, and for this to have the same status in law as any other wedding. We have heard from others about how possible this is; I understand that the law can be changed quite quickly and easily by laying down the order under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. No further legislative work is needed. I am so proud that Labour has long supported this. It would strip away legal risks, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), and it would be free. It would also be popular, as we have heard. I hope that after today’s debate we can just get on with it.

Legalising humanist marriage would have a transformative impact for humanist couples across the country, stripping away the awkwardness, inconvenience, cost and injustice of needing both an official ceremony and a moment of celebration. It would enable humanists to make their wedding day what it should be: the celebration of their commitment to each other, in line with their beliefs and values, and the legal recognition of that union once and for all.

2.23 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), as well as the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), on securing the debate. Before I begin in earnest, I am proud to declare my interest as a member of Humanists UK and of the all-party parliamentary humanist group.

I would like to make a proposal to the Minister—one that does not need a ring, flowers or a dramatic moment on bended knee. My simple proposal is that we finally say yes to legalising humanist marriage in England and Wales. I understand the Government’s arguments, and I will focus my remarks on them, but before I get into the detail, I want to say that the fact that this was

resolved in Scotland two decades ago, and could be, but has not been, resolved in England and Wales by way of a simple order, is indefensible. It demands urgent action.

I have heard the Government's argument that they want to consider marriage law in the round, and they should certainly do that, but, thanks to the previous Government, humanist couples have already been waiting for 12 years and that has not happened. Why should they have to continue to wait, and why can they not have legal recognition of their marriages in the meantime?

While humanist couples have been waiting, many other piecemeal reforms have taken place. In 2021, the law was changed to allow civil marriages outdoors. The system of registering marriages became electronic. Mothers' names have been added to marriage certificates. Opposite-sex civil partnerships have been introduced, along with new possibilities for conversions between marriage and civil partnership. No-fault divorce was introduced in 2022. The marriage age was raised to 18 in 2023. Weddings for whole-life prisoners were banned by this Government just last year.

While all that was taking place, more and more religious groups have been happily registering themselves to do marriages for the first time. Scientologists got the power to conduct marriage in 2014 following a Supreme Court case. The Order of St Leonard, a religious group founded in just 2009, has registered. The Goddess People of Avalon and the He Lives Bible Church, formed in 2000 and 1998, respectively, both registered. In other words, whole religions have come into existence and got the power to conduct marriage in almost the same time that humanist marriages have been under review.

Similarly, more religious groups have decided to perform same-sex marriages, most notably the Methodists in 2021. All the while, humanist celebrants have wanted to be able to perform legal same-sex marriages, but have been denied the right to do so. The previous Government argued that other religious and non-religious belief groups are arguing for legal marriage recognition, so it would be unfair to recognise humanists. However, that argument seems to be that two wrongs make a right. It is not clear who those groups even are. Muslims, for example, can already marry in mosques, and hundreds do so every year. Independent celebrants are an entirely different proposition, as we have heard, being profit-making alternatives to state registrars. It is also not clear how other religious or non-religious belief groups would be disadvantaged by humanists gaining recognition.

In the interest of time, I will wrap up. Scotland has already said, "I do." Thousands of couples have legally married in beautiful, meaningful humanist ceremonies. England and Wales are still standing at the altar, checking their watch and waiting for the doors to open. I am not asking for sweeping reform. I am not asking the Minister to rethink everything. I am just asking for a simple answer to a simple question: will the Minister, at long last, do me the honour of making that order and recognising humanist marriages? There is no lawful impediment, just the chance to say, finally and unequivocally, "I do."

2.27 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale

(Lizzi Collinge) and the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), who secured this debate. It has been worth it for all the puns, if nothing else.

I will use my time to speak about what a positive impact making this change would have, particularly for LGBT couples. In the 2021 census, 37% of people in England and Wales identified as having no religion. Among lesbian, gay and bisexual people, that jumps up to 63%. The numbers for trans people, while a bit less clear due to some issues with the census, are similar. With that in mind, it stands to reason that those LGBT couples would generally prefer to have a non-religious ceremony when they get married.

Indeed, that is what is happening. Humanists UK, whose stats I will be quoting throughout—I also declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary humanist group—has found that, following the legislation of same-sex marriage in 2013, humanist celebrants do more same-sex marriages without legal recognition every year than there are legally recognised religious same-sex marriages. That means that many people are opting for these meaningful, inclusive ceremonies even though they do not carry legal weight. That says something very powerful about the demand. Part of that is out of necessity. Humanists UK's statistics have also shown that less than 1% of places of worship in England and Wales have registered to perform same-sex marriages, so, in practice, a lot of the time, LGBT couples who want to get married and have their union properly recognised are left with very few real options.

That is not to downplay the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which was a big step forward in LGBT rights. To give credit where it is due, that Act was one of very few positives under the previous Conservative Governments, albeit something that got through only because Members from other parties, particularly my own, supported it. That Act, as others have said, included a provision for an order to be laid in future to recognise humanist marriages without the need for further primary legislation, so we could make this change very quickly.

In Labour's 2024 election manifesto, we committed to strengthening the rights and protections of cohabiting couples. The Minister cited that in response to a recent written question on humanist marriages, which I was pleased to see. I know the Government are currently considering the recommendations from the Law Commission report on weddings and will hopefully confirm the position on that soon. I look forward to that development, as I know humanists have been waiting a long time for legal recognition. I hope we hear more about that today.

There is huge support among various religious groups for this change, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth said. More recent polling has shown there are majorities in favour across all religious groups, as well as across voters of all major political parties. Last year, Sandi Toksvig and Stephen Fry were joined by Stonewall, the Terrence Higgins Trust, the LGBT+ Consortium and the LGBT+ groups affiliated to all three major political parties in writing to the Prime Minister about what recognition would do for LGBT couples. This seems to be one of those issues on which pretty much everyone agrees.

Given the overwhelming public support, the ease with which this could be introduced and the impact it would have on LGBT couples in particular, I hope we see recognition of humanist marriages in England

[*Sam Carling*]

and Wales, joining Scotland and Northern Ireland, so that everyone in the UK has the option to have a legally recognised humanist ceremony.

2.31 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. The Liberal Democrats are proud of our clear and consistent commitment to legal recognition for humanist marriages, which has been official party policy since 2010. It is a position anchored by a strong tenet of our liberalism—the belief that couples should be able to celebrate their marriage in the way they wish. We believe that all types of marriage ceremonies, whether religious, civil or humanist, should be treated equally under the law. It is the right thing to do and the fair thing to do. Frankly, it is deeply sad that it has not yet been done in England and Wales.

As has been mentioned, humanist marriages have been legally recognised in Scotland for 20 years, having been introduced in 2005 by the coalition Government that included the Liberal Democrats. Humanist marriages have been legally recognised in Northern Ireland since 2018, in Jersey since 2019, and in Guernsey since 2021. Today, we are reckoning with an alarming discrepancy across the British Isles in a crucial aspect of our legal system.

Do not get me wrong—I am a localist. I believe firmly in devolution of policy, and I recognise that one thing that makes our country so great is the co-existence of strong and diverse legal traditions and systems. But on the question of what really should be a fundamental right for people to marry whoever they love in the manner of their choosing, it is right that we should look to extend and entrench that right as far and as wide as possible.

All of that is to say nothing of the growing recognition of humanist marriages in other countries with similar legal traditions, a shared Commonwealth history and, in countries like Australia, New Zealand and Canada, a shared Head of State. Indeed, I have intimate knowledge of the latter. When I lived in Toronto, Ontario in 2013, I married my wife in a beautiful ceremony with our choice of officiant, in the snow, in the bandstand of a park near Niagara Falls. A word of warning, though: the temperature plunged to minus 15° during the ceremony and my eyelashes froze shut.

It was not explicitly a humanist wedding, but nor was it a religious or strictly civic wedding either. We had the freedom to choose where and by whom we were married, without the need for a second, separate official ceremony or registration, which humanists are forced to do here in England. We simply had to procure a marriage licence from the city hall and then wait for the marriage certificate to arrive in the post following the ceremony.

This ceremony is recognised as a marriage here in the UK—at least I hope it is—so my personal experience might speak to a further discrepancy in the law by which I, a British national, have what I believe is a legally recognised non-religious and non-civic marriage, while other British nationals in this Chamber are not afforded that same right and freedom of choice were they to be wed in England and Wales.

As several Members have outlined in today's debate, humanism is a proud tradition with roots stretching back across the centuries. Today, it is alive and well in Britain, with around 5% of the population identifying as humanists, which is more than 3 million people. For the record, I am one of them. The humanist tradition is clearly well established, and the demand for recognising this kind of marriage is clearly significant.

It is not just humanists who want this kind of marriage to be recognised in law: polling published this week by YouGov and Humanists UK shows that 70% of UK adults are in favour, and that this support is widespread and cross-cutting across a wide range of religious groups and political preferences.

Recognising humanist marriage in law is clearly the right thing to do, and it is time for the law to catch up with public sentiment. The public clearly respect and are permissive of a meaningful, non-religious alternative that aligns with the values of many couples, and that recognises that the current situation—in which couples who have a humanist marriage effectively have to duplicate their enjoyment at a later date, usually in a civil ceremony—is unfair. Recognising that unfairness and treating these marriages equally under the law would be a great step forward for millions of people, and it would provide legal clarity for couples.

The moment is ripe for this kind of change. The past decade and a half have seen meaningful revision of our marriage laws, on which the Liberal Democrats are proud to have led the way. The tireless efforts of Liberal Democrat Ministers such as Baroness Featherstone were instrumental in getting the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act passed. I am so grateful for the hard work of people like Lynne and the countless heroes from the LGBT+ community who made this a reality.

It was the Liberal Democrats in government who led the charge to get the ball rolling on recognising humanist marriages, too. Pressure from the Liberal Democrats resulted in the coalition Government proposing what is now section 14 of the Act: the order-making power that could give legal recognition to humanist marriages at any time. Since then we have had more than a decade of missed opportunity, as Government after Government have dragged their feet on responding to a series of Law Commission reviews. In that time, support for humanist marriages has only grown stronger, and the urgent need for change ever clearer.

This Government, who talked a good game in opposition on finally delivering this change using the section 14 power, have dithered in their first year. I ask the Minister to outline the timetable for moving forward on recognising humanist marriages, to explain the Government's considerations in relation to the Law Commission's review into the matter, and to tell us why they need more time to consider the change when the issue has been under review for 12 years.

I take advantage of this opportunity to personally call for the right to recognise any marriage conducted by a registered officiant for all other groups, as I enjoyed in my marriage, because there is no reason why a humanist should have rights that any other group is denied. Far from leading to “Las Vegas-style free-for-alls”, as the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) described—somewhat tongue in cheek—I see it as a basic choice in a liberal society. If a couple choose to be married by a man in an Elvis Presley costume, they should have that right.

If the Government wanted, they could start making this change tomorrow. They have inherited a state apparatus that has had that power for more than a decade, as has been clearly expressed today. I hope the Minister agrees about the need to change the law, and I invite her to say to all of us, “I do.”

2.37 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain, in what has been a heart-warming debate. I thank the hon. Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards), for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) for securing this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Marriage and civil partnerships play a vital role in fostering stable families and, as a result, more stable communities. Marriage and civil partnerships are more than personal milestones; they are cornerstones of strong, cohesive and enduring relationships—values that my party holds dear. When talking positively about marriage, I always like to point out that my parents were divorced; I do not approach this issue with some idealised view of what marriage represents and can mean, but understanding that an institution is not perfect does not mean that one cannot champion all of its benefits.

