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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 16 June 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 769

EIGHTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 16 June 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CONTINGENCIES FUND ACCOUNT 2024-25

Ordered,

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2024-25, showing:

- (1) A Statement of Financial Position
- (2) A Statement of Cash Flows and
- (3) Notes to the Accounts; together with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Antisemitism on University Campuses

1. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of StandWithUs UK's "Voice of Students 2024/25" report on antisemitism on university campuses. [904587]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the report by StandWithUs UK. Antisemitism has no place in our lecture halls, campuses and universities, and no place in our society. Universities must be places where all students feel safe and respected, and are able to thrive. A week ago today, I brought together university vice-chancellors and community leaders to hear testimonials from Jewish students, and to discuss next steps to ensure safer and more inclusive campuses for all our students.

Jack Rankin: What StandWithUs UK sets out in its report into antisemitism and support for terrorism at British universities is a source of national shame. It is high time that we heeded the stipulation in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition that so-called anti-Zionism is nothing less than anti-Jewish racism. I urge the Secretary of State to reiterate that crucial point and ask whether she will commit to enacting the report's important recommendations, including introducing a framework of escalating financial penalties for universities that fail to safeguard their Jewish students from such hateful intolerance and extremism.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that incredibly important issue that we, as a Government, take extremely seriously, because no student should be subject to antisemitism on universities campuses or in any place in our education system. That is why we have committed £7 million of funding to address antisemitism in education. Half a million pounds of that has already been awarded to University Jewish Chaplaincy to support student welfare on university campuses. That runs alongside the new condition of registration from the Office for Students that will ensure we protect students from harassment and discrimination.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Given my experience of working with the Holocaust Educational Trust in schools in Mansfield, I ask the Secretary of State to confirm that the history of the Holocaust will be taught in schools following the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which the Conservatives opposed.

Bridget Phillipson: I can give that confirmation to my hon. Friend. I join him in paying tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust for its work to shine a light on antisemitism at the moment in our country, but also to ensure that we learn the lessons of history. I say to my hon. Friend that yes, we have given that undertaking, ahead of the conclusion of the curriculum and assessment review, to ensure that all our young people learn and understand the lessons of the Holocaust, which are more important now than was ever the case.

Employer National Insurance Contributions: School Redundancies

2. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What estimate she has made of the potential impact of increases in employer national insurance contributions on the number of redundancies in schools. [904588]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): I am pleased to inform the House that the Government are over a third of the way to meeting our plan for change milestone: compared to last year, we have over 2,300 more teachers in schools and over 1,000 more in training. Whether on private school tax breaks or on teacher recruitment and retention, the Conservatives' scaremongering is not coming to fruition, but they continue to talk down our education system, to be disconnected from reality and to be wrong.

Bob Blackman: May I update the Minister, who seems to be very complacent on this issue? In Harrow, where I have been out to see many of our schools, since we passed the resignation date, vacancies are not being filled and many staff feel threatened with being made redundant from our schools. That is not good for our children or for the education system. All the schools say that these issues are because of the national insurance hikes that have taken place, which are penalising school budgets. Will the Minister take action to ensure that money is provided to enable schools to recruit the staff that we need?

Catherine McKinnell: There is absolutely no complacency on the Government Benches—we saw complacency over the past 10 years, and we are picking up the pieces and fixing the system. We have committed significant funding to schools. We are providing mainstream schools and high needs settings with over £930 million to support them with increases in national insurance contributions. At the spring Budget, we announced additional funding to the tune of £4.7 billion per year by 2028-29, compared with 2025-26. We are supporting schools to get on and improve education, creating excellent outcomes for every child, and we will continue to do so.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I very much welcome the 2,300 extra teachers that Labour's plan for change has seen in our schools, but school support staff are just as important as teachers in ensuring the delivery of the well-run schools we have in Ealing Southall. Will the Minister update the House on progress in reinstating the school support staff negotiating body, which was abolished by the Conservative party in 2010?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the fantastic work done in our schools not only by teachers, but by all school staff. One of the first things we did in Government was to introduce

legislation to bring back the school support staff negotiating body, to ensure that those staff are recognised for their vital work and that they are part of the conversation about terms, conditions and pay. That process is under way in Parliament, and we are in strong negotiations on a continuous basis through our improving education together plan, which allows stakeholders to get around the table.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The last Conservative Government added 27,000 extra teachers. Although we would never know it from the Minister's answer, there are 400 fewer teachers in our schools than last year. Labour promised 6,500 more teachers, but it is ignoring the loss of 2,900 primary school teachers, because apparently they do not count. The loss of teachers is not a coincidence. The Confederation of School Trusts and the Association of School and College Leaders have shown that schools have been left up to 35% short in compensation for the national insurance rise. Will Ministers finally admit that they broke their promise to fully compensate schools for that tax rise?

Catherine McKinnell: I think the hon. Gentleman's maths need a bit of work. He will know as well as anybody that pupil numbers in primary are down and keep on falling, yet recruiting and retaining expert teachers is crucial to this Government's mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. That is why we have committed to recruiting 6,500 additional expert teachers, and we are targeting them at the sectors in which they are most needed. It is not the Government's fault that those on the Opposition Front Bench do not seem to be able to add up or pay proper attention.

Smartphones in Schools

3. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): If she will take steps to stop the use of smartphones in schools. [904589]

7. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): If she will take steps to stop the use of smartphones in schools. [904594]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): Mobile phones have no place in our schools. Government guidance is clear that schools should prohibit the use of devices with smart technology throughout the school day. If pupils fail to follow those rules, schools have the power to confiscate devices to ensure that classrooms are free from disruption.

Sarah Bool: Schools with a smartphone ban were rated higher by Ofsted, and their students achieved better GCSE results. All the evidence shows the benefit of banning smartphones in schools, but the Government are simply issuing non-statutory guidance and passing the buck. Does the Minister not understand the evidence? Does he need more evidence, or does he not trust the Government to be able to implement a ban on smartphones in schools?

Stephen Morgan: I will take no lectures from the Conservatives on this issue. When they were in government, they exclaimed that the same guidance meant a consistent approach across schools. I have to ask: if they were wrong then, are they wrong now?

John Lamont: Mobile phones in classrooms are linked to disruptive and violent behaviour. Does the Minister agree that mobile phones should be banned in all schools so that children are focused on their education, not glued to Instagram and TikTok?

Stephen Morgan: I repeat my earlier answer: legislation is not necessary, because schools already have the power to ban phones in schools, and the majority have chosen to do so.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): From speaking with former teaching colleagues and local school leaders, I know that the impact that powerful school policies to restrict the use of smartphones and keep them out of schools can have is really clear. Fantastic work has been done on that, including by Hitchin boys' school in my constituency, but sadly not all schools are meeting this high standard in ensuring that they have robust and well-enforced policies. How can we ensure that we are spreading this good practice to every school across the country? Would the Minister love to visit Hitchin boys' school in my seat so that he can see at first hand the fantastic work it is doing?

Stephen Morgan: I think that shows that schools actually have the power to do this. It is worth saying that everyone, including parents, schools and providers, is responsible for ensuring that children are aware of the importance of internet safety. We encourage schools to consult and to build on that support with parents to develop a policy that works in the context and that keeps children and young people safe.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): The Secretary of State may dismiss banning smartphones in schools as a gimmick, but teachers, health professionals and parents are all calling for action to reduce children's screen time. Every day we have new evidence of the harm that screens are doing, so why is the Education Secretary ignoring that and pressing ahead with screen-based assessments for children as young as four from September? Does she accept that that is normalising screen time for young people, which is the opposite of what we should be doing?

Stephen Morgan: Is that all that the right hon. Lady can go on? After 14 years, the Conservatives broke the education system. As I said, guidance is already in place for schools, and the majority of schools already have a ban on mobile phone use.

School Estate

4. **Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con):** What steps she is taking to help improve the school estate. [904590]

16. **Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to improve the quality of school buildings. [904603]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): This Government are committed to sustained investment to improve the school estate, in order to give children the best start in life. We will increase annual capital investment for maintenance in real terms, rising from £2.1 billion this financial year to around £2.3 billion in 2029-30—over £400 million more than in 2024-25. That is on top of around £2.4 billion per year over the next four years to 2029-30 to continue the school rebuilding programme in over 500 schools. We will go further by expanding the programme, providing long-term certainty through to 2034-35, and we will set out details in the forthcoming 10-year infrastructure strategy.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. I draw his attention to the process for getting some of that funding. Battling Brook is a small primary school in the heart of Hinckley. It is well loved, but it has had problems with two of its classrooms having damp and falling into disrepair, so the school cannot use them. It applied to the condition improvement fund but was declined. The school feels that the goalposts have been shifted; there was a six-month delay in the condition data collection report, so it was marked down, and this all culminated in Battling Brook not getting the funding it needs. Will the Minister look at this case and have a meeting with me, so that I can go back to Battling Brook and make sure it gets the funding it needs to reopen its classrooms in September for the primary school pupils of Hinckley?