I must also declare an interest in that I consider myself to be a humanist, and I am a member of the all-party parliamentary humanist group—this seems to be a gathering of humanists in Parliament today.

The exact meaning of what it is to be a humanist will be different for different people, just as the interpretation and meaning of religious faith varies among individuals. To me, it has its greatest value at a community and societal level. We can all individually decide to try to lead what we consider to be moral, values-based lives, but humanism provides us with the opportunity to do so from a shared perspective.

Many humanists celebrate significant milestones—births, marriages and deaths—in ways that reflect their values and worldview. As others have said, a humanist marriage ceremony is often deeply personalised, focusing on the couple’s individuality and commitment, rather than adhering just to religious traditions. Humanist ceremonies are gaining in popularity because they offer an alternative that resonates with those who prefer secular yet still meaningful celebrations.

Approximately 1,200 couples a year choose to have a humanist marriage ceremony, and currently they all have to have a separate legal ceremony. The public, outward-facing nature of a marriage ceremony puts into action the idea that values can be even more powerful when shared and celebrated together as a community.

Previous Conservative Governments understood and recognised the importance of marriage. We delivered the groundbreaking Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, which allowed gay and lesbian couples to lawfully marry for the first time. Indeed, that legislation provided for a review and subsequent public consultation on humanist marriages too.

I understand that the majority of respondents to the 2014 consultation were in favour of changing the law. However, the coalition Government, which included the Liberal Democrats, decided that the legal and technical

requirements of marriage ceremonies and registration in England and Wales should be considered more generally, alongside making a decision on this issue.

The Law Commission was asked to review the law governing how and where people can marry in England and Wales, and the Law Commission concluded its work in 2022. The final 500-page report on reforming weddings law set out 57 recommendations. One feature of the proposed new scheme is that regulation would be based on the officiant rather than on the building in which a wedding takes place. The report also set out a scheme by which anybody could be authorised to conduct civil marriages.

I have some concerns about the Law Commission’s proposals. I understand that the recommendations go beyond giving humanist wedding ceremonies legal status, and they would create a free-market, celebrant-based approach to the wedding industry. I disagree with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), that marriage is an entirely individual choice. We have talked about how its value sits within society; and if society does not regulate and choose how that operates, marriage loses its wider shared meaning. Alongside humanists, others have expressed that such a move could undermine the solemn nature of marriage.

I understand that the current Government have also taken the view that wholesale reform is preferable. But every year that passes rightly creates further pressure, as the balance tips closer to those arguing that having specific measures to support humanist marriage ceremonies is the fairer approach. Let us not forget that Scotland and Northern Ireland already legally recognise humanist marriages.

During the pandemic, the previous Conservative Government took steps to adapt our marriage laws to accommodate the social distancing regulations in place at the time. In June 2021, they recognised the need for flexibility during a challenging time for individuals wishing to marry and for wedding venues, by extending legal recognition to outdoor civil marriages on an interim basis. The measure allowed ceremonies to take place outdoors on approved premises, addressing the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

Following a consultation, that temporary reform was made permanent in April 2022, ensuring that couples could continue to celebrate their union in a safe and meaningful manner. The reform demonstrates the ongoing Conservative commitment to marriage and proves that specific adaptations to our legal framework to meet the needs of the moment are eminently possible.

On a personal level, and as a member of the APPG, I share the frustration with the continued delay to marriage reform and, as a result, the recognition of humanist marriages. I also note the YouGov poll, conveniently published earlier this week, showing strong public support for recognising humanist marriages, with 70% in favour and only 15% opposed. The support is consistent across religious and belief groups of different kinds.

Notwithstanding the concerns I have outlined, the Opposition are positively predisposed to the introduction of humanist marriage ceremonies. While we would need to consider any proposals in detail, we hope to be able to welcome any reform package brought forward. We are increasingly sympathetic to the need for specific

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

measures to allow humanist marriages to take place, given the ongoing delays. A number of Conservative Members who support these measures wished to attend this debate, but as is often the case, timetables can be challenging.

I hope the Minister can outline a timetable, and if she cannot, can instead explain what consideration the Government are giving to targeted reform. What do they see as the obstacles to this approach? As other Members have mentioned, the manner in which the marriage ceremonies of Quakers and Jewish groups are legally recognised provides a template for the Government.

At the heart of this discussion lies a fundamental truth: marriage and civil partnerships are institutions that promote stability, responsibility and community cohesion. These are values that I, as a Conservative, champion unequivocally. I look forward to hearing the Minister's plans for bringing them to the fore for the humanists in our society.

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I start by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), and the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), for securing this important—and, may I say, really lovely—debate.

I should stress that the strength of feeling and frustration around legally recognising humanist weddings is very clear to me from this debate. It is important for me to acknowledge at the outset that the Government fully understand and recognise the significance of the issue to hon. Members and to humanists more widely. I am aware that a number of hon. Member from both Houses are campaigning on the issue, including those Members who secured the debate. I thank all hon. Members for taking part and expressing their deeply personal experiences and views. It has really contributed to this positive debate.

Andrew Copson, chief executive of Humanists UK, has been at the forefront of this campaign. He has met officials from my Department on a number of occasions, and it has been very helpful to understand his views on the issue as we take forward any potential reform. It is also only right that I acknowledge the frustrations that humanists have felt while campaigning for a change to the law. I appreciate that this change has been ongoing on for a long time. For many humanists, the inclusion of the order-making power within the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 was hard fought for, and I know that it has been disappointing to them that this power has not been used to date.

I also do not think it would be right to have this debate without recognising the important contribution that humanists make to society. Humanists have often been at the forefront of the fight for social justice, campaigning for fairness, respect and equality for all. I join in celebrating the celebrants mentioned today for all the work they do to conduct weddings, funerals and important life events. The Government hugely acknowledge the tireless work of humanists, whether that is campaigning to abolish blasphemy laws, or Humanists UK raising the profile of illegal independent schools within Government.

I know that my noble Friend Lord Khan was very pleased to attend the World Humanists Day reception last year as the Minister for Faith, Communities and Resettlement. When the Prime Minister was Leader of the Opposition, he spoke in 2021 to mark Humanists UK's 125th anniversary, saying:

“Ever since its foundation as an ethical movement, humanists have contributed enormously to our party's and our nation's achievements...Humanists and Humanists UK have been at the forefront of the fight for social change: to decriminalise homosexuality, to end corporal punishment in schools, and to introduce free school meals.”

I could not have put it better myself. That quote captures the profound and lasting impact of Humanists UK.

We are having this debate because marriage is one of our most important institutions. At its best, it is a celebration of love, a symbol of enduring partnership and a deeply personal commitment. Marriage can provide many benefits, including emotional support, financial stability and legal protections. For those who choose to marry, it is a significant and meaningful decision—one that this Government are proud to promote and protect. Although the state rightly has a responsibility to ensure that marriage laws provide clarity and certainty around the legal status of marriage, we believe the conversation can and should go further. Our weddings law should always reflect the importance and meaning of marriage as an institution.

It is important to acknowledge the shape of our current law around weddings and explain how we have got to where we are, so let me begin by reflecting on the history of marriage law in England and Wales—unlike some wedding speeches, I promise to keep it brief and free of groan-inducing jokes.

Our weddings law has evolved gradually over centuries, with its core structure rooted in the 18th and 19th centuries. The foundations of weddings law were laid by the Clandestine Marriages Act 1753. The Act was designed to prevent secret or hasty marriages by requiring weddings to be undertaken by Anglican clergy in a parish church or public chapel. While the Act permitted Anglican weddings only, it explicitly exempted Jewish and Quaker marriage ceremonies. The Marriage Act 1836 marked a significant turning point, introducing civil marriage for the first time and allowing weddings to take place in registry offices and non-Anglican places of worship. It also brought in civil preliminaries, acknowledging the state's interest in there being legal certainty about who is married.

The fundamental structure established in 1836 remains largely in place today, consolidated within the Marriage Act 1949. The model on which our law is based is broadly a buildings-based model, which means that most marriages are regulated according to the building in which they take place. There are exceptions to the system, because Jews and Quakers are not bound by this restriction and may marry in any location.

There is discrepancy in the law, because couples must choose between a civil or a religious wedding. If they opt for a religious wedding, the rules that apply will vary depending which religion the ceremony is conducted according to. Civil weddings, by contrast, must be held at a register office or at premises that have been officially approved for that purpose. Therefore, it is for historical reasons that humanists are currently unable to conduct legally binding weddings. There is no provision in our

legislative framework for non-religious belief ceremonies to be legally binding, as a wedding must either be religious or civil.

As others have said, the Law Commission published a report in 2022 reviewing weddings law and concluded that it is

“inconsistent and complicated, inefficient, unfair, and needlessly restrictive”.

It found that the law does not work for couples of many different religions and beliefs, including humanists. The report was the result of extensive research and stakeholder engagement; the Law Commission received more than 1,500 responses to its consultation and engaging with more than 50 key stakeholders. It provided a number of instances where the law does not work for many couples, and one prominent example is that humanist couples are unable to have legally recognised humanist weddings in England and Wales.

The Law Commission also highlighted discrepancies affecting different religious groups. For instance, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Hindus are required to marry in a registered place of worship, regardless of whether that place of worship is meaningful in a marriage context, and must use a prescribed form of words. In contrast, Jew and Quaker couples are permitted to marry in any location and without any prescribed wording. Another example identified was the challenges faced by mixed-faith couples, who are currently unable to have ceremonies that might reflect two different faiths.

To address the wide range of problems identified with the current law, the Law Commission made 57 recommendations for reform, underpinned by the proposal that current weddings law should be overhauled and a new legislative framework should be put in place. The Law Commission proposed a new framework to ensure that all groups are treated with fairness and consistency on how they get married.

I am keenly aware that humanists have expressed the view that the Law Commission’s recommendations do not provide the solution they are seeking. One of the main reasons for that is their preference for the Government to act quickly and use the order-making power, as several hon. Members have mentioned, which would allow for humanist weddings to take place within the current legislative framework.

Andrew Cooper: I understand the Minister’s point, but that does not accurately characterise my position. I am very happy for the Government to do a broader set of reforms, but I and others are arguing that we do not necessarily need to wait for that before acting on humanist marriage. The two things could happen in parallel. Would the Minister agree with that?

Alex Davies-Jones: It is important to ensure we do this properly. I am against any piecemeal reform here. If we are to do this, we need to do it properly and together, so that it is succinct. There are ways that that can be done, as I am about to come on to.

I acknowledge the calls made during this debate for the Government to take that step, and to take it quickly, and I will address them directly. Although it is true that using the order-making power would allow non-religious belief organisations to marry within the current framework of weddings law, it is important for us to take into account what the Law Commission has said about doing

that. The Law Commission highlighted the complexities of the law in this area and concluded that exercising the order-making power is not, in its view, a viable option. As a responsible Government, we must take that view into account when considering the issue of weddings reform.

Cat Eccles: Does the Minister agree that those measures already exist for Quakers? Humanists are not asking for a huge change in the law.

Alex Davies-Jones: I totally agree, and I recognise that point, which I have addressed in terms of Jews and Quakers; this is about equality before the law, but we need to recognise the concerns raised by the Law Commission about what making that change on its own could entail. We need to look at this in the round, which is exactly what the Government are doing.