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Member has not been shy in lobbying me on these issues, but I would be very happy to meet him again. He will know that the Department provides advice and support on a case-by-case basis, and I am happy to discuss these issues with him further.

Ben Goldsborough: Children at Wreningham and Brooke primary schools are receiving a first-class education from excellent teachers, despite still being taught from portacabins due to a lack of investment by the previous Government. I thank the Minister for already agreeing to meet me. It would be rude if I did not extend the same invite to him, so would he like to come and visit those two amazing schools?

Stephen Morgan: The Government do not want any school to be left behind, including those serving rural communities. That is why we have invested significantly in capital funding this year, with almost £5.5 million for Norfolk county council to invest in improving its estate, including Wreningham and Brooke primary schools. I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Small rural schools in Cumbria have some of the oldest buildings that are most in need of repair, but also some of the most pressured budgets. Will the Minister consider setting out a special budget aimed at making sure we tackle repair backlogs in small rural schools, such as those in my constituency?

Stephen Morgan: The hon. Member will know that ensuring schools and colleges get the resources and buildings they need is a key part of our mission to break down barriers to opportunity and ensure every young person can succeed and thrive. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss these issues further.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for having taken the time to meet me and hear the case for Saint Benedict school to be rebuilt to be more sustainable, safe and secure. The neighbouring primary school, St Mary's, is the greenest in the UK and an incredible example of what a rebuild can do to inspire young minds. Will the Minister visit both schools to see, on the one hand, what has already been achieved in Derby, and on the other, the amazing opportunity we have to achieve so much more?

Stephen Morgan: I was very pleased to meet my hon. Friend to discuss Saint Benedict, which will benefit from transformed buildings through the school rebuilding programme. This Government have committed to continue and expand that programme to improve the school estate and give children the best start in life. I know that my hon. Friend is a real champion on these issues, and I would be very happy to discuss them further.

School-based Nurseries

5. **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps she is taking to expand school-based nurseries. [904592]

6. **Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to expand school-based nurseries. [904593]

11. **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to expand school-based nurseries. [904598]

18. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of school-based nursery places. [904605]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): School-based nurseries are a key part of delivering on our plan for change by making high-quality early years education more accessible and affordable, so that every child gets the best start in life. At the spending review, we announced almost £370 million for school-based nurseries, on top of the £37 million already awarded to schools. The Tories left a childcare pledge without a plan, but this Labour Government are delivering on promises made to families, saving working parents up to £7,500 a year.

Steve Witherden: The Government have announced £37 million for the first round of schools to expand nursery provision, supporting the roll-out of the extended 30 hours childcare offer in England, but the Public Childcare Now campaign points out that nearly two thirds of the funded schools are part of multi-academy trusts. While we are fortunate not to have academies in Wales, concerns remain that this model encourages privatisation, reduces accessibility and undermines staff pay and conditions, contributing to greater educational fragmentation. What assurances can the Minister offer that expanding entitlements without investing in public infrastructure will not exacerbate these issues?

Bridget Phillipson: I am delighted that so many academies are taking part in our school nursery programme. Academies drive innovation across our system and are an important part of the system we have. Of course, it was the last Labour Government who first brought about the academies programme to drive up performance in our schools and to make sure that all our children get a brilliant education. Sadly, we know that after 14 years of the Tories, far too many children, including in our most disadvantaged communities, do not get the education they deserve. That is why our schools White Paper later this year will make it a reality once and for all that they do.

Andrew Lewin: Swallow Dell primary in Welwyn Garden City is a fantastic school. I have had the privilege of meeting the leadership team, who are ambitious for every single child. They have a state nursery as part of the school, but they are seeking to expand, and unfortunately their bid was rejected in the last round. I am passionate and hopeful that this school might be able to benefit from the £370 million of additional funding, not least because one in three children attending Swallow Dell is eligible for free school meals. My right hon. Friend knows my constituency well, and she is welcome to visit. I hope that she will agree to a meeting to talk about Swallow Dell's bid for future funding.

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the workforce at Swallow Dell for everything they are doing to make sure our children get a brilliant start in life. I am sorry that they were not successful in the first phase. There was lots of demand, and that is why I am delighted that the spending review gave £370 million to ensure that we can make further progress towards our manifesto commitment. I would be delighted to discuss it further with him.

Rachel Taylor: The Conservatives let down working parents by not having a plan for their pledge. I am proud of how this Labour Government have delivered to provide working families with 15 hours of Government-funded childcare and funding for new school-based nurseries, including at Keresley Newland primary academy in Bedworth, which I look forward to visiting in the autumn. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to join me. Can she outline the role that school-based nurseries will play in ramping up to the 30 hours of Government-funded childcare this September, putting £7,500 back in the pockets of hard-working families across my constituency of North Warwickshire and Bedworth?

Bridget Phillipson: I will certainly do my best to visit Keresley Newland, and I am delighted that it is taking part in our school-based nurseries programme. We are determined to make sure that every child gets the best start in life. We know that the early years are crucial, and that is why we have set an ambitious target of making sure that a record number of children at the end of the early years foundation stage are ready for the next step on their journey through the school system. The last Government made all kinds of promises to parents, but they did not fund them. In fact, they left behind a huge black hole in the public finances. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) should know that better than most, because she was in the Treasury.

Chris Bloore: I recently visited the excellent Matchborough first school in my Redditch constituency to meet headteacher Lynn Briers. It was selected as one of the first schools in the country to receive substantial funding to transform unused classrooms into much-needed nursery spaces. I saw at first hand the difference that that funding will make. Can I therefore cheekily ask the Secretary of State to confirm when the next round of funding will be available, so that we can deliver even more of these excellent projects to support schools and families in Redditch?

Bridget Phillipson: It is because we know the benefits that primary-based nurseries can bring, often working with the private, voluntary and independent sector, that we are determined to move as fast as we can to deliver the next phase. I look forward to discussing that further with my hon. Friend. I am delighted that families in Redditch and right across the country will benefit from the expansion of free school meals eligibility to all families in receipt of universal credit, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty and putting money back in the pockets of parents.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Does the Secretary of State monitor the number of private nursery closures? If so, can she tell us how many have closed since the Budget?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, we continue to keep that under review, especially ahead of the further expansion of childcare in September. The figures will be published in the usual way, and we will make sure that we have the workforce there to deliver on the commitments that have been made. I say to the hon. Lady that in addition to almost doubling the early years pupil premium, we put in place a £75 million expansion grant to make sure that ahead of the further roll-out in September, all our early years settings can deliver the places that are needed.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): In my constituency there are more than 130 active cases involving children with special educational needs, many of which involve education, health and care plans that were either denied or issued in such a poor state that they contained the wrong names and described the wrong conditions, and therefore offered completely inappropriate packages of support. Given that Surrey county council has the highest number of tribunal cases against it every year—most of which are lost—may I ask whether the Secretary of State intends to reduce the rights associated with EHCPs, and whether she will do what so many parents ask me about and launch an immediate investigation into the council and its compliance with its legal obligation?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman has raised a number of important questions. I will certainly look into the issues relating to Surrey that we have discussed previously, and will then come back to him. As for support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, he has made the case for reform very precisely. The current system is simply not working, and the Government are determined to ensure that children get more timely early support and that we have a system that is based much more on need. As part of the process leading to the schools White Paper that will come later in the year, I am engaging with parents, campaigners and others, and I would be more than happy to discuss the matter further with Liberal Democrat colleagues in order to understand their concerns.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This morning, in my constituency, I met the chief executive of the Early Years Alliance. Its Laindon nursery is facing closure, not because of falling demand but because it is being hammered by the national insurance tax rises. How can the Secretary of State talk about expanding provision when nursery after nursery, in my constituency and across the country, is being pushed over a cliff edge by this Labour Government?

Bridget Phillipson: I too recently met the chief executive of the Early Years Alliance, and I will always be open to discussing the challenges faced by the sector; but let me convey to the right hon. Gentleman the points that I made to the chief executive. We are investing £8 billion in early years education, as well as almost doubling the early years pupil premium and providing a £75 million expansion grant to support settings ahead of a further roll-out in September. The right hon. Gentleman and the Conservative party made a load of promises to parents at the time of the last general election, but they did not fund them, they did not ensure that the workforce would be there, and they left us with the black hole in the public finances that this Government are turning around.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): In the last couple of months, I have been speaking to lots of nursery providers across my constituency about these issues, and the thing that comes up again and again is small business rate relief. The Secretary of State's Department has already replied saying that nurseries can claim the relief, but a nursery has to have fewer than 18 children to qualify, and the average number in my constituency is 75. Those nurseries are not eligible, and the national insurance and consumables changes are crippling them, so they are now considering not taking on Government-funded children. What should they do?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), has been in touch with the hon. Lady recently to discuss this matter further, and I personally will happily look further into the case that she has raised. We are investing record sums in early years education and working with the sector to deliver the places that are needed. That is a big challenge, because the last Tory Government did not leave behind a plan to deliver those places.

SEND Support: Children without an EHCP

8. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What steps she is taking to support children with special educational needs and disabilities who do not have an education, health and care plan. [904595]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Parents right across the country know that the Tories left behind a SEND system that was, in the words of the last Tory Education Secretary, “lose, lose, lose”. Labour will restore parents’ confidence with a support-first approach, prioritising early intervention and inclusive support in mainstream schools to address needs before they escalate. We will not be removing effective support, but we will also expand schools’ capacity to deliver consistent, high-quality provision to help children thrive, with timely and effective support.

Lincoln Jopp: In the last 11 months I have visited nearly all the schools in my constituency, and wherever I have gone I have asked whether people understand why the number of children with special educational needs has been going through the roof. I have received various explanations, such as lockdown, diet, social media, drugs in pregnancy, parenting, increased awareness and over-medicalisation. Is the Department doing any research on what is causing this phenomenon, so that we can treat the causes and not just the symptoms?

Bridget Phillipson: My Department, and the Department of Health and Social Care, are keen to understand some of the drivers identified by the hon. Gentleman. I know that he comes to this discussion in good faith, but some people, including Reform Members of Parliament, sometimes do not approach it in a responsible way. I think we need to tread with a great deal of care when we approach and discuss this subject, not least because it is a welcome change in our society that we now better understand where children have additional needs. The challenge, of course, is that the hon. Gentleman's party did not put in place the support that was required both to identify and to support children with special educational needs and disabilities.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): One of the biggest challenges affecting the delivery of support for children with special educational needs and disabilities is the extent of local authority funding deficits. They are currently dealt with through the statutory override, which allows local authorities to set a balanced budget without accounting for their SEND deficits. Given that the statutory override expires in March 2026, does the Secretary of State agree that a White Paper in autumn 2025 provides far too little time for the Government to implement meaningful change without extending the override further, and when does she expect local authorities to be able to have the certainty that they need to plan for the coming financial year?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that in addition to longer-term reform, which the White Paper will deliver, it is imperative that we take action now in order to make sure that the school system better caters for children with a wide range of needs. That is why we have invested £740 million to support councils to create more specialist provision in mainstream schools. I have seen some fantastic examples right across the country, and we need to see more. On the precise question about the statutory override, we want to make sure that councils are better supported through the process, and we will set out our position very soon.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): One of the best ways to support autistic children in schools is for teachers to go through mandatory training and to understand better the challenges that faced by neurodiverse people. How is the neurodivergent taskforce progressing, and will the Government bring in mandatory training for new teachers?

Bridget Phillipson: We are introducing more training on SEND for new entrants to the profession. That will take effect from September, but there is more that we need to do, including supporting teachers and staff

already working in our schools. That is part of the work that the group has under way, and we will set out more through the White Paper. I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's interest in the issue; I know he cares very much about making sure that all children, including those who are neurodivergent, have the support that they need to thrive, which is what this Government are determined to deliver.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her comments about the need to address the topic of SEND with great sensitivity, as we risk stigmatising entire families and generations who are affected so adversely by this issue.

In rural constituencies like Suffolk Coastal, the SEND crisis is incredibly severe and acute for many reasons. Is the Secretary of State looking at the decline in population that we face in many of our rural primary schools, and at how that extra capacity could be a huge resource and opportunity in tackling the SEND crisis?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that in areas where we are seeing space opening up in the schools estate, it is allowing us to do things like open more school-based nurseries. It also provides us with the opportunity to deliver more specialist provision in mainstream schools. I have seen some brilliant examples, right across the country, of where that can be delivered. I have also seen brilliant examples that involve the mainstream sector working together with the specialist sector to improve training for staff in order to improve provision overall. This is a big challenge—one that many Members from across the House want to see put in a much better place. We will all have heard anguished tales from parents who have had to fight incredibly hard for the support that their children need. Alongside that, we will all have heard that many staff in our schools feel that they currently lack the training and support they need to ensure that all children are able to thrive, and this Government are determined to change that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Asked whether the Government were planning to restrict EHCPs so that they apply only to children in special schools, the Government's strategic adviser on SEND, Christine Lenehan, recently said:

"I think, to be honest, that's the conversation we're in the middle of."

Is she correct to say that Ministers are considering that, or not?

Bridget Phillipson: We do need to think differently about the system that we have inherited from the Conservative party—one that Members from across the House recognise just is not working. This is not about taking away support for families or children; it is about making sure that there is much earlier identification of need and that support is put in place much more rapidly, including ahead of any formal diagnosis. I urge the shadow Minister to reflect and to show a bit more humility about the terrible state of what he and his party have left behind: a system that is adversarial and fails children, and in which children with special educational needs and disabilities do not get the excellent educational outcomes that should be the right of every child in this country. He should reflect on his total failure.

Level 7 Apprenticeships: Funding

9. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of changes to funding for level 7 apprenticeships on people aged 22 and over. [904596]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Apprenticeship starts by young people collapsed under the Conservatives. Labour is rebalancing the system towards young people to help them get on in life by backing them and giving them the skills they need to get jobs and grow our economy.

Greg Smith: Over 95,000 apprenticeships are being undertaken in the health, public services and care sector, and NHS Employers and many others have raised concerns about the impact of the Government policy to cease funding for level 7 apprenticeships for those over the age of 22. Can the Minister tell us what plans are in place to ensure that the people supporting all of us and all our constituents are given essential training and support? More particularly, what discussions has she had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the impact of this decision on our NHS?

Janet Daby: We are encouraging more employers, including the NHS, to invest in upskilling their staff who are over 22 years old and to deliver level 7 apprenticeships where they benefit those businesses and individuals. It will be for employers to determine the most appropriate training, and there are other training opportunities available at level 7, including non-apprenticeship routes. Our reforms will support 120,000 new training opportunities and up to 13,000 foundation apprenticeship starts. Apprenticeship starts, participation and achievements are all up under Labour, and we are continuing to go much further.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's plans to create those 120,000 training opportunities for young people, including these higher-level apprenticeships. However, we know that there are significant shortages of those able to provide training and mentorship. With only 65% of 55 to 64-year-olds employed, does the Minister agree that there is an opportunity to retrain older workers so they can pass on their experience to the next generation?

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we continue to support and train adults, and many adults with seniority in their professions will continue to offer excellent support, mentoring, internship and guidance to younger apprentices. The change we have put in place will enable apprenticeship opportunities to be rebalanced towards younger people and will create more opportunities for those entering the labour market.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Ministers recently announced that they were axing level 7 apprenticeships. Strangely, they made the announcement during recess; and also strangely, it was only the day after the announcement that they finally answered my parliamentary question from April, revealing that they were making a 90% cut in those apprenticeships. This is

blowing a huge hole in the NHS workforce plan, leading to a shortfall of 11,000 nurses. If Ministers will not listen to the many employers saying that this will make it much more difficult for people who are not so well-off to get into the professions, will they at least rule out cutting level 6 apprenticeships next?

Janet Daby: I can reassure the shadow Minister that level 6 apprenticeships are a core part of our offer, and we will continue to fund them. I also say politely to him that we will take no lessons from Liz Truss's previous Health Minister; that Government left our NHS on its knees, and we are having to rebuild it from its foundations again.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): The number of health visitors in England has reached an all-time low, with just 7,000 remaining, and there is a forecast shortfall of 37,000 community nurses by 2036. The Department's own Skills England sectoral report shows that the health and social care sectors face the highest vacancy rates, at 41%. Has there been any specific assessment of how removing level 7 apprenticeship funding for those over 21 will impact the pipeline of specialist community public health nurses into critical shortage roles, and is Skills England working with the Department of Health on NHS workforce planning?

Janet Daby: Skills England is taking a pivotal and active role. Also, of the 2.5 million workers in critical demand occupations, which includes the NHS, the majority require a qualification lower than degree level. We are rebalancing opportunities towards younger people, whose rates of apprenticeship starts have fallen more dramatically than the overall decline over the last decade. To create more opportunities for young people, we will need to prioritise public funding towards those at the start of their working career and at the lower apprenticeship levels, rather than those who are already in work with higher levels of prior learning or qualifications.

Outdoor Education: National Curriculum

10. **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of outdoor education provision in the national curriculum. [904597]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): It is important for young people to enjoy the benefits of spending time in nature, as part of a balanced curriculum. Beyond the curriculum, the Department is also working on an enrichment framework to support schools in developing their offer, which includes a variety of outdoor education opportunities. Our National Education Nature Park initiative also aims to support young people's wellbeing and develop skills for the future.