I know that the hon. Members who secured this debate will be disappointed when I say that it would not be responsible for the Government to ignore the Law Commission’s report, but we cannot ignore the fact that the report identified a number of complex and significant recommendations. It is absolutely essential that those are considered carefully and in full, and that is exactly what we are doing. I stress that that does not mean the issue of humanist marriage is being overlooked. On the contrary, the Government are actively considering the matter of humanist weddings as part of their broader review of the Law Commission’s report.

As I have said, we are considering the issues very carefully. Although I know hon. Members will be disappointed that the Government have not yet made commitments in relation to the issue, I hope the debate today has at least provided some assurance that the Government understand and hear the strength of feeling on the issues, including the key importance not just of weddings, but of marriage itself, and that we are looking into them with the utmost care and attention. I hope that assures hon. Members that I very much sympathise with humanists’ wish for legally binding weddings. I am happy to confirm—and say “I do”—that my officials are working on this at pace, and that an update on the Government’s position on weddings law reform will come soon. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth, we may not yet be able to set the date, but we can certainly start planning.

2.54 pm

Sarah Edwards: I thank all hon. Members for their insightful contributions to this ceremonious debate, the personal stories shared and the tone of the debate. We have witnessed a marriage today between my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), which was a treat for all of us. We have had an incredibly important debate, but we have been waiting. I acknowledge the Minister’s comments, but more than a decade has passed since Parliament gave the Government power to make this change—a change backed by public support, clear legal authority and a strong moral case. The Labour Government have the chance to act and bring an end to this unnecessary injustice.

It is slightly disappointing not to hear more clarity on the timeframe. We are asking for equal treatment, fairness and recognition, and it is a straightforward and

[Sarah Edwards]

uncontroversial step to give legal status to humanist marriages. I say to the Minister: let us not wait any longer. The engagement has been long enough. The guests are ready, the vows have been written and the case is clear for finally delivering the legal recognition that humanist couples have waited so long to see. Will she pronounce our humanist marriages lawfully wedded?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the recognition of humanist marriages.

2.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Long-term Medical Conditions

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. Long-term conditions need a long-term plan. We were promised one of those, and it cannot come soon enough. The Chancellor's statement yesterday, which committed to a 3% real-terms rise in NHS funding each year, gives me enormous hope for the future of our health service. Some 70% of that funding will likely go to the treatment of long-term conditions, so it is incredibly important that we consider how we should treat them.

Most of us at some point will collect a few long-term conditions. Some of us are born with them; sometimes, they are serious disabilities. I am sure that we will hear some stories of those challenges. I reached out to the people of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket and heard many stories about their experiences of using our NHS. All too often, it is the same story: it is those with long-term conditions, not deadly diseases, who feel most let down now. The reality for many is that by the time they reach my age, they are fortunate if they have never had to visit a clinic or see a nurse about something that is no longer working quite as well as it should. The wheels begin to fall off all of us eventually.

Living with a long-term condition has a profound impact on people. It can mean lost work days, missed opportunities and, for many, being pushed out of the workforce altogether. When people are unable to work because of poor health, they are cut off from society and their quality of life obviously declines. That also has a terrible effect on the economy. It is estimated that successfully addressing the crisis in long-term sickness would increase GDP by between £109 billion and £177 billion over the next five years, generating billions of pounds of additional tax revenue. This is a growing trend and as the population gets older it will simply become more pressing. I worry that we have not truly adapted our medical system to deal with this reality.

When I was a medical student, a heart attack was managed with morphine and bed rest. Things have certainly changed, and yet the NHS has not changed enough. In 1948, it was created to deal with infectious diseases and acute hospital care, but the health needs of the population have changed completely. People now live long lives with conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and arthritis. We need to focus on keeping those people in the community rather than waiting until they become so unwell that they have to be brought to hospitals.

The NHS should not just be a sickness service; it should help people to manage their conditions and live much better lives. During our debate on dementia a few days ago, I heard many moving stories about families challenged by that devastating illness. Dementia fills so many hospital beds, and the cost to society is quite staggering, but the real message of the debate was about the need for better community care and greater investment in technology and research. That is true for dementia, but it is also true for many long-term conditions. We have the time and the ideas; now, we must use them.

There is much talk about moving care from hospitals to the community, which is not a slogan but an absolute necessity. I have seen it work in practice: before I came here,

I was involved in a project that moved care for people with hearing loss out of hospitals and into the community. Patients benefited from easier and quicker access to specialist NHS audiology and nursing services. We now need to see such an approach rolled out across the country.

The neighbourhood practice model advocated by my Suffolk GP colleagues must be part of the answer, with community health hubs open into the evening, resourced with nurses and mental health services and incorporating a pharmacy, with a GP who is known to the patient and to the family. Those hubs would be the place to call when sick—a better option than calling 111 or having a long wait in A&E. They would offer access to multi-disciplinary teams all in one place, a bit like the geriatric day hospitals that my dad, Professor Derek Prinsley, a pioneer of geriatric medicine, introduced into his practice in Teesside in the 1960s.

The NHS must be a neighbourhood health service, not just a national health service. That is how we join up care so that patients no longer feel like they are being pushed from pillar to post. Instead of being rushed between different appointments in hospital corridors, people should be cared for in one place, bringing lifesaving continuity of care. It is time to end the fragmented system of the past, where people ended up in A&E simply because there was nowhere else to go, and where we had older people lying in trolleys in the early hours for long-term conditions that could have been managed in primary care. A&E should be for real accidents and emergencies. That is how we must start thinking about the long-term care of long-term conditions.

At the centre of our thoughts must be the patient. Health services are all too often designed to deal with patients with a single disease, but for a growing number, that is no longer a suitable model. If I have high blood pressure and asthma, I have to visit the practice three times: once for the blood pressure check and once for the asthma check, and then another appointment to see the GP. I think we can do better than that.

How can we truly put the patient at the centre of healthcare? As I have said before, one answer is to embrace the digital transition and change the medical record paradigm. Let the patient have the record. Give them agency over their healthcare. If people knew a bit more about their health, they might care for it a bit better. More than one in five patients with a long-term condition has said they do not have enough information to manage their condition. That is 5.5 million people across the country who are not confident that they can manage their condition, so let us have the doctor ask the patient for the record, not the other way round. That would be a revolutionary change.

I would like to talk about medical research. Of course, our country has an incredible record of medical research: Jenner, who devised vaccination; Lister, who invented antiseptics; and Fleming, who discovered penicillin—British doctors who saved unimaginable numbers of lives. Then there is Dr John Snow, who removed the handle from the water pump in Broad Street, near to where we are sitting today, ending the cholera epidemic and founding the field of public health. It is on scientific advances like those that we mostly depend as we fight many long-term conditions. We will hear of artificial pancreas pumps to treat diabetes and genetic treatments to cure sickle cell

disease and arthritis, but let us not take that progress for granted. We should support medical innovation and put the best technology into the hands of our doctors.

I am proud that the Government are boosting investment in diagnostic machines in hospitals across the country, because I have been told by constituents about the struggle of misdiagnosis—months and years spent unsure what is wrong with them, with doctors unable to shed any light. We are rolling out artificial intelligence and improving diagnostics across the country, and the Government have promised to support that further.

Improving researchers' access to medical data will be part of the approach. Let us imagine the scientific advances we could make if researchers could conduct studies on sample sizes of 67 million people. Scientific and medical advances depend on our brilliant young people, who must be funded and supported as they embark on research careers. The number of clinical academics is in decline, which is a particular worry of mine. We should challenge that and reverse it. The NHS is easily the biggest employer in our country—perhaps one of the biggest employers in the whole world—but what are we doing to ensure that its people can best support us?

A failure to tackle long-term conditions is significantly impacting the NHS's own workforce. Musculoskeletal conditions, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis are leading causes of absenteeism among NHS staff, with ambulance and clinical support staff particularly affected, but we also hear many examples of terrible workforce planning. We learn of nurses and midwives graduating from colleges carrying large debts, after working for thousands of hours on placements for free, only to find a recruitment freeze in the very hospitals that desperately need their skills. Instead, hospitals are spending huge sums on agency staff. This is not a long-term plan; this is short-term thinking of the very worst kind.

I am glad that agency spending fell last year. We must make sure that we spend wisely on newly qualified nurses and midwives, which will end up saving the NHS enormous sums. We also ought to do something about their student debt. Why not write it off if they commit to working for five years in our NHS, giving them security? Our health service needs their expertise.

What about the young doctors, of whom I have spoken before? We need enough GPs, nurses and clinicians to help people to get well, but every year, thousands of UK doctors qualify with debts of up to £100,000. Many are then sent far from home, family and friends just as they begin their careers, and after two years they face intense competition for higher training against thousands of international doctors who fill up our hospital rotas and keep our services running. Some young doctors find themselves repeating their foundation years or going overseas, and others leave medicine altogether. This is certainly not a long-term plan.

We must do better. I have seen for myself that our hospitals can run better with the resources they already have. At my West Suffolk hospital I saw the results: corridor care has been abolished and long-term waits in A&E are now a thing of the past. That has been done by taking a whole-hospital approach to improve the patient experience and ensure that the appropriate health professional is dealing with the patient at the earliest opportunity. That does not cost more, the staff are happier

[*Peter Prinsley*]

and the service is massively better. That is what happens when we put people first, work together across the disciplines and take real responsibility for change.

Mr Blair once spoke of dealing with crime and the causes of crime; today I speak of dealing with diseases and the causes of diseases. Poverty, poor nutrition and poor housing are at the heart of so much of our country's ill health. Those are not just background factors; they are the root cause of suffering and long-term conditions. If we are truly committed to a healthier society, those are the challenges we must address.

The mission of our party and our Government is to lift millions out of poverty, tackle deep inequality and shape people's health from cradle to grave. We will not accept the shocking housing conditions endured by so many of our fellow citizens. These are not simply political and economic problems; they are the underlying causes of much disease and misery, and many avoidable deaths.

There is much for us to do, but I am convinced there is much that we can do to create easier access to NHS services, improve primary care and support those who want to conduct groundbreaking medical research. I hope the Government will look to tackle our long-term conditions crisis.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I remind Members that they must bob if they want to take part in the debate.

3.12 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for his learned and absolutely excellent speech. I will focus on my profession as an NHS optometrist and discuss the impact of sight loss from long-term conditions.

Let us imagine a young mother-to-be sitting in my consulting room glowing with excitement, whose joy turns to fear as I gently explain to her that her sight is deteriorating—all of a sudden it becomes a race against time; she may never be able to see her baby clearly. Or let us imagine the teenage boy with dreams of a rugby career who leaves my room with the life-changing knowledge that he is losing his vision. Unfortunately, those are not extraordinary cases; they are everyday tragedies in my workplace.

These long-term conditions are often framed in terms of physical health, but as someone working with patients losing their sight, I see—as the hon. Member already eloquently articulated—the more profound, layered consequences everyday: the emotional trauma, isolation and loss of independence, and the inevitability of declining mental health, which I want to concentrate on.

For example, macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in the UK. It does not just take away people's central vision; it also affects their ability to read, recognise faces and drive. That means grandparents may never be able to see the faces of their grandchildren; tears are a natural result of such a devastating awareness. There is also a condition called glaucoma—generally diagnosed later in life—known as a thief of sight, because

it creeps up on someone silently, often unnoticed, until irreversible damage has been done. It steals more than vision; it robs people of confidence, safety and the ability to live independently. For many, the diagnosis comes too late, and with it comes a slow loss of identity.

Sight loss is not just a health issue but a social one, and its impact is profound. More than 4 million people in England with a long-term physical health condition also live with mental health problems. Those individuals experience significantly poorer outcomes and shorter life expectancies, and economically the toll is massive: between £8 billion and £13 billion a year, or at least £1 in every £8 spent on long-term conditions, is linked directly to poor mental health and wellbeing.

One extremely overlooked condition—I suspect many people have not heard of it—is a consequence of vision loss called Charles Bonnet syndrome, which causes people to see vivid hallucinations as the brain attempts to fill in the gaps left by the reduced sight. The images can be repetitive patterns, but more often and distressingly they can be realistic visions of people, sometimes long deceased, or landscapes.

Let us imagine that a person who is elderly, fragile and possibly alone is diagnosed with sight loss, and all they can see is their long-lost childhood pet—it is beyond frightening. It is not a mental disorder, yet many patients suffer in silence, afraid to talk about the hallucinations for fear of being misunderstood and misdiagnosed. Research suggests that at least one in five adults with sight loss will experience Charles Bonnet syndrome—more than 1 million people in the UK—but the figure is probably even higher. Children are affected too, but we are only beginning to understand their experiences.

People living with long-term conditions such as macular degeneration, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy face a constant battle not just with their illness, but with a system that is not designed to meet the complex, long-term nature of their needs. We need a change in the Government's upcoming 10-year healthcare plan, and I have some suggestions for that. We should recognise sight loss and associated conditions such as Charles Bonnet syndrome as part of the national long-term conditions framework.

We need routine mental health screening and support for people with chronic vision impairment—in fact, for all long-term conditions. We need training for all healthcare professionals, as the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said, in integrated work, so that optometrists, GPs and nurses identify patients and support them with the psychological impact of the illness. NHS funding models and care pathways should be redesigned to reward integrated care and cross-speciality collaboration, especially where physical and mental health intersect. We need investment in early detection and care pathways.

Long-term conditions shorten lives not only through the body but through the burden they place on the mind. If we do not act, we will be complicit in that erosion. But if we do act—if we integrate care, listen to patients, fund innovations and remove stigma—we can change what it means to live with long-term conditions in this country. Let us ensure that people living with long-term health conditions, whether heart failure, arthritis, diabetes or sight loss, are not left to fall through the cracks. Sight is not a luxury, independence is not optional and suffering in silence must never be acceptable.

3.17 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this extremely important debate. He speaks from a position of great experience. He rightly points to a holistic approach, putting the patient at the centre of their treatment.

By 2035, two thirds of the UK population aged over 65 are expected to be living with two or more long-term conditions, whether chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, Parkinson's, diabetes or epilepsy. Living with an LTC can significantly reduce a person's quality of life.

I rise to speak on behalf of those living with a condition that affects approximately 1.5 million women in the UK: endometriosis. This chronic condition, whereby tissue similar to the lining of the womb grows outside the uterus, causes debilitating pain, fatigue and often infertility, yet despite its prevalence it remains under-recognised and undertreated, like so many conditions that affect women. The average time to diagnose in the UK is more than eight years. Many women visit their GPs multiple times before receiving a referral, and some are forced to turn to private healthcare due to the lengthy NHS waiting times. That delay not only exacerbates the condition's physical symptoms but impacts mental health and quality of life.

Endometriosis is not merely a health issue for women; it is a public health issue that costs the UK economy. Over half of those affected have taken time off work due to endometriosis, and many fear job loss or reduced income.

My constituent, Angela Tiernan, has thoracic endometriosis, a rare form of the condition where tissue similar to the uterine lining grows in the chest cavity, commonly affecting the diaphragm and lungs. Angela recently found out that planned surgery to confirm her diagnosis and reformulate a treatment plan would no longer be going ahead as the specialist Oxford University Hospitals has stopped commissioning the surgery, as have other specialist centres in London and Bristol. Angela has told me that patients are being advised to go private to access required treatments and surgeries that were previously available through the NHS, but have since been cancelled by the hospital. My constituent Angela and other women are now left in a position with no diagnosis and no access to investigation, care or treatment unless they can afford to go private.

Endometriosis is a long-term condition that requires a long-term solution. I ask the Minister for reassurance that endometriosis is addressed in our 10-year-plan.

3.21 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a delight to speak under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this important debate.

Many of those living with long-term conditions are people who live happy and enriched lives. They are supported not only by wonders in medical advancements, but by the communities of people—friends, family or incredible NHS and care staff—who support them week in, week out, day in, day out. But for some, the consequences

when those support networks fail can be catastrophic. I would like to use this opportunity to raise awareness of the plight of my constituent, Andy.

Andy has been living with a benign brain tumour and functional neurological disorder for nearly a decade. In that time he has been treated in various medical settings. By 2022, he had been transferred from the care of London hospitals to medical facilities closer to home in my constituency of Eastbourne. Following an initial appointment there in April 2022, he was told that there would be a follow-up six months later. Outrageously, due to human error, the follow-up was not held until November 2024, a staggering two and a half years after his initial appointment. I hear of cases like that again and again, disproportionately from patients experiencing long-term health conditions. It seems there is no parity of esteem between people suffering from these kinds of conditions and people suffering from shorter-term, more emergency-based conditions.

If that was not bad enough, Andy was subsequently informed that the services and expertise needed to treat his condition, which he had been referred to Eastbourne for, were not available locally, so one has to ask why that transfer happened in the first place. But the wider question, which goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, is why towns like Eastbourne are denied such important services locally. It cannot be right that people living with long-term conditions sometimes have to travel dozens or in some cases hundreds of miles to access the care that they deserve and rightly expect.

We have seen in the likes of my town and across the country, following years of underfunding by the last Government, centres like the Eastbourne district general hospital losing core services to other towns and cities nearby, forcing residents to trek even further to get the treatment they need. The life of my constituent, Andy, has been hugely impacted by this woeful state of affairs—a broken system and broken administration within it. Both his personal and professional lives have been significantly compromised. He can, of course, take his case to the ombudsman, which he plans to do, but that process can take months if not years to conclude, and he needs answers now.

I ask the Government: what steps are being taken to address and rectify the issues, not only with the funding but with the administration of our NHS, caused by some of these things that create such grief and hardship for residents like Andy? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that local hospitals like mine are equipped to treat a broad range of long-term conditions? Most importantly, for Andy, can I get a categoric reassurance from the Government that his case will be looked into and resolved as a matter of urgency, so that neither he nor anyone else in his position has to experience this gross injustice on top of the hardship of living with a long-term condition?

3.26 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this debate. This is also an appropriate time to acknowledge his more than four decades of service as a surgeon in the NHS.

[Terry Jermy]

I want to use my time to talk about strokes, because I, like millions of people across the country, have a personal account of dealing with this life-altering medical condition. At 11 am on 13 August 2013, I received a message from a relative saying, “I think your dad has been in a crash. The car is all smashed up and the doors are wide open outside the house.” I was at work in Cambridge that morning, and my parents’ house was back in Norfolk. Not being able to reach my dad, I managed to get a message to my sister to go round. She found my dad in bed.

Unbeknown to any of us, including my dad, he had been having a stroke all morning. Getting ready for work, he struggled to put on his coat. He forgot to pick up his car keys and initially left the house without locking the door. My mother did not think too much of it. He then somehow managed to drive her to work and drove himself to his engineering factory just a bit further down the road. When he got to work, they sent him home. They thought he was drunk.

On the way home, my dad crashed into a parked lorry. Dazed and confused, and in the midst of his stroke, he drove home and took himself to bed, thinking he had a cold. If he had not left the car abandoned outside the house, and if that relative had not raised the alarm, he would have been in bed for the rest of the day alone and he likely would not have survived. As it turned out, we were able to get him to hospital and we managed to have a further 10 years with him. My dad was 55 when he had his stroke. He was fit and healthy. He worked full time. He showed no warning signs, and then—wham. He had a full-on, major stroke from nowhere.

As a family, we did not know much about strokes at all. I had no idea that they came in all shapes and sizes, with varying levels of severity. The recovery, too, is variable. Strokes directly affect 100,000 people each and every year. Approximately one in four men and one in five women aged 45 can expect to have a stroke if they live to 85. Stroke is the fourth leading cause of death in the UK, and a leading cause of disability. Tragically, nine out of 10 strokes are preventable through early detection and management of conditions such as high blood pressure.

Last month was Stroke Awareness Month, which is an important opportunity to highlight how to spot a stroke. I urge Members to look at F-A-S-T—face, arms, speech, time—the method to recognise symptoms. Is the face drooping? Does one side of the face feel numb? Is the arm weak? Can the person raise both arms? Is speech difficult? Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase. Check to see whether speech is slurred or strange. If these symptoms are observed, it is time to call 999—F-A-S-T. I welcome the Government’s commitment to a 25% reduction in deaths from cardiovascular disease and stroke by 2035, but without urgent action on stroke, that goal will not be met. A plan is needed to tackle three key factors: early detection, treatment and prevention.

There are almost 3,000 stroke survivors in my South West Norfolk constituency alone, and they are all working to rebuild their lives. The prevalence of stroke in my constituency is 473; given that one is the lowest prevalence and 543 is the highest, it is clearly a significant problem in my community. While I have the opportunity to do so, I also want to note the Stroke Association’s incredible work to support stroke survivors across the country.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing the debate and, like the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), I thank him for his service. I did not know he was a surgeon—I thought he was a GP—but whatever it was, I thank him. We are all indebted to him for his contribution.

It is great to speak in this debate as the Democratic Unionist party health spokesperson, and as an MP who has many constituents suffering from long-term health conditions. I frequently meet them to discuss the issues they face and, more often than not, the issue is benefits and help to fill in their benefit forms—I have a staff member who does nothing else but that. We are, then, face to face with those with complex and chronic long-term conditions. It is important to come here and make the case for them.

I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic. Believe it or not, this thin young man—he is not young no more, by the way—used to be 17 stone. He is now down to just over 13 stone. Whenever I was told I was diabetic, the doctor was very clear that I really had to do something. A sweet trolley was going by the table—I remember that well; it has stuck in my mind all these years—and he phoned up to tell me. I went to see him because I thought there was something wrong, and there was something wrong, but thank goodness it was not what I thought it was at the time. He said, “You’re diabetic. The one good thing is that you’ve got a heart like an ox.” That was perhaps the one good thing out of it all.

I lost weight and was able to control my diabetes for four years or thereabouts, but then it got worse. I am now surviving with nine tablets in the morning and five at night. That keeps the condition subtle and manageable. This is not about me, but I wanted to tell that story because many people who are diabetic do not know they are. We always talk about early diagnosis, as the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket and others will know.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is an honour to intervene on the hon. Gentleman. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes and I want to emphasise the point about early detection. A family recently got in touch with me who tragically lost their daughter because she had not been identified as a type 1 diabetic and ended up in diabetic ketoacidosis. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to do more to identify people and screen them for chronic, lifelong conditions?

Jim Shannon: If I could ask for one thing in this debate, it would be that—it is important.