Phil Brickell: Learning in the outdoors allows children and young people to build their confidence and push their boundaries in a safe but challenging environment, yet all too often young people from more deprived communities, including in my constituency, do not have access to opportunities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what more

can be done to support schools in rolling out the Duke of Edinburgh's award across Bolton, Blackrod, Horwich and Westhoughton?

Catherine McKinnell: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the value of outdoor pursuits and the value of the Duke of Edinburgh's award, which I benefited from taking part in myself when I was at school. The Department has funded 300 schools in areas of high deprivation to start offering the award, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is providing funding of a further £1.5 million this financial year to extend the scheme. My hon. Friend is of course keen to ensure that his constituents benefit and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss that further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her answers. Worryingly, obesity levels are predicted to rise between 20% and 30% in the next five to 10 years. To combat that, physical education is important, as is the Government looking at children's diets at school. Those two things can address obesity, so I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on them.

Catherine McKinnell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We want all schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, including outdoor activities, sport, PE and physical activity, and to ensure that every child can benefit. That is why we are legislating to ensure that the national curriculum applies to all schools, through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

SEND Strategy

12. **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps she is taking to develop a SEND strategy. [904599]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Colleagues across the House have already heard today about the "lose, lose, lose" system that we inherited from the Conservatives. Improving the special educational needs and disabilities system is a priority. We are working to improve outcomes for all children. Parents should not have to fight for support for their children. We will be setting out further details in our schools White Paper in the autumn.

Rachael Maskell: Given the sharp rise in diagnosis in York of children with SEND, we have established a SEND-focused family hub. We are also reviewing other services. I am particularly concerned about the culture within schools. We need nurturing and inclusive education, so that we have a therapeutic learning environment. Will the Minister say what she is doing to ensure that schools, local authorities and others can feed into the White Paper to share best practice and raise concerns?

Catherine McKinnell: I know that my hon. Friend cares very deeply about this issue. I can reassure her that we are actively collaborating with sector parents and experts on how we drive forward our SEND reforms. That includes working closely with Dame Christine Lenehan, our strategic adviser on SEND, and Tom Rees, who leads the expert advisory group on inclusion. Changes we make will focus on improving support for children and parents, ending that fight for support, and protecting existing provision. We are listening very closely as we develop the plans.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is rare but very encouraging when a constituent comes into a surgery with some solutions. A couple of months ago, Elizabeth Cordle came into my surgery to talk about Corefulness, which is a series of short, simple, evidence-based exercise programmes to mature essential movement skills and help improve a child's readiness to learn and break down barriers to learning. She is uncertain on how exactly it could be applied to assist with SEND, but she is absolutely clear that, through the national roll-out that she is leading, it has enormous potential. Will the Minister to engage with me and Elizabeth, so that as the strategy is being developed, we can examine whether that programme has a wider application?

Catherine McKinnell: I agree that we need to take a constructive and collaborative approach in how we improve outcomes for all children, and intervene in children's lives to ensure their needs are met at the earliest stage possible. We will support schools to do that in any way we can. I would be more than happy to engage with the right hon. Gentleman on his constructive suggestion.

Adoption: Children in Foster Care

13. **Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to reduce the time taken for the adoption of children in foster care. [904600]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Where adoption is the right option for children, it needs to happen without delay, and early permanence placements are a crucial way to offer children stability. Labour believes that children growing up in our country deserve the best start in life, which is why we have provided £250,000 in funding for Adoption England to promote the practice. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill represents the biggest overhaul of children's social care in a generation, and it is a shame that Opposition Members opposed it.

Josh Newbury: I thank the Minister for that response. As an adoptive parent and a foster carer, I know the transformative effect that early permanence can have on the lives of children in care. It is not right for every child or for every parent, but adoption agencies could make much wider use of it. Would the Minister be willing to meet me and adoption charities to discuss how we can maximise the benefits of early permanence?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important topic; he is a champion for children in Cannock Chase. I agree that we should continue to promote early permanence. Adoption England has published national standards to promote and shape early permanence practice across the country. I regularly meet the organisations my hon. Friend has mentioned, but I am more than happy to meet him, too.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Adoptive parents right across my constituency are rightly concerned about the impact of Labour's recent cuts to the adoption and special guardianship support fund. Following last week's spending review, what hope can be offered to

families in my constituency and up and down the country who need the additional support that has been taken away under those cuts?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for the concern she has expressed. The adoption and special guardianship support fund has not been cut. Demand is ever increasing, and we have chosen an approach to manage tight resources in the face of increasing demand for support. The adoption and special guardianship support fund still enables those eligible to access a significant package of therapeutic support tailored to meet their individual needs.

Mental Health Support: Schools

14. **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve mental health support in schools. [904601]

21. **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve mental health support in schools. [904609]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): This Government are committed to breaking down the barriers to opportunity, which is why we are providing access to specialist mental health professionals in every school and expanding mental health support teams so that every child can access early support before problems escalate.

Dr Opher: In the Stroud area, six schools are now teaching mental health first aid to 16-year-olds. Many students have received a form of qualification, which they can use for applications to jobs and university. At Rednock school, these students are wearing coloured lanyards so that other students can recognise them and ask them for help with their mental health. Would the Minister support and extend this innovative scheme?

Stephen Morgan: I am happy to hear about the successful project in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I am interested to learn more as we share further details. Separately, to support education staff, the Department provides a range of guidance and practical resources on promoting and supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

Olivia Bailey: The brilliant schools in my constituency know that good mental health is the foundation for pupils enjoying school, fulfilling their potential and getting ready for life. In addition to rolling out mental health support for nearly a million more young people this year, will the Minister confirm that this Government will ensure that every child who needs mental health support will get it by the end of this Parliament?

Stephen Morgan: I agree with my hon. Friend, but would add that it is not just seen through the expansion of mental health support teams. With an extra £680 million in Government funding this year, the Government are transforming mental health services for children in Reading West and Mid Berkshire and across the country, hiring more staff, delivering more talking therapies and getting waiting lists down through our plan for change so that children can have the best possible start in life.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): What are the principal differences between this Government's groundbreaking plan to introduce mental health support teams to schools and the previous Government's already in-progress programme to deliver mental health support teams to schools? As I like this Minister, Mr Speaker, let me give him a hint: this has been a rhetorical question.

Stephen Morgan: The difference is that we are delivering it to every school in our country to make sure that every child can succeed and thrive.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): My constituent John Clifton chairs the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum. Last week John wrote to me and all West Sussex MPs outlining a number of the forum's concerns, including the provision of mental health support for children who have special educational needs and are neurodiverse. How will the Minister ensure that the support that will be provided is inclusive for all children, regardless of their needs?

Stephen Morgan: The Secretary of State has recently met the parent carer forum to discuss these issues and will continue to do so. We are committed to introducing more mental health support workers across the NHS and creating youth mental health hubs in all communities.

Topical Questions

T1. [904612] **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Last week's spending review was about investing in Britain's renewal and investing in excellence for every child, so that background will not determine what they can go on to achieve. Through our settlement, we will continue to make high-quality early years education more accessible and affordable. We will rebuild our crumbling schools estate, and we will improve outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities with our support-first approach. We will also continue our overhaul of children's social care, opening up training opportunities for young people to get great jobs in growing industries. Crucially, we will lift 100,000 children out of poverty through an historic expansion of free school meals to cover all families in receipt of universal credit. It will save parents nearly £500 per child per year. That is the difference that a Labour Government makes.

Harpreet Uppal: I recently met young people from the West Yorkshire Youth Collective. They told me that funding for work experience opportunities for those aged between 16 and 19 has reduced in recent years, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics and the arts. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that young people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, can access the opportunities that they need to succeed?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this important area. As she will know, our manifesto committed us to expanding work experience and careers guidance so that we can support young people into fulfilling jobs, create opportunities and drive growth.

Our wider skills reform will also create 120,000 training opportunities over the course of this Parliament. If my hon. Friend would like to share more details of the discussion she mentions, I would look carefully at them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is a pleasure to welcome my old primary school teacher Mrs Case to the Chamber today—I hope we all remain on our best behaviour. My question is very simple: does the Education Secretary believe that primary school teachers are indeed teachers?

Bridget Phillipson: I join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute to her teacher who joins us today. We all know that a brilliant teacher and the contribution that they make can always stay with us. I am slightly perplexed by the right hon. Lady's question. She is obviously right, but after 14 years of Tory failure many of our teachers are sadly having to pick up the pieces of wider societal challenges—whether that is too many families being in temporary accommodation or the growing number of children in poverty. We are determined as a Government to turn that around.

Laura Trott: I am grateful for the confirmation that the Education Secretary does accept that primary school teachers are indeed teachers, but why is she then saying that they no longer count towards her manifesto pledge to recruit 6,500 more teachers? Is it because, contrary to the Department's social media posts, teacher numbers are in fact going down, not up?