I should have welcomed the hon. Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen) to her position; apologies for not doing that at the beginning of my speech. It is a real joy to see her there. It is better than whipping, I am sure she knows. This is two debates in two days running in which we have had Parliamentary Private Secretaries and, in this case, a Whip in the place of Ministers. I wish her well in her role today.

Many of the people I meet every day have diabetes, dementia, Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s, osteoporosis or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

COPD has been more prevalent this last while than it has been in the past. It is an accumulative disease, of course—it comes at the end of a person's life, unfortunately—and it catches up with people, in many cases. It is not just about the long-term physical conditions; it is the depression, the anxiety and the mental health effects, as well as the pressure of life. The physical pressures are part of it, but the mental pressures come off the back that. Many of the people I speak to have complex needs, and might have one, two or perhaps three of those conditions, which adds to the issue.

Ahead of the debate I met representatives from the Cystic Fibrosis Trust and spoke to them about the effect of cystic fibrosis on people. This week, I celebrate the people, like the trust, who have responded to cystic fibrosis by trying to find a cure. CF is a chronic, life-limiting genetic condition without a cure. It affects more than 11,000 people across the UK, with approximately 500 of those diagnosed back in Northern Ireland. I meet some of them regularly in my constituency. For those living with the condition, medication and general health must be considered when planning the simplest of projects or activities—even getting out of bed, for goodness' sake, or going down the stairs or making breakfast. Going shopping is a no-no for most of them, and interaction with family is another issue. Being unwell can interfere with work and education every day. Research has highlighted the intense financial costs of the condition, which causes an average loss in income of nearly £6,800 a year.

This is not a direct attack on the Minister, but I have to make a point about the potential changes to the guidance on welfare and personal independent payments. I have raised before how the changes will impact people with certain health conditions who are on benefits such as PIP. I know that the Government are trying to get people who want to work back into work. Some people with these conditions cannot work, of course, but for people with other conditions there are days that they feel good, and days that they do not. They cannot regulate themselves and say, "I'm going to work Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of next week," because the fact is that they do not know how they will feel next week. They may not be able to get out of bed. The Government need to look at flexibility in the PIP process. That probably means that a person cannot do every job that they would like to do, and is restricted. It might be that they have to do some of their work from home. When they look at changes, the Government need to consider that.

The Government must commit—this is my absolute red line in the sand—to scrap the four-point rule for personal independence payments, which disproportionately harms people with conditions such as Parkinson's and CF by failing to account for conditions that tend to fluctuate. That is the very issue I am trying to put forward. As I said, the cost of some of these conditions is financially challenging for many. Aside from the loss of PIP payments, it is also important that a safety net is provided by increasing the age of transition for young people who are currently eligible for disability living allowance but transferring to PIP. These are not issues that the acting Minister will understand, or respond to positively, in a focused way, but it is important to feed these issues into the process so that when Labour comes up with a way forward, it understands the issues.

I wish to speak briefly about the Government's national cancer plan, which is extremely important for people living with cancer and the care they receive. The plan states that more care will be shifted from hospitals to local communities. Earlier today, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) asked the Minister for Secondary Care a question on the health and social care statement, and expressed disappointment at not hearing anything about cancer in the statement. The Government need to focus on cancer, including the early diagnosis of the disease and how quickly the process can move forward to ensure that people get treatment.

Back home in Northern Ireland, general practitioners are referring people for cancer treatment, and only 35% of those people have been seen. What a disappointment. That is not the Minister's fault—it is a devolved matter, so it is the responsibility of the Minister back home—but if 65% of people who are diagnosed with cancer are not getting treatment, my goodness me! That comes to the point that the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) made about his constituent who had to wait two and a half years—how long are people waiting to get treated? Sometimes the delay in treatment means that the person does not survive and passes away. What a tragedy that they did not get the response they needed at the time that they needed it. We need to be ever mindful that the care of people who require long-term cancer care is tailored to them and structured in a way that suits them and makes them as comfortable as possible.

It is wonderful how the NHS has advanced, and how the cures for cancer have advanced. Although 50% of the people in this room will get cancer, 70% of us will hopefully survive. Is it not marvellous how the NHS has progressed and how the research into finding the cure for diseases has marched on?

One in two people with a serious disability or other long-term condition, such as diabetes or heart disease, say that it is now harder than ever to get a diagnosis, and some people may have the complex issues I referred to earlier as well as cancer. Too many opportunities to support people are being missed. I look to the Minister for a response, and for her to say that the Government will do what they can, through the legislature, to provide support for people with long-term health conditions.

So many people across this nation are suffering and we must do more to ensure that their lives are made as easy as possible. I look to the Minister for a very positive answer. I hope that I have not given her a difficult time; that was not my intention. I try to do things in a respectful way, and hope my questions have not been too hard to answer. They are straight from the heart, and from the heart of us all, because we are here to work on behalf of our constituents. The stories that I bring to this Chamber are those of my constituents, and the hon. Member for Eastbourne brings the stories of his constituents. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) told us three or four different stories about vision, which is not something we hear about often, but those are the true, everyday experiences of his constituents. We need something in response to that.

When it comes to the answers, perhaps we could have a better working relationship with the devolved Administrations. I am ever mindful that health is devolved in all three of them, but there could be concerted plans. Whenever I first came to this place, we had a United

[Jim Shannon]

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland diabetes plan that was agreed by this Parliament and by all the regions and all the Administrations. Sometimes, we need to do things collectively. I always put forward the advantages, and this great nation—this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—is great because of all the people who make up the component parts: the Scots, the Welsh, the Northern Irish and, of course, the English.

3.41 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I was a bit anxious, because I do not think I have ever followed the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) before, and people are normally leaving as he sits down. But there we are.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on securing such an important debate. He clearly demonstrated why he was the best person to bring this issue forward, given his years of experience.

I declare an interest: I was a physiotherapist for 32 years. I was also used to dealing with long-term neurological conditions such as stroke, MS and Parkinson's, and respiratory conditions such as asthma and COPD. They are all really important. Of course, I also dealt with long-term musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis.

For the sake of balance, I should say that my daughter is a resident doctor. I had to mention her, otherwise she would tell me off. As people can imagine, we have a very balanced debate about whether a doctor does better than a physiotherapist. We have a lot of interesting debate about that.

I must thank Versus Arthritis, representatives of which I met earlier this week to talk about various conditions and the economic impact of arthritis. They reminded me about this debate. I was late asking to speak because it had completely passed me by.

It is really important that we acknowledge the fact that, as other hon. Members have said, there are many people in this country living with long-term conditions and living very successful lives. We must make sure that we enable them to carry on in that way.

Arthritis impacts over 20 million people in this country, which is a lot of people. Whether it is osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis, nearly one in six of us is living with arthritis. Arthritis affects all ages, not just the elderly, as we tend to assume, and affects children, too. Juvenile chronic arthritis is well known, and at least 10,000 children are currently living with that condition.

The issue is not only diseases and the way they affect people's mental health, or other factors, but the economic impact, as we have heard clearly from other hon. Members. Some 2.8 million people may be economically inactive due to long-term conditions. After mental health issues, musculoskeletal issues are the second biggest reason why people are economically inactive. That means a tremendous loss of revenue to the Treasury.

There is also a feeling of worthlessness, and people's mental health going down and down. One of my ladies had MS. She said: "What really creases me is my children have to help me, instead of me helping them." That

really affected her mental health. Reliance on others is one of the biggest issues. There are lots of aids, gadgets and gizmos that can help people to live independently, but they need to know about them. There can be long waits for assessment, treatment or surgery, during which time people's long-term conditions can deteriorate. We need to ensure that we educate people with these conditions; knowing what their condition is makes it all the more easy to manage. Knowledge is power here.

We need individual, tailored help. It is not enough to say, "You have osteoarthritis of the hip—you do this." We have to tailor the programmes to ensure that the individual is very much a part of them, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said. It is all about putting the person at the centre of the care plan. They are the most important person.

Obviously, I am going to say that exercise and management of the physical condition is key—I am a physio, so I would, wouldn't I?—but it is important that people do not just curl up in a ball in the corner and think, "That's it; my life is over." They can still go on to have worthwhile lives with a long-term condition.

Osteoarthritis happens to the best of us. I look at people's hands and I can see that they are a bit arthritic-y; I look at the way people walk and can see that, yes, they have a hip or knee problem. Having the disease does not make it inevitable that our function goes down. It is important that we manage the outcome and ensure that people can exercise and maintain their physical fitness.

The Minister will be pleased to know that, as a Welsh MP, I am not going to be making asks of her—I do welcome her to her place and congratulate her—but I hope that she listens to the asks made by my English colleagues and talks to her colleagues in the Department. As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, the PIP changes are coming, and we are hearing about welfare reforms. Those are important, and I understand the need for reform, but at the same time we must take account of the variability of people's conditions, and the assessment process must be done correctly first time. We save an awful lot of time and money on appeals if we can get it right first time, and that is what everybody wants.

Finally, long-term conditions are here, but they can be managed, in partnership between the individual and the services all around. Bring it on.

3.47 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I follow other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on bringing this vital topic to the House and sharing his insight from his many decades of medical practice as well as the tribute that he paid to his father's—he clearly comes from a family of strong medical pedigree. He talked about the potential for a boost of more than £109 billion for the economy. He also spoke about the wheels starting to come off, but I say to him that there is no sign of that happening in his case: I have heard him make valuable contributions using his medical experience in many debates in the House.

This topic is important. Analysis from the Office for National Statistics conducted during 2019 and 2020 highlighted that almost half of the UK population reported

having a long-standing health problem, with the four most common chronic conditions in the UK for men and women being allergy, high blood pressure, low back disorder and depression. The Health Foundation has found that more than 9 million people in England are projected to be living with a major illness by 2040—an increase of 2.5 million compared with 2019. A third of those surveyed in 2024 did not feel supported to manage their long-term health condition.

Hon. Members have brought out some important themes in the debate. They have talked about the mental health and economic impact, and the importance of social, community and volunteer care, as well as care in hospitals and health facilities. They have talked about the importance of integrating care and ensuring that appointments are co-ordinated to avoid people being pushed from pillar to post in our excellent but sometimes complicated national health service. They have also all highlighted the critical importance of prevention, screening and early diagnosis and detection, as well as the need to reduce waiting times to increase survival chances. A number of hon. Members also highlighted concerns about the benefit system and personal independence payments, and I am sure we all very much look forward to hearing from the Minister on that point.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) shared some very powerful stories from his time as an optometrist, including the impact of sight loss on people's physical and mental health. He highlighted the potential to save between £8 billion and £13 billion by tackling mental health and wellbeing impacts.

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) spoke powerfully about endometriosis—I have a friend called Emma who is also dealing with that condition—and highlighted that two thirds of people expect to live with long-term conditions. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) spoke powerfully about his constituent Andy, who has a benign tumour and functional neurological disorder. My hon. Friend laid out how the NHS and the care system have not always been able to meet Andy's needs locally, despite their good intentions. The hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) spoke emotionally and powerfully about how his father's stroke was detected as a result of a car crash, which paradoxically saved his life, and he also told us how strokes are the fourth most common cause of death and a common cause of disability.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of access to benefits. I pay tribute to his ox-like heart. He mentioned a number of long-term conditions, including type 2 diabetes, COPD, cystic fibrosis and cancer. The hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) talked about her physiotherapy background. It is so good to have so many Members who bring their past health and medical background to this House. She highlighted that one in six people are affected by arthritis and she quite rightly reminded us that long-term conditions are experienced not only by older people but by people of all ages.

My constituent, Terry, has a range of long-term health issues, some spanning more than 20 years. There is little to no co-ordination of his care. He has had doctors from multiple hospitals and specialist centres working on medical care, with no one named person in charge and in control. Therefore, there is sometimes difficulty resolving conflicting medical priorities.

This week is national Diabetes Week. Retinopathy is a serious diabetic complication that can cause blindness, and until recently it was the leading cause of blindness in the working population. Regular eye screening is key to detect this condition. My constituent, Carolyn, has written to me to express how difficult it is to access this essential service in Oxfordshire. A new service has been contracted by NHS England—for as long as it is here—to do that work with far fewer centres. Making screening more difficult to access will mean that there will be people who find it too difficult to access that important service.

My constituent, Jess, has been struggling with endometriosis for 14 years because of misdiagnosis. As a result, her condition has progressed and worsened, which could have been avoided with better informed doctors and greater awareness. In the UK, diagnosis for the condition takes an average of nearly nine years, and one in six women who have endometriosis have to leave the workplace because of it.

As Members have said, the personal independence payment scoring system is not fit for purpose. My constituent, Sally, has progressive MS. She scored 12 points and was rejected, but someone with a different disability scored eight points and was approved. That is because of the proposed “four points in one activity” rule, which can punish people with complex whole-body conditions just because their needs are spread across multiple areas. My constituent was unable to work for a number of months, but did not qualify for PIP. That highlights the importance of making sure that our disability benefits system is fit for purpose. It must recognise real human needs and not just view people as numbers in a system.

The UK should be one of the healthiest countries in the world with our long history of grassroots sports, high-quality food production and world-leading medical research, but under the previous Government, the UK only became sicker, and it now lags far behind its international peers. That is why the Liberal Democrats want the new Government to take urgent action to support people to live healthier lives. They should start by reversing Conservative cuts to public health funding and investing in community services, so that everyone can see a GP within seven days.

We must also end the crisis in social care, which is a disaster for people with long-term conditions and for our NHS. I repeat our call for the current review into social care to be concluded this year, not in three years. We have had many reviews into social care. We do not need further reviews; we need action. We are pressing for better social care for disabled people, including free personal care and more support for family carers, such as through more respite breaks and paid carer's leave. We would also give everyone a new right to flexible working, and every disabled person the right to work from home if they want to unless there are significant business reasons why that is not possible.

We would make it easier for people with long-term conditions and disabled people to access public life—including the world of work—by, for example, adopting new accessibility standards for public spaces, improving the legislative framework for blue badges and incorporating the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities into UK law. There is much work to be done to raise employers' awareness of the Access to Work scheme, simplifying and speeding up the application process,

[Olly Glover]

introducing adjustment passports to record the adjustments, modifications and equipment that a disabled person has received and ensuring that Access to Work support and equipment stays with the person if they change jobs.

As I mentioned, social care is critical to ensuring that people with long-term health conditions are properly cared for, recognising that hundreds of thousands of people are stranded in hospital beds because they are waiting for capacity in the care system. To that end, this is Carers Week, and the Liberal Democrats are campaigning to empower care users and to support care workers and the millions of unpaid carers looking after loved ones, some of whom we have heard about this afternoon. We would create a social care workforce plan, establish a royal college of care workers to improve recognition and career progression, and introduce a higher minimum wage for carers.

Boosting public health and helping people to recover from mental ill health will be critical to achieving progress, as will tackling chronic fatigue and ME. A number of hon. Members highlighted the importance of the better use of data and technology to understand health trends and improve care. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on those topics and others covered by hon. Members.

3.56 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on securing this important debate. I declare an interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician. In my clinical work, I have seen at first hand the impact that chronic conditions can have not just on the health of individuals but on their families, their carers and their wider communities. These are conditions that can shape daily life in profound and enduring ways.

In some respects, the increased prevalence of long-term conditions is a success story for the medical fraternity, because some conditions that previously would have led to a patient's death can now be managed effectively for a longer period of time, and people can continue to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. There is no silver bullet for tackling such conditions, but effective interventions and systems can improve quality of life, enable independence—we have heard about the importance of that—and reduce avoidable healthcare costs. Such interventions require a co-ordinated, whole-system approach, bringing together local authorities, NHS trusts, public health, education, social care and the voluntary sector.

I am glad that the Government are talking about a move away from reactive and acute-based care towards prevention, rehabilitation and supported self-management in the long term. I note that the hon. Member talked about care on Teesside some years ago. As someone who grew up on Teesside, I remember the Carter Bequest hospital—I do not know whether his father had anything to do with that—which was the local community hospital providing community care for many local residents.

We increasingly see patients living with not just one long-term illness but multiple long-term illnesses, known as multi-morbidity. That provides challenges, because sometimes the medication that one would ideally provide

a patient for condition A is complicated because they also have condition B, for which they are taking something else that would interact with that medication. A patient might also need an operation but not be able to have it because another condition makes the anaesthetic risk too high, so the management of the second condition might have to be suboptimal as a result of the first condition. Some people have more than two conditions.

One of the challenges that people with long-term conditions will face is staffing and workforce. I notice that the Government have decided to cancel, or at least significantly reduce the availability of, level 7 apprenticeships, which train our specialist nurses in advanced clinical practice, our district nurses and our community nurses. Will the Minister talk to her colleagues in the Department for Education about how there can be a move towards community care and prevention if they are going to make it more difficult to train the people who would provide that care?

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) talked about the delay in follow-up appointments. I have seen that myself. One of the challenges is that when one is under pressure to meet the 18-week pathway and there is no similar pressure on follow-up appointment timings, the consultant's clinic inevitably ends up with more new patients and fewer follow-ups. The follow-ups get pushed back, often for many months. How will the Minister's team ensure that the pressure to meet the 18-week pathway does not cause chronic illness to be covered less well than it is now?

I was also interested in what the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) had to say about exercise and lifestyle. I see a lot of children with varying conditions in my clinics as a paediatrician, and I have been amazed by how fresh air and exercise, diet and hydration, sleep, and not spending hours on computers, particularly in the evening and through the night, can make a whole range of medical conditions better. We know that the same is true of adult care in some cases. While it is not the cure for all conditions—of course it is not—in some cases it can help people to live better with the conditions that they have. I am interested that in some cases people are allowed only a few physio appointments before they get referred back to their GP. Perhaps longer courses of physio treatment could help people a little more.

Multimorbidity was recognised as a priority in the previous Government's health and care White Paper in 2022. Community diagnostic centres opened in order to play a vital role in providing quicker access to essential tests, dealing with the backlog left by the covid pandemic. There are two centres near my constituency, in Grantham and Lincoln. I visited the one in Lincoln recently, which has had very good feedback from constituents and is providing a great service. Can the Minister confirm that community diagnostic centres will continue to be well funded following the spending review?

The previous Government launched a major conditions strategy in 2023, aiming to address six key areas—cancer, heart disease, musculoskeletal disorders, mental ill health, dementia and respiratory disease—but the current Government have paused work on this strategy. They came to power saying that they had a plan. They stopped the plan that we had, because they wanted to think of their own, which is fair enough. But we are now three weeks out from the first anniversary of their election, and still

this magic plan has not appeared. I say to the Minister that this is too long to wait for people who are unwell. Can she, at the very least, commit that the 10-year plan will be published before we have lost one year in which the Government could have started delivering it?

Musculoskeletal conditions are particularly common long-term conditions, affecting around 20 million people in the UK—that is a third of women and about 30% of men. They are the second most common cause of economic inactivity after mental health, and take a considerable toll. I thank advocacy organisations such as Versus Arthritis for their tireless campaigning on this issue. They have highlighted how these conditions disproportionately affect women and those living in deprived communities.

The recent cuts to the personal independence payments proposed by the Government have disproportionately affected people with MSK conditions. Have the Government conducted an impact assessment? My concern with the PIP changes is that they were announced to meet an economic target, rather than being properly thought through. Can the Minister confirm whether they have been properly thought through? Has an impact assessment been conducted, and if so, will she ensure that it is published so that we can all study it in some detail?

Mental health should be treated as a core component of long-term care. People with long-term conditions are two to three times more likely to experience mental ill health. Research shows that people who are confident in managing their long-term conditions have not just fewer A&E visits and hospital admissions but better mental health. What concrete steps are the Government taking to improve mental health provisions specifically for those with long-term conditions?

Rehabilitation can be just as important to health outcomes as medicine and surgery. As was mentioned earlier in the context of strokes, some people have very good stroke rehab care, but for others that is less of the case. Rehabilitation, particularly early rehabilitation, is very important. Providing timely rehab and self-management advice would significantly reduce the number of people diagnosed with health conditions in their 40s and 50s, for example, being pushed out of the workforce, which drives both income and health inequality.

Is improved access to community rehabilitation for people with long-term conditions part of the Government's plan to shift from hospital to community care, keeping people out of hospital and in work for longer? I know that the plan is not published yet, but perhaps the Minister knows. Long-term conditions will define the health and social care agenda of the next decade. That requires a joined-up strategy across healthcare, the Department of Work and Pensions, and social care, and for the Government to support the most vulnerable and maximise the quality of life for all our constituents who suffer from long-term conditions.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I call the Minister.

4.4 pm

Gen Kitchen (Wellingborough and Rushden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. It is my first time speaking from the Front Bench, so please bear with me if I get my papers mixed up. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and

Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this debate, and for speaking so passionately on the subject, using his decades of experience of caring for patients in the NHS. I also thank all the other Members for their insightful contributions, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, especially because it is taking place during Diabetes Week. We have had more than 10 meaningful contributions, and I wish to respond to them individually. I have noted them all down, and if I do not get to them all, I will ask the relevant Minister to respond.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket is concerned about economic inactivity, hospital-to-community care, the digital transition for patients, and research and development. I have, in my pack, full answers for my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) spoke passionately about sight loss and his time as an optometrist, as well as about macular degeneration and Charles Bonnet syndrome.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My office is supporting a vulnerable, elderly constituent, who has multiple sclerosis and suffers nervous breakdowns, having also battled hip cancer and undergone a hip replacement. Does the Minister agree that the failure to provide people with social care and early-intervention support can often expose individuals to a cascade of further suffering, and of course increases the strain on our health services?

Gen Kitchen: I agree, and I will come to comorbidities and some of the strategies in the 10-year plan later in my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) spoke about endometriosis. I was very sorry and dismayed to hear about her constituent Angela Tiernan, who has endometriosis in her chest cavity. I assure my hon. Friend that urgent action to tackle gynaecological care is taking place through the elective reform plan, and we are having significant successes in that area.

I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde). I was also dismayed to hear about his constituent Andy's benign brain tumour. I was particularly dismayed to hear about his treatment, and the transfer of services to the community. The hon. Member rightly asked about the administration from care to community. I assure him that further work on the national neighbourhood health implementation programme will come after the 10-year health plan. I see that issue all the time in Wellingborough and Rushden, as he does in his constituency. As a semi-rural community, we have very little in the way of community healthcare, so I am also pushing that forward. I will ask the relevant Minister to respond directly to him about Andy's case.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) gave an impassioned and personal speech about his father's stroke. I am grateful to him for highlighting and raising awareness of the F-A-S-T action that people can take if they think that someone is having a stroke. I reassure him that the NHS is actively working to provide access to 24/7 thrombectomy services across England and Wales.