Bridget Phillipson: I do not know where the right hon. Lady has been, but she certainly has not been paying attention. We have been clear that we will make sure that we have 6,500 more teachers in secondary and specialist education and in further education colleges. This year alone we have 60,000 fewer children in primary schools, and that is why we are focusing our recruitment efforts in areas where we are seeing growth. It is common sense. It is this Labour Government who have delivered two pay rises for teachers, because we, the Labour party, value our brilliant teachers.

T5. [904616] **Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The work of Fife college is essential in equipping thousands of my constituents with skills for success. Does the Minister share my deep concern at the real-terms cuts that the SNP Scottish Government are inflicting on the college as they deprioritise Fife in favour of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen? Will she join me in urging them to think again?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I agree with my hon. Friend that it is time for a new direction for Scotland with Scottish Labour. In England, we are making over £1 billion of additional investment per year in skills by 2028-29 to support young people into the industries of the future. That is because we are unlocking opportunity and driving growth through our plan for change.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): Philip Augar, the chair of the previous review into post-18 education funding, stated recently in the *Financial Times* that “a handful” of universities are receiving “secret bailouts”. Will the Secretary of State confirm what emergency financial support the Government have already provided to struggling institutions and commit to informing Parliament of any future emergency financial support for individual institutions?

Bridget Phillipson: It was this Labour Government's priority to ensure that our world-leading universities were put on a much more sustainable footing. That is why we took the difficult but necessary decision to increase student fees, and it is why we are reforming the Office for Students to have a much sharper focus on financial regulation and sustainability. We, together with the Office for Students, continue to keep under review any institutions that may face difficulty, but the hon. Member will appreciate that these sensitive issues are best dealt with properly and seriously through the Office for Students.

T6. [904617] **Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): In Rossendale and Darwen, the Valley leadership academy is a vital school serving some of our most disadvantaged communities, yet it was recently identified as a stuck school following successive “requires improvement” Ofsted assessments. The staff and leadership at the school are working incredibly hard to drive improvement, and we are starting to see positive signs. Will the Minister therefore please update me on what Labour is doing to support them?

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Labour is delivering a new era of high and rising school standards, because we know that when standards slip it is disadvantaged children who suffer, and we will not let that happen. That is why Labour's regional improvement for standards and excellence teams are spearheading a stronger, faster system, prioritising stuck schools, sending in advisers with a proven track record of turning schools around, and backing that up with up to £20 million—

Mr Speaker: Order.

T2. [904613] **Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I invite the Secretary of State to come and visit the outstanding Market Field special school in my constituency, which was rebuilt and dramatically expanded under the Conservatives? I have been listening to what she has been saying about expanding special needs provision. Will she give an assurance that the number and capacity of special schools will continue to be expanded and that we will not return to the failed policy of the previous Labour Government?

Bridget Phillipson: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will ensure that we have the right numbers of specialist placements in the parts of the country where they are needed. Our capital budget in the spending review will allow us to do that. But alongside that, we need to ensure that we have more specialist provision in mainstream, including partnership with the specialist sector, to train and support the workforce to make that a reality.

T7. [904618] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that plans to make all children in households in receipt of universal credit eligible for free school meals will build on the Government's brilliant work to tackle pupil absence? The incredible numbers I have heard mentioned about this academic year are 140,000 fewer children persistently absent and 3 million extra days in school.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Providing over half a million children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds with a free, nutritious lunch every school day will lead to higher attainment, improved behaviour and better outcomes, including on attendance, meaning that children can get the best possible education and a chance to succeed in life.

T3. [904614] **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Although the Department is providing some extra funds to meet the additional costs of NICs in schools, those with a high number of SEND pupils such as All Saints' primary in Maldon will still receive less than 50% of the increase. Will the Secretary of State look again at that aspect, which is another disincentive for mainstream schools taking SEND pupils?

Bridget Phillipson: In wider reform later this year through the schools White Paper—including to the SEND system—we will look at every way in which we can improve outcomes for children, including those with SEND. That will include looking at the funding mechanisms we inherited from the Conservative party.

T9. [904620] **Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): I set up the Corby and east Northants SEND roundtable to help seek solutions to fix the broken system. One of the outcomes of the discussions was the need to improve SEND provision in our mainstream schools. What is the Minister doing to engage with teachers to make schools more inclusive and maximise the potential of every child?

Catherine McKinnell: We are investing significantly to make mainstream schools more inclusive for SEND students. By strengthening our evidence of effective inclusive practice, we are equipping teachers with proven tools and strategies to deliver excellent inclusive education supported by expert teaching and a world-class curriculum. We will set out more details in our White Paper in the autumn.

T4. [904615] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Scottish education was once the envy of the world, but under the SNP it is being destroyed. Data shows that a quarter of 11-year-olds in Scotland are not achieving expected literacy levels. Does the Minister agree that the SNP needs to drop its weird obsessions and get back to the basics of sorting out Scotland's education?

Bridget Phillipson: It is only through delivering a Labour Government in Scotland next year that we will get the change that the hon. Gentleman is seeking. I agree that Scottish education used to be the envy of the world—I spent many a long day speaking to my grandfather about his experience of the Scottish system—but it is

only with a Labour Government in Scotland that we will once again see the focus on standards that our disadvantaged young people badly need.

T10. [904621] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Earlier this month, I opened the Launch Pad, a new SEND provision at Sandhurst school, and I was shown around by Ben, who told me how the Launch Pad had helped him to access education. As the Government work at pace to fix the broken SEND system, what is the Minister's message for young people like Ben?

Catherine McKinnell: We know that there are lots of great examples of mainstream schools delivering specialist provision, such as the one my hon. Friend recently opened, enabling children to achieve and thrive in mainstream school and providing excellent support to children with speech and language needs. We have allocated £740 million to support mainstream schools to increase their SEND provision, and we want to reassure his constituent that we will continue to prioritise that in our work.

T8. [904619] **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Another private school, Queen Margaret's school for girls in York, has announced its closure, months after the Carrdus school in my constituency announced its closure. Over 11,000 children have left the private sector in this first year, which is more than three times what the Government expected. Does the Minister believe that the impact assessment of the introduction of VAT on private schools is correct? Will she look again at the flawed case for it?

Stephen Morgan: Around 50 mainstream private schools close each year. The level of fees charged by private schools is not a matter for the Department; it is a contractual matter between private schools and parents.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Just two in five young people recall receiving any financial education at school, and those who did so often received less than an hour per month. While I welcome the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which will require all schools to teach financial literacy, does the Minister agree that the curriculum and assessment review gives us an opportunity to go even further? Will she meet me to discuss how Government, industry and civil society can ensure that children in my constituency get this vital life skill?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree with the importance of financial education. We are looking at the curriculum and assessment system and making sure that we take the advice of the independent review on these matters. I would be more than happy, given my hon. Friend's enthusiasm—and parents' enthusiasm—for this subject, to discuss it further with him.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Last week the Chancellor committed £9.6 billion over the next four years to the school rebuilding programme. Hornsea school and language college in my constituency is in dire need of a full rebuild, so can the Secretary of State commit today to including it in the next tranche of rebuilds? If she needs any persuading, I would be delighted to invite her to make a short detour on her way back to Sunderland and to come and have a look for herself.

Stephen Morgan: We have significantly increased investment to improve the condition of schools or rebuild them; ensuring that schools have the resources and buildings that they need is key to our plan for change. If the hon. Member would like to write to me about that school, I would be happy to update him on this matter.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Sign Language, I know that the thousands of BSL first-language speakers in this country are very supportive of the introduction of a new BSL GCSE. However, I understand that progress on that has slightly stalled, so I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on the roll-out.

Catherine McKinnell: The British Sign Language GCSE is a key feature of our commitment to enhancing the status of British Sign Language, both in education and

in society. Ofqual is currently running a public consultation on its proposed assessment arrangements and expects to confirm its decision on the qualification rules in autumn 2025.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): In April, I wrote to the Minister for School Standards about the Angel Hill free school, which will provide 96 desperately needed places for children with SEND in my constituency. I thank her for her response in which she said that we would get an update shortly. I ask again: when does she expect construction of the Angel Hill free school in Rosehill to begin?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important project. I can confirm that works at Angel Hill free school are expected to commence in September 2025 subject to the contract being awarded in August.

Child Sexual Exploitation: Casey Report

3.35 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): With permission, I will update the House on the audit the Government commissioned from Baroness Casey on child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs, and on the action we are taking to tackle this vile crime—to put perpetrators behind bars and to provide the innocent victims of those crimes with support and justice.

The House will be aware that on Friday seven men were found guilty of committing the most horrendous crimes in Rochdale between 2000 and 2006. They were convicted of treating teenage girls as sex slaves, repeatedly raping them in filthy flats, alleyways and warehouses. The perpetrators included taxi drivers and market traders of Pakistani heritage, and it has taken 20 years to bring them to justice. I pay tribute to the incredible bravery of the women who told their stories and fought for justice for all those years. They should never have been let down for so long.