[*Gen Kitchen*]

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his speech. As he said, health in Northern Ireland is a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly, but I assure him that the Secretary of State is regularly engaging with his counterpart across the sea on all the issues that the hon. Member outlined, which were many. He told his personal story of diabetes, and spoke about COPD, cancer, cystic fibrosis and many other conditions. I share the sentiment that it is marvellous that so many people will now survive cancer. As he may know, my father is currently undergoing treatment for his terminal diagnosis. I reassure the hon. Member—and it gives me some hope—that the national cancer plan is coming.

We had a lovely intervention from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon), who is also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes. I thank him for his work on diabetes awareness.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for her many years of service as a physiotherapist, and I thank her daughter for her many years of service as a doctor. My hon. Friend rightly raised arthritis and all the great work that she did as a physiotherapist. I am sure that she is aware of the great work that the National Institute for Health and Care Research is doing with Versus Arthritis in funding dedicated UK MSK translational research. She will also be aware that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published expert guidance on early diagnosis to speed up that process. She will know that the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions are committed to supporting disabled people and people with long-term health conditions. A range of support is available already, including some that joins up the health and employment support systems. I agree that we need to get it right first time, because a system that has an over 90% appeal approval rating is not getting it right first time.

The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) and I spent a lot of time together on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill Committee; I am glad to be able to finally respond to him on things. I was very sorry to hear about his friend Emma and his constituents Terry and Jess, who have a range of health conditions. I was particularly dismayed to hear that Terry had no one named person in his multidisciplinary team. That should not be happening.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) asked many questions, which I have noted down. If she does not get the answers in my speech, I will press the relevant Minister to write to her. She asked about training and apprenticeships. To reassure her, a new workforce plan will be coming after the 10-year plan, and the 10-year plan will be coming in the summer. I would love a community diagnostic centre as well; in a semi-rural constituency, it is very hard to get care. I will press a Minister to write to her, following the spending review.

I pass on apologies from my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), the Minister for public health and prevention, who is passionate about improving care and support for people with long-term conditions, and had really looked forward to responding

to this debate. Unfortunately, due to the medical emergency of a family member with a long-term condition, she is unable to be in Westminster this week, but she hopes to return to Westminster as soon as possible to write the letters that I have promised on her behalf.

This is a busy afternoon in the House for the Health Department, with my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care currently representing the Government in a general debate on the fifth anniversary of the covid pandemic in the main Chamber, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Care currently serving on the Mental Health Bill Committee. I am pleased to be here to respond on their behalf to such an important debate, and I hope that my remarks demonstrate that improving support for those with long-term conditions is a priority for this Government.

Over 15 million people in England have long-term health conditions, and many people live with two or more. Every one of us has a constituent living with a long-term condition; even some of my colleagues in this place who have shared their stories today have long-term conditions. Given that the prevalence of long-term conditions generally increases with age, the number of people with such conditions in our society will only get bigger, as new treatments and technologies keep us alive for longer. Let me be clear: that is to be celebrated. It is a wonderful and amazing thing to happen, but it is critical that we have the health architecture in place to manage those changes.

That is why building a health service and care system fit for the future is central to this Government's mission. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out the multi-year spending review, which prioritises health, with a record investment in the health and social care system that will improve treatment, support and outcomes, and help those living with long-term conditions. The Government are providing £29 billion more in day-to-day funding in real terms than in 2023-24, and the largest-ever health capital budget, with a £2.3 billion real-terms increase in spending over the spending review period.

The spending review puts the NHS on a sustainable footing by cutting the waiting lists so that by the end of the Parliament 92% of patients will start consultant-led treatment for non-urgent health conditions within 18 weeks of referral, delivering on the Prime Minister's plan for change and commitment to prioritising people's health. The settlement also supports the shift from analogue to digital, with a total investment of up to £10 billion in NHS technology and transformation between 2026-27 and 2028-29—an almost 50% increase from 2025-26.

Colleagues will know that we have undertaken the biggest ever conversation about the NHS since its creation. We have received more than 270,000 contributions and had almost 2 million visits to our online portal, a significant number of which were from people with long-term conditions. We will ensure that their voices are heard in the 10-year plan. The plan will deliver three big shifts to ensure the NHS is fit for the future: from hospital to community, which we have spoken about a lot this afternoon; from analogue to digital, which was also mentioned a couple of times; and from sickness to prevention. All three are relevant to improving the diagnosis, care and management of long-term conditions in all parts of the country.

We will see more tests and scans in the community, in high street settings, to reduce the need for people to take multiple trips to hospital to get diagnosed—a particular issue in Wellingborough and Rushden, because we do not have a hospital or a bus service. We will see better joint working in neighbourhoods between primary care, pharmacies, community healthcare, such as district nurses, and social care to help people to manage multiple long-term conditions at home. That will help them access the right self-care professional support so that they are not passed from service to service, and will reduce the need for emergency hospital admissions. Again, that is brilliant for Wellingborough and Rushden, as I am sure it is for all hon. Members' constituencies.

We will see better access to technology that helps people to manage their health conditions in their own home, such as apps and wearable technologies, to reduce the need to go to hospital or other healthcare settings. We will have better, joined-up access to healthcare records, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket suggested, to ensure that those working in health and care are better able to support patients in planned and emergency care, and that patients feel confident that the clinicians who are treating them know about their conditions.

There have been many mentions in the debate of the changes to welfare and economic activity. We recognise that people with long-term conditions face multiple challenges in trying to remain in work. Long-term sickness continues to be the most common reason for economic inactivity among the working-age population.

Alison Hume: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her turn speaking from the Front Bench. DWP analysis suggests that people with long-term conditions such as arthritis are more likely than most to be affected by the changes to PIP. Does she acknowledge that taking away PIP from people with long-term conditions such as arthritis, which can fluctuate and vary, could be devastating?

Gen Kitchen: I acknowledge that those with long-term health conditions such as arthritis will rightly be very worried about what is happening, considering that only a Green Paper, rather than a Bill, has been published. I assure my hon. Friend that the Department of Health and Social Care and the DWP are committed to supporting disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. There is already a range of support that is online and working, but we want those who are in work and can stay there to do so, and we want people to get back to work. Those measures include joining up the health and employment support around the individual through employment advisers, NHS talking therapies, individual placements, support in primary care and WorkWell, as well as work coaches and disability employment advisers at the jobcentre. That will get people back to work if they can, and keep working people in work.

We have a range of specialist initiatives to support individuals. Things currently online include WorkWell, and Connect to Work is coming online as we speak. We are also mobilising eight place-based trailblazers to reduce economic inactivity in places where we can see that it is really key.

On elective care, our plan for change is clear that our immediate priority on health is to reduce elective waiting lists to meet the NHS constitutional standard that 92%

should wait no longer than 18 weeks from referral to treatment. We have hit that pledge already—more than 2 million more elective care appointments have happened early—and we have now exceeded it by delivering over 3.5 million more appointments.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): Hear, hear!

Gen Kitchen: Thank you. In fact, the waiting list has been cut by over 200,000 since we came into office.

Another topic touched on a lot was social care, its effective use and access to it. Effective and accessible social care is crucial for people with long-term conditions.

Dr Johnson: There is a question that I have been wondering about. Baroness Casey is doing a report for the Government on social care, but she is also doing a report on child abuse. We were told initially that those reports would run consecutively, but they appear now to be running concurrently. I do not necessarily expect the Minister to be able to answer the question now, because she is standing in for somebody else, but it would be helpful if she could get us a written answer on what proportion of Baroness Casey's time is currently devoted to the Home Office, and what proportion to healthcare.

Gen Kitchen: I was coming on to Baroness Louise Casey's report to the Prime Minister. I will try to get an answer from the Departments she is working with. Hon. Members will be aware that we have launched the independent commission into adult social care as part of our critical first steps to delivering a national care service. It is chaired by Baroness Louise Casey and reporting to the Prime Minister. The commission will make clear recommendations for how to rebuild social care systems to meet the current and future needs of the population, but I will make sure that Ministers write to the hon. Lady on her specific question.

We also had a small discussion on unpaid carers and how crucial they are for individuals with long-term conditions. These unpaid carers, often family members or spouses, do vital and essential work that helps people to manage their long-term conditions and also helps the health service. Lord Darzi's independent review of the national health service highlighted the need for a fresh approach to supporting and involving unpaid carers, to improve outcomes across the board for carers and those they care for. Those findings are being carefully considered as part of our 10-year plan to reform and modernise the NHS. We continue to shape our plans to reform adult social care, including through the national care service.

We cannot underestimate the toll of living with one or more long-term health conditions. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) made an intervention about the mental health support that is needed for long-term conditions. Living with one or more long-term conditions can put significant stress on an individual's mental wellbeing and can lead to stress, worry and depression—all of which come to our constituency doors a lot. Two thirds of people with a common mental health problem also have a long-term physical condition. That is why the NHS is prioritising the development of NHS talking therapies to include a

[Gen Kitchen]

focus on people with long-term conditions. These services bring together mental and physical health providers to work in a co-ordinated way to achieve the best outcomes for all.

I feel that I have been speaking a rather long time, so, to conclude, I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, for securing the debate, and all those who have spoken. The debate has been extremely wide ranging and covered conditions from across the spectrum, many of which I cannot pronounce. I hope that Ministers will be able to write back to hon. Members and reassure them on some of the questions they have raised today.

It is understandable that we have covered so many topics, given the sheer number and breadth of long-term conditions and the multitude of challenges they pose for individuals, their families, their communities and the healthcare system. For that reason, as I said, I have not been able to cover in full the well-informed points that were made throughout the course of the debate. However, my hon. Friend the Minister for public health and prevention has committed to writing to all hon. Members who have raised specific concerns today.

4.24 pm

Peter Prinsley: I thank all who have contributed to this interesting discussion. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen), who has acquitted herself extraordinarily well and should be congratulated. It is quite obvious that many of our fellow citizens are depending on us. It is also obvious to me that the politics of healthcare really do matter. We have an opportunity to do something about this, and we must seize that opportunity, because I believe that is one of our great missions. I thank everyone very much for coming to the debate this afternoon.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): My congratulations to the hon. Member for Wellingborough and Rushden for filling in ably for the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered long-term conditions.

4.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 12 June 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK-Singapore Investment Treaty

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The Government will shortly end negotiations with Singapore on the UK-Singapore bilateral investment treaty.

Negotiations were launched in March 2023 to strengthen the UK-Singapore investment relationship, through agreeing modern provisions to guarantee high standards of fair treatment for investors, in line with a commitment in the 2020 UK-Singapore free trade agreement. As British investors in Singapore now benefit from the high-standard investment protections gained through our membership of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (having formally joined in December 2024), we are ending negotiations on the UK-Singapore BIT. We will instead focus on efforts to further facilitate and promote investment and to boost our economic growth, as well as to build on the stock of UK investment in Singapore, and Singapore's stock of investment in the UK, which stand at £15.7 billion and £19.3 billion respectively.

The strong co-operative relationship between the UK and Singapore extends beyond investment. On digital trade, seven memoranda of understanding signed alongside the UK-Singapore digital economy agreement facilitate co-operation in several key areas, including fintech and lawtech services. Trade digitalisation pilots conducted under the DEA demonstrated significant business benefits to trade in goods, including a 40% reduction in trade processing time, an 89% reduction in paperwork, and a 67% improvement in staff productivity. We are looking forward to continuing our close collaboration on digital innovation.

To further strengthen our trading relationship, we will continue to work closely with Singapore, as part of CPTPP, to modernise trade rules and promote deeper co-operation with other economies, including through accessions and the general review.

[HCWS695]

TREASURY

Wholesale Cash Firms: Oversight Regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): Wholesale cash distribution is the mechanism that supplies physical cash—specifically banknotes and coins—to retail banks, cash machines and the wider retail market. This is a vital mechanism for ensuring the sustainable provision of and reliable public access to cash.

Under part 5A of the Banking Act 2009, the Bank of England is responsible for managing risks to the effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the WCD system. Specifically, the Act gives the Bank of England powers to “oversee” firms recognised by the Treasury in wholesale cash oversight orders as performing relevant

WCD activities and as being market significant. The Bank of England can give directions, issue codes of practice, and supervise firms’ compliance. Further detail on the Bank of England’s supervisory approach can be found in its statement of policy.¹

His Majesty’s Treasury’s decision on recognition

Today I am announcing which firms the Treasury has specified as recognised persons in wholesale cash oversight orders. As required under the Act, in making this decision the Treasury has: notified firms it considered for recognition; sought and considered any representations from these firms; and consulted relevant regulators, including the Bank of England.

Following this extensive process, I am announcing today that HM Treasury has made wholesale cash oversight orders to the following firms:

Barclays Bank UK PLC;
Barclays Bank PLC;
G4S Cash Centres (UK) Limited;
HSBC UK Bank PLC;
HSBC Bank PLC;
Lloyds Bank PLC;
Bank of Scotland PLC;
National Westminster Bank Public Limited Company;
The Royal Bank of Scotland Public Limited Company;
Post Office Limited;
Santander UK PLC;
Vaultex UK Limited.

These wholesale cash oversight orders have been made on 5 June 2025 and will come into force today, 12 June 2025.

In making these orders I have considered the requirements under section 28 of the Small Business, Enterprise, and Employment Act 2015. This requires Ministers to include in certain secondary legislation that regulates businesses and other bodies a provision for review or a statement as to why this is not appropriate.

I consider a provision for review inappropriate as it would be disproportionate relative to the economic impact. The impact on business is expected to be de minimis with annual fees that the Bank of England can charge recognised firms effectively capped by the Treasury, detailed in the Banking Act 2009 (Wholesale Cash Oversight Fees) Regulations 2024. The Bank of England can charge a maximum of £400,000 per firm per year for supervision fees and £150,000 for “special projects”. The current aggregate impact of making these orders is de minimis as defined in the better regulation framework.

Further, including a provision for review would be undesirable for particular policy reasons. The legislation contains provisions which necessitate ongoing review, meaning further provisions would be duplicative. Under section 206J of the Banking Act 2009, HM Treasury must revoke an order if it is no longer satisfied that the firm meets the relevant criteria. Section 206Z2 also requires the Bank of England to produce an annual report on the discharge of its functions and the extent to which risks in the WCD system have been managed. That report will subsequently be laid in Parliament. HM Treasury also plans routine engagement with the Bank of England that will monitor the implementation and impact of the regime.

¹ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/paper/2023/sop/sop-on-the-banks-supervisory-approach-to-market-oversight-for-wholesale-cash-distribution>

[HCWS698]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Best Value: Croydon Council

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): As I have previously stated when updating the House, this Government are committed to resetting the relationship between central and regional government, and to establishing partnerships built on mutual respect, genuine collaboration and meaningful engagement. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent, and this Government are taking the action necessary to fix the foundations of local government. I am today updating the House on the steps that we are taking to support the London borough of Croydon to recover and reform.

London borough of Croydon

I am today publishing the latest report of the London borough of Croydon improvement and assurance panel, which I received in April. The report acknowledges and welcomes the hard work of the council's members and staff and notes that there has been some progress over the course of the intervention, which is due to end on 20 July this year. However, the council's financial position is deteriorating rapidly and the report documents serious concerns, particularly on the council's ability to improve, on some aspects of leadership and on the use of resources.

Croydon remains one of the most financially distressed councils in the country. The council's general fund debt sits at around £1.4 billion and it relies on the allocation of exceptional financial support through in-principle capitalisation directions to balance its budget. The dramatic increase in the council's £136 million EFS for 2025-26, from £38 million granted for 2024-25, is highly concerning. The council has received approximately £553 million in total EFS since March 2021. This is simply not sustainable.

Failing to change course would condemn Croydon's residents to a worsening position without an exit strategy. The report sets out that there has been a lack of pace throughout the intervention, but the deteriorating financial position, which is not being gripped and tackled adequately by the council, is reaching a "financial crisis". The stabilisation plan has been in development since late January, but this does not yet provide a concrete plan to achieve the efficiencies and transformation that the council has committed to. Poor financial information and forecasting and a lack of controls have contributed to the deterioration of the financial position. There is an increasing reliance on Government support to balance the budget, operating costs continue to be "unreasonably high" and the medium-term financial strategy projects the general fund debt to rise to over £1.9 billion by 2029.

The panel documents the council's ambition to deliver transformation but is concerned that the council will find it "enormously challenging" to deliver the necessary transformation and reduce spending while maintaining day-to-day delivery. The report notes that, based on benchmarking data, the council's operating costs can be improved to be more in line with other authorities. I have carefully considered the report and other relevant material, including the Local Government Association's corporate peer challenge. I am satisfied that the London borough of Croydon is failing to comply with its best value duty. I am therefore minded to exercise powers of direction under section 15(5) and 15(6) of the Local

Government Act 1999 to implement an intervention package that ensures the council's compliance with its best value duty.

Proposed package

I am satisfied that the scale of the financial difficulties facing Croydon, the failure of the council to adequately respond to these difficulties and the assurance required moving forward means that a short and sharp reset, with fast action, is required to shift the dial on the council's recovery. On balance, I believe this is best achieved by escalating the statutory intervention to a commissioner-led model, to ensure that the council can achieve sustained change at the pace needed.

The finalisation and implementation of the council's stabilisation plan, and in time a recovery plan, will be fundamental to Croydon's transformation, reform and recovery. Commissioners will have greater scope to challenge and support the council to finalise and implement its stabilisation plan and deliver realistic transformation and savings, in line with what the council has committed to. I envisage the appointment of commissioners until 20 July 2027, with a review of the progress of the intervention after 12 months.

Representations

I am inviting representations from the London borough of Croydon and any other interested parties on the proposed intervention package by Wednesday 25 June.

I will carefully consider all representations before deciding how to proceed. The proposal to intervene is not taken lightly but is designed to strengthen and accelerate improvement to ensure that the council delivers for its residents. With council focus and support from the commissioners, I expect the council to demonstrate swift and sustained progress necessary to ensuring compliance with its best value duty.

Conclusion

I am committed to working in partnership with the London borough of Croydon to provide the necessary support to ensure its compliance with the best value duty and the high standards of governance that local residents and service users expect.

I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS697]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland: Civil Disorder

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I would like to update the House on the civil disorder in Ballymena and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. I have been in contact with the First and Deputy First Ministers and the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The violence we have witnessed over the last three days is deeply shocking, including the attacks on police officers as they have worked to keep people safe and the attempts to burn people out of their homes. Such behaviour is completely unacceptable and has no place in Northern Ireland. Those involved will be brought to justice.

I urge all of those in positions of leadership to continue to work together to help bring this disorder to an end and to rebuild community relations, and I want to thank all those community leaders who are working hard, night and day, to bring calm back to our streets.

On Monday 9 June, approximately 4,000 people attended a peaceful vigil in the Harryville area of Ballymena to show support following reports of a sexual assault. I am saddened by those reports and my thoughts are with those affected. This case is now before the courts, and the PSNI and prosecutors must be given the time and space to do their jobs.

Despite the majority of people engaging in peaceful protest, a number of masked individuals broke away from the vigil and began to attack police officers using petrol bombs and masonry. Properties in the area were also attacked.

On Tuesday 10 June, in a second night of disorder in Ballymena, police officers again came under sustained attack from petrol bombs, heavy masonry, bricks and fireworks. PSNI officers discharged a number of attenuating energy projectiles, and deployed a water cannon and public order dogs to disperse the crowds. Properties were again attacked and damaged, and a number of vehicles in the area were set on fire.

On Wednesday 11 June, there was further disorder in Ballymena—AEPs and water cannon were again deployed—and in Larne a group set fire to the leisure centre where some of the families displaced from the disorder in Ballymena had been taken. The fire, in the reception area, was extinguished but there is smoke damage. The families that had been in the centre had all been safely relocated. In Coleraine, disorder led to bus and train services being suspended during the evening.

As policing and justice are devolved matters in Northern Ireland, the response to the disorder is being led by the PSNI and the devolved Government. I have been receiving regular updates from the Chief Constable both on the disorder, and the impact on PSNI officers. A mutual aid request has been submitted by the PSNI to the National Police Co-ordination Centre. The PSNI has my full support as it works to bring those responsible to justice.

More than 30 police officers have been injured. The House will want to pass its best wishes to them for a speedy recovery. Police officers working to protect local communities should not have to face this kind of attack. The fact that they continue in their duties despite this is testament to their commitment to the community they serve. I will be meeting the Chief Constable and some of those officers who have been keeping people safe in Ballymena, and will have an opportunity to thank them and pass on my wishes for their swift recovery.

Peaceful protest is an important part of our democratic society but what we have seen is disorder which has harmed the local community and caused fear, suffering and disruption to those living in the area.

Northern Ireland is a welcoming, open place. In my time as Secretary of State I have spoken to many people across Northern Ireland who want to work together to build a safer, more prosperous future. The vast majority of people are shocked by this disorder and the harm it has caused.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the PSNI, the NI Ambulance Service and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, as well as to the community and local organisations and agencies, who have worked in difficult conditions over the past few days to keep people safe.

[HCWS696]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 12 June 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	1081	BUSINESS AND TRADE—continued	
Employment Costs.....	1087	Support for Small Businesses.....	1091
High Street Businesses	1089	Topical Questions	1096
Industrial Strategy	1093	Trade Agreements Programme.....	1081
Small Businesses: Exports.....	1088	UK-India Free Trade Agreement.....	1083
Support for Entrepreneurs.....	1085		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 12 June 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	43WS	NORTHERN IRELAND	46WS
UK-Singapore Investment Treaty	43WS	Northern Ireland: Civil Disorder	46WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND			
LOCAL GOVERNMENT	45WS	TREASURY	43WS
Local Government Best Value: Croydon Council..	45WS	Wholesale Cash Firms: Oversight Regime.....	43WS

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**not later than
Thursday 19 June 2025**

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CONTENTS

Thursday 12 June 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1081] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Business and Trade

Business of the House [Col. 1103]
Statement—(Leader of the House)

Gibraltar [Col. 1126]
Statement—(Mr David Lammy)

Spending Review: Health and Social Care [Col. 1138]
Statement—(Karin Smyth)

Industrial Strategy [Col. 1158]
Select Committee Statement—(Liam Byrne)

Backbench Business
SEND Funding [Col. 1165]
Motion—(Graham Stuart)—agreed to
Covid: Fifth Anniversary [Col. 1200]
Motion—(James Asser)—agreed to

Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy [Col. 1218]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Humanist Marriage [Col. 429WH]
Long-term Medical Conditions [Col. 456WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 43WS]