The sexual exploitation of children by grooming gangs is one of the most horrific crimes. Children as young as 10, plied with drugs and alcohol, were brutally raped by gangs of men and disgracefully let down again and again by the authorities that were meant to protect them and keep them safe. These despicable crimes have caused the most unimaginable harm to victims and survivors throughout their lives and are a stain on our society.

Five months ago, I told the House that our most important task was to stop perpetrators and put them behind bars. I can report that that work is accelerating—arrests and investigations are increasing. I asked police forces in January to identify cases involving grooming and child sexual exploitation allegations that had been closed with no further action. More than 800 cases have now been identified for formal review, and I expect that figure to rise above 1,000 in the coming weeks.

Let me be clear: perpetrators of these vile crimes should be off our streets, behind bars, paying the price for what they have done. Further rapid action is also under way to implement recommendations of past inquiries and reviews, including the seven-year independent inquiry into child abuse—recommendations that have sat on the shelf for too long. In the Crime and Policing Bill, we are introducing the long-overdue mandatory reporting duty, which I called for more than 10 years ago, as well as aggravated offences for grooming offenders so that their sentences match the severity of their crimes.

Earlier this year, I also commissioned Baroness Louise Casey to undertake a rapid national audit of the nature, scale and characteristics of gang-based exploitation. I specifically asked her to look at the issue of ethnicity and the cultural and social drivers of this type of offending—analysis that previously had never been done despite years of concerns being raised. I asked her to advise us on what further reviews, investigations and actions would be needed to address the current and historical failures that she found.

I told Parliament in January that I expected Baroness Casey to deliver the same kind of impactful and no-holds-barred report that she produced on Rotherham in 2015, so that we never shy away from the reality of these

terrible crimes. I am grateful that Louise and her team have done exactly that, conducting a hugely wide-ranging assessment in just four months. The findings of her audit are damning. At its heart, she identifies a deep-rooted failure to treat children as children, and a continued failure to protect children and teenage girls from rape, exploitation and serious violence and from the scars that last a lifetime. She finds too much fragmentation in the authorities' response, too little sharing of information, too much reliance on flawed data, too much denial, too little justice, too many criminals getting off and too many victims being let down.

The audit describes victims as young as 10—often those in care or children with learning or physical disabilities—being singled out for grooming precisely because of their vulnerability; perpetrators still walking free because no one joined the dots or because the law ended up protecting them instead of the victims they had exploited; and deep-rooted institutional failures, stretching back decades, where organisations that should have protected children and punished offenders looked the other way. Baroness Casey found that

“blindness, ignorance, prejudice, defensiveness and even good but misdirected intentions”

all played a part in that collective failure.

On the key issues of ethnicity that I asked Baroness Casey to examine, she has found continued failure to gather proper robust national data, despite concerns being raised going back many years. In the local data examined from three police forces, the audit identifies clear evidence of over-representation among suspects of Asian and Pakistani-heritage men. Baroness Casey refers to

“examples of organisations avoiding the topic altogether for fear of appearing racist or raising community tensions”.

These findings are deeply disturbing, but most disturbing of all, as Baroness Casey makes clear, is the fact that too many of them are not new. As her audit sets out, there have been 15 years of reports, reviews, inquiries and investigations into the appalling rapes, exploitation and violent crimes against children—detailed over 17 pages of her report—but too little has changed. We have lost more than a decade. That must end now. Baroness Casey sets out 12 recommendations for change, and we will take action on all of them immediately, because we cannot afford more wasted years.

We will introduce new laws to protect children and support victims so that they stop being blamed for the appalling crimes committed against them; new major police operations to pursue perpetrators and put them behind bars; a new national inquiry to direct local investigations and hold institutions to account for past failures; new ethnicity data and research, so that we face up to the facts on exploitation and abuse; new action across children's social services and other agencies to identify children at risk; and further action to support child victims and tackle new forms of exploitation and abuse online. Taken together, this will mark the biggest programme of work ever pursued to root out the scourge of grooming gangs and child sexual exploitation.

Those vile perpetrators who have grown used to the authorities looking the other way must have no place to hide, so let me spell out the next steps that we are announcing today. Baroness Casey's first recommendation is that we must see children as children. She concludes

[Yvette Cooper]

that too many grooming cases have been dropped or downgraded from rape to lesser charges because a 13 to 15-year-old is perceived to have been in love with or consented to sex with the perpetrator, so we will change the law to ensure that adults who engage in penetrative sex with a child under 16 face the most serious charge of rape, and we will work closely with the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to ensure that there are safeguards for consensual teenage relationships. We will change the law so that those convicted for child prostitution offences while their rapists got off scot-free will have their convictions disregarded and their criminal records expunged.

Baroness Casey's next recommendation is a national criminal investigation. As I have set out, arrests and investigations are rising, but the audit recommends that we go further, so I can announce that the police will launch a new national criminal operation into grooming gangs, overseen by the National Crime Agency. It will bring together for the first time all arms of the policing response and develop a rigorous new national operating model that all forces across the country will be able to adopt, ensuring that grooming gangs are always treated as serious and organised crime, and so that rapists who groom children—whether their crimes were committed decades ago or are still being committed today—can end up behind bars.

Alongside justice, there must also be accountability and action. We have begun implementing the recommendations from past inquiries, including Professor Jay's independent inquiry, and we have said that further inquiries are needed to get accountability in local areas. I told the House in January that I would undertake further work on how to ensure that those inquiries could get the evidence that they needed to properly hold institutions to account. We have sought responses from local councils, too. We asked Baroness Casey to review those responses, as well as the arrangements and powers used in past investigations and inquiries, and to consider the best means of getting to the truth. Her report concludes that further local investigations are needed, but they should be directed and overseen by a national commission with statutory inquiry powers. We agree, and we will set up a national inquiry to that effect.

Baroness Casey is not recommending another overarching inquiry of the kind conducted by Professor Alexis Jay. She recommends that the inquiry be time-limited, and its purpose must be to challenge what the audit describes as continued denial, resistance and legal wrangling among local agencies. We will set out further details on the national inquiry in due course.

I warned in January that the data collection we inherited from the previous Government on ethnicity was completely inadequate; the data was collected on only 37% of suspects. Baroness Casey's audit confirms that ethnicity data is not recorded for two thirds of grooming gang perpetrators, and that the data is

“not good enough to support any statements about the ethnicity of group-based child sexual exploitation offenders at the national level.”

I agree with that conclusion. Frankly, it is ridiculous and helps no one that this basic information is not collected, especially as there have been warnings and

recommendations stretching back 13 years about the woefully inadequate data on perpetrators, which prevents patterns of crime from being understood and tackled.

The immediate changes to police recording practices that I announced in January are starting to improve the data, but we need to go much further. Baroness Casey's audit examined local data in three police force areas—Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire—where high-profile cases involving Pakistani-heritage men have long been investigated and reported. She found there that the suspects of group-based child sexual offences were disproportionately likely to be Asian men. She also found indications of disproportionality in serious case reviews.

Although much more robust national data is needed, we cannot and must not shy away from those findings. As Baroness Casey says,

“ignoring the issues, not examining and exposing them to the light, allows the criminality and depravity of a minority of men to be used to marginalise whole communities”.

The vast majority of people in our British Asian and Pakistani-heritage communities continue to be appalled by these terrible crimes, and agree that the criminal minority of sick predators and perpetrators in every community must be dealt with robustly by criminal law.

Baroness Casey's review also identifies prosecutions and investigations into perpetrators who are white British, European, African or middle eastern, just as Alexis Jay's inquiry concluded that all ethnicities and communities were involved in appalling child abuse crimes. So that there is accurate information to help tackle serious crimes, we will, for the first time, make it a formal requirement to collect ethnicity and nationality data in all cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation. We will also commission new research on the cultural and social drivers of child sexual exploitation, misogyny and violence against women and girls, as Baroness Casey has recommended.

The audit's final group of recommendations is about the continued failure of agencies that should be keeping children safe to share vital information or act on clear signs of risk. Worryingly, the audit finds that although the number of reports to the police of child sexual abuse and exploitation has gone up, the number of child sexual abuse cases identified for protection plans by local children's services has fallen to its lowest ever, but no one has been curious about why that is. The audit also details an abysmal failure to respond to 15 years of recommendations and warnings about the failings of inter-agency co-operation. We will act at pace to deliver Baroness Casey's recommendations for mandatory information-sharing between agencies, and for unique reference numbers for children, building on work already being taken forward by my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will also work at pace to close loopholes in taxi licensing laws.

I want to respond to three other important issues identified by Baroness Casey in her report, but on which she has not made specific recommendations. On support for victims, my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary will fund additional training for mental health staff in schools on identifying and supporting children and young people who have experienced trauma, exploitation and abuse. Baroness Casey reports that she came across cases involving suspects who were asylum seekers. We have asked her team to provide all the evidence they

found to the Home Office, so that immigration enforcement can immediately pursue individual cases with the police. Let me make it clear that those who groom children or commit sexual offences will not be granted asylum in the UK, and we will do everything in our power to remove them. I do not believe that the law we have inherited is strong enough, so we are bringing forward a change to the law, so that anyone convicted of sexual offences is excluded from the asylum system and denied refugee status. We have already increased the removal of foreign national offenders by 14% since the election, and we are drawing up new arrangements to identify and remove those who have committed a much wider range of offences.

Finally, Baroness Casey describes ways in which patterns of grooming gang child sexual exploitation are changing, and evidence that rape and sexual exploitation are taking place in street gangs and drug gangs who combine criminal and sexual exploitation. I do not believe that this kind of exploitation has been investigated sufficiently. The report also describes sexual exploitation in modern slavery and trafficking cases. Most significantly of all, it describes the huge increase in online grooming, and horrendous online sexual exploitation and abuse, including through the use of social media apps to build up relationships and lure children into physical abuse. The audit quotes a police expert, who says:

“If Rotherham were to happen again today it would start online.”

We are passing world-leading laws to target those who groom and exploit children online, and investing in cutting-edge technology to target the highest-harm offenders, but we need to do much more, or the new scandals and shameful crimes of the future will be missed.

When the final report of Alexis Jay’s seven-year national inquiry was published in October 2022, the then Home Secretary, Grant Shapps, issued a profound and formal public apology to the victims of child sexual abuse who were so badly let down over decades by different levels of the state. As shadow Home Secretary at the time, I joined him in that apology on behalf of the Opposition, and extended it to victims of child sexual exploitation, too. To the victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and grooming gangs, on behalf of this and past Governments, and the many public authorities that let you down, I want to reiterate an unequivocal apology for the unimaginable pain and suffering that you have suffered, and for the failure of our country’s institutions, over decades, to prevent that harm and keep you safe.

But words are not enough; victims and survivors need action. The reforms that I have set out today will be the strongest action that any Government have taken to tackle child sexual exploitation. There will be more police investigations, more arrests, a new inquiry, changes to the law to protect children, and a fundamental overhaul of the way organisations work in order to support victims and put perpetrators behind bars, but none of that will work unless everyone is part of it, and everyone works together to keep our children safe. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Hopefully the report will be available in the Table Office for those Members who wish to see it. The Home Secretary quite rightly took longer than expected, and I have no problem with that. I say to the Leader of the Opposition, and to the Lib Dems, that it is available to them to do the same.

3.54 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement, although when I listened to it, I could not believe my ears. It was as if this was the Government’s plan all along, when we all know it is another U-turn. After months of pressure, the Prime Minister has finally accepted our call for a full, statutory, national inquiry into grooming gangs, and I welcome our finally reaching this point. We must remember that this is not a victory for politicians—especially not for the ones, like the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister, who had to be dragged to this position. This is a victory for the survivors, who have been calling for this for years. However, I have been speaking to many who do not have confidence that a Government who ignored their concerns will deliver.

Before I turn to the detail of the Home Secretary’s statement, I want to recognise the tireless work of those who refused to let this issue be buried: survivors like Fiona Goddard, who bravely waived her anonymity; the parents of survivors, like Marlon West, who I spoke to this morning; Maggie Oliver, whose courage in speaking truth to power has been instrumental in bringing us to this point; the late Andrew Norfolk, whose fearless journalism brought these crimes to light; Baroness Casey for her review; and Charlie Peters, who has consistently been a voice for the voiceless.

The Prime Minister’s handling of this scandal is an extraordinary failure of leadership. His judgment has, once again, been found wanting. Since he became Prime Minister, he and the Home Secretary dismissed calls for an inquiry because they did not want to cause a stir. They accused those of us who demanded justice for the victims of this scandal of “jumping on a far-right bandwagon”, a claim that the Prime Minister’s official spokesman restated this weekend—shameful.

Time and again, it has been left to the Conservatives to force this issue. Three times—[*Interruption.*] They can all mutter now, but these Labour MPs voted against a national inquiry three times. The Liberal Democrats did not bother to vote at all—asleep at the wheel. Labour MPs voted against a reasoned amendment to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and in Committee they voted against the Bill. At Committee stage of the Crime and Policing Bill—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Swallow, I want you to set a good example. This is a very serious statement, and tempers are running high, but I certainly do not want to see you pointing, shouting and bawling in that way.

Mrs Badenoch: Mr Speaker, they can point and shout as much as they like; they know the truth, just as we on the Conservative Benches do. Three times—[*Interruption.*] I will repeat myself: Labour MPs voted against the reasoned amendment to the children’s Bill; in Committee, they voted against that Bill; and they voted against the Crime and Policing Bill in Committee. They voted against a national inquiry and, at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister repeatedly ruled out a national inquiry, to the cheers of all the Labour MPs who are now pretending that they believed in an inquiry all along.

No doubt, in her response to me, the Home Secretary will try to claim that the previous Government did nothing—a wholly false assertion that she should not

[Mrs Badenoch]

repeat today. The Conservative Government took extensive action, starting with the original Jay report, commissioned in 2014 by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May. A year later, she commissioned the independent investigation into child sexual abuse, and Sajid Javid commissioned ethnicity data collection in 2018. It is wrong to claim, as the Home Secretary did, that ethnicity data collection had not been done. I remind her that the Foreign Secretary criticised Sajid Javid at the time, saying that he was bringing the office of Home Secretary “into disrepute”, and that he was pandering to the far-right for doing exactly what the Home Secretary says she will now do. They should be ashamed of themselves.

We accepted all the recommendations made by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in 2022, except the recommendation to have a new Cabinet Minister, which would not have made any difference at all to the victims of this scandal. The Home Secretary claimed that the recommendations sat on the shelf, but let me be clear that we went further than those recommendations. It was the Conservatives who established the grooming gangs taskforce, which supported police forces to make 807 arrests for group-based child sexual exploitation last year, so do not tell me that we did nothing.

It is vital that this inquiry is robust, swift and, above all, independent.

There are legitimate concerns about institutions investigating themselves, especially as some of the most egregious cases of institutional failure occurred in Labour-controlled authorities. [Interruption.] Labour Members can moan as much as they like, but the people out there believe that is why nothing has happened yet. In Greater Manchester, Operation Augusta was prematurely shut down. In Rotherham, which has been under continuous Labour control since 1974, we saw repeated failures. In Telford, where Labour has predominantly held power, the current MP, the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies), initially rejected calls for an inquiry while serving as council leader.

This inquiry must have teeth. It must start with known hotspots such as Bradford and Rochdale, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his persistent advocacy on this issue. We need clear commitments. For example, will the inquiry examine the role of ethnicity in these crimes, confronting hard truths about potential cover-ups motivated by fears of appearing racist? [Interruption.] There is no point in Labour Members muttering—the Home Secretary said it herself.

I spoke to the father of a survivor just this morning, and he told me that survivors need to have someone who is independent and who they can go to and trust. It is no use them being forced to speak to the same authorities who ignored them in the first place. Will this inquiry ensure that no one, whether police officers, councillors or council officials, is beyond scrutiny?

The Government’s approach to the Casey review itself raises serious concerns. While the review’s findings are crucial, we as legislators are sent here to make decisions, not to outsource the difficult ones. The Prime Minister has waited months for someone to take this decision for him. That is the kind of dithering and delay that the survivors complained about.

We need answers to the following questions. The House deserves to know what changed the Prime Minister’s mind from thinking that this was dog-whistle, far-right politics to something that he must do. When exactly did Baroness Casey submit her findings to Downing Street, and did the Government request any changes to her report? Does the Home Secretary agree that anyone in authority who deliberately covered up these disgusting crimes should be prosecuted for misconduct in public office and that those prosecutions should happen alongside, not after the inquiry? We believe that anyone in the police, local authorities, social services or even the CPS who covered this up because they cared more about so-called community relations than about protecting vulnerable girls as young as 10 years old should be pursued.

We welcome the Home Secretary’s comments about perpetrators not being able to make asylum claims. I remind her that we put forward an amendment to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, and she and all her colleagues voted against that very measure. Does she now agree that the perpetrators should also not be able to make human rights claims to avoid deportation, and will she legislate to do that? Will the inquiry be concluded within two years, and will every one of the 50 towns affected be covered, including Bradford, which is still refusing to conduct an inquiry into this? Will those local inquiries have the power to summon witnesses, or is that power only for the national inquiry? Most critically, we need a clear timeline for conclusions and actions. The victims cannot wait another decade for justice: we should be able to do this in two years.

Finally, we did not need to commission a report to tell us what we already knew. Will the Home Secretary apologise on behalf of herself, the Labour party and the Prime Minister for wasting so much time and voting against this, dismissing the concerns of the survivors? The House, the British public and, most importantly, the many brave survivors deserve clear answers from a Government of dithering and delay.

Yvette Cooper: I do not think the Leader of the Opposition can have read the report and seen the seriousness of its conclusions, because it sets out a timeline of failure from 2009 to 2025. Repeated reports and recommendations were not acted on: on child protection, on police investigations, on ethnicity data, on data sharing and on support for victims. For 14 of those 16 years, her party was in government, including years in which she was the Minister for children and families, then the Minister for equalities, covering race and ethnicity issues and violence against women and girls. I did not hear her raise any of these issues until January this year. She will know that the Prime Minister did not just raise them but acted on them: he brought the first prosecutions against grooming gangs and called for action to address ethnicity issues in 2012. She will also know that the safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), and I have raised these issues repeatedly.

The Leader of the Opposition referred to Professor Alexis Jay’s independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. I called for that inquiry and strongly supported it, and we wanted it to work on a cross-party basis. We supported its conclusions, but the Leader of the Opposition’s party did absolutely nothing to implement them. Time and again, recommendations just sat on the shelf, and it has taken this Government to bring forward the mandatory

duty to report. She says that we should ensure that people who have engaged in cover-ups are prosecuted. I agree, which is why the Labour party is changing the law to make that possible, so that cover-ups cannot happen and people are held to account.

The Leader of the Opposition also knows that in the vote she referred to, what she wanted to do—the amendment she tabled—would have wrecked the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. That Bill includes two of Baroness Casey’s recommendations to strengthen child protection, recommendations that the Leader of the Opposition and her party refused to introduce over 14 years. I am sorry that she chose not to join in the apology to victims and survivors for decades of failure in 2022. That apology was a cross-party one, which, if she really had victims’ interests and the national interest at heart, it should be again.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I listened with cold fury to what was coming out of the mouth of the Leader of the Opposition, because much of it was beneath contempt. I commend the Home Secretary for her statement and for commissioning a fiercely independent figure such as Louise Casey to conduct this national audit, without which we would not have had today’s outcome.

In Rochdale, we know all too well how many years it has taken for victims to get the justice they deserve. They have waited many, many years to see these sick criminals locked up and put behind bars. Only last week, we had seven more of these perverts locked up in Rochdale, which is a testament to the police and the prosecution who finally got those cases together. However, the victims also want accountability for anyone in a position of authority, as the Home Secretary has said—anyone who found out about this, or knew about it, and failed to act. Does she agree that no councillor from any political party, no social worker, no police officer, no council officer and no ethnic group should hide from the fierce scrutiny of this national inquiry?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to raise the appalling case in his constituency, where seven people were convicted on Friday. He will also know that further criminal investigations are still ongoing—it is shameful how long it has taken to get justice for those victims. I agree with him that no one can hide from justice on this appalling issue, on which victims and survivors have been let down for far too long. I hope that supporting that aim will be a cross-party process.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Child sexual abuse and exploitation are among the most abhorrent crimes imaginable, and we must all support every effort to deliver justice for victims and prevent these vile acts from happening again. It is, of course, right that the Government follow the recommendations of Baroness Casey’s report, including a new national inquiry. Survivors must be at the heart of this process. Their voices, experiences and insights must shape both the inquiry and its outcomes, and I would welcome hearing more from the Home Secretary about how she intends to ensure survivors are heard, are respected, and—essentially—are allowed to build on their existing testimony without being asked to repeat themselves and relive their abuse again and again.

The seven-year inquiry into child sexual abuse, chaired by Professor Alexis Jay, delivered its final report in 2022, and the Government at the time delivered none of its recommendations, leaving survivors waiting for justice. In her remarks, the Home Secretary mentioned two of Professor Jay’s recommendations being introduced through the Crime and Policing Bill: a mandatory reporting duty and aggravated offences for grooming offenders. What does this new inquiry mean for the remaining recommendations of Professor Jay? Will victims and survivors see all 20 recommendations implemented while the new inquiry is being carried out?

Any new inquiry must be more than symbolic; it must be robust, victim-centred and capable of driving real change. A duty of candour would require public officials and authorities to co-operate fully with such an inquiry, so it continues to be disappointing that the Government have delayed bringing that provision forward. I ask the Home Secretary plainly: what is stopping the Government from introducing a duty of candour via a Hillsborough law now?

Finally, now that Baroness Casey has completed her review, I welcome her appointment as chair of the independent commission into adult social care. I trust that she will bring to that hugely important role the same determination to challenge injustice and to champion the voices of those too often left unheard.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes important points about the seriousness of this crime, and she is right, too, that we need to continue to implement the recommendations of the overarching inquiry into child abuse. The Safeguarding Minister updated the House before Easter on those recommendations and the action we are taking forward on them. I can tell the hon. Lady that in the Home Office, measures are already well under way, and we will continue to do that. It is important that we do not simply have recommendations sitting on shelves—things have to be implemented.

On the Hillsborough law, we are working at pace to get the details right and to bring it before the House. The hon. Lady will understand that it needs to meet the expectations of the Hillsborough families, as well as be right for the House. We will continue to work on the wider issues, too. In her foreword, Baroness Casey says:

“If we’d got this right years ago—seeing these girls as children raped rather than ‘wayward teenagers’ or collaborators in their abuse, collecting ethnicity data, and acknowledging as a system that we did not do a good enough job—then I doubt we’d be in this place now.”

We lost a decade. We cannot lose another one.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): First, may I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for her leadership and commitment to getting a grip on this issue? As a Member of Parliament for one of the largest constituencies of Muslim and Pakistani heritage people, I know the sheer anger and condemnation that the vast majority of them share, like all Britons who are against those who commit these vile actions and vile sexual abuse. That is backed up not only by recent polling by Opinion showing that a majority of Muslims are deeply concerned about grooming gangs, but by sermons in mosques, letters from leading figures, demonstrations on the streets and so much more that is often not given the media coverage it deserves. I am pleased to see that the National Crime Agency will be involved in the

[Naz Shah]

future inquiries. Let me reiterate in this House that British Muslims stand on the side of victims and support the full force of the law being used against all perpetrators of abuse. Does the Home Secretary agree that those who display selective outrage or fan the flames to blame entire communities do nothing to protect innocent victims or further the cause of victims?

Yvette Cooper: May I welcome my hon. Friend's points that she makes about the anger in her community and the anger across British Muslim communities towards the grooming gangs, towards the rape of children and towards these appalling crimes? She has long called for work, including stronger action from the police to be able to go after perpetrators and bring them to justice. She is right that the horror at crimes committed against children and in particular against young girls is shared across communities. It is in the interests of those children and victim-survivors that we have reforms now.

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

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for early sight of it, and I am pleased that Baroness Casey has agreed to appear before the Committee tomorrow to set out the contents of her report more clearly. However, I am concerned about the potential for inquiries intended to get to the truth to prejudice criminal trials. How does the Home Secretary envisage the two elements running alongside each other—an inquiry and criminal prosecutions?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome that question, and I am glad that Baroness Casey will have the opportunity to set out more details of her findings. As the right hon. Lady will know, Baroness Casey has huge expertise and determination, and will be forthright in giving the evidence that she has drawn together.

It will be important for the commission conducting the independent inquiry to have arrangements with police forces to ensure that criminal investigations that are currently under way are not cut across. It is also important to ensure that we can uncover institutional failings, because institutional failures to pursue action, or the turning of a blind eye, need to be looked into in particular areas, as part of the local investigations and the national inquiry. As the right hon. Lady will know, arrangements of this kind have featured in past inquiries, so they can be made and will need to be made again now.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Let me first praise and pay tribute to survivors across the country, and draw attention again to the survivors who worked in Telford along with me and various organisations to carry out the local review. We did so because the then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, and the then local government Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), refused to provide a statutory inquiry into what had happened in Telford. That is why we worked with the police and crime commissioner—who happens to be a Conservative—and with people across the political spectrum to take this matter out of the party political field and try to find answers in our small part of the world.

What we need, though, is action. We need action in respect of the Jay inquiry and in respect of the Casey review, but does the Home Secretary agree that we also need action in respect of the number of local reviews that have taken place up and down the country whose findings have not been on the desks of Ministers over the last 14 years and which have therefore not received the attention that they deserve?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right: what we need is change and action, and recommendations from inquiries need to be implemented. Part of the strength of the Telford inquiry lay in the fact that victims and survivors were at its very heart, and there were also serious plans to ensure, and ways of ensuring, that the recommendations were implemented. That is crucial. It is no good having inquiries if recommendations just sit on the shelf; we must ensure that they are implemented, as well as pursuing answers.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The fact that victims and survivors of this horrific crime literally had to become campaigners themselves to reach this outcome should make everyone in the House stop and think. When I last met the Safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), along with the leading child abuse lawyer David Greenwood, we pointed out the fundamental flaw in her Government's grooming gangs strategy: namely, the completely ridiculous decision to give council leaders in areas such as Keighley and Bradford the option to simply say no to an inquiry. Now that we have an inquiry equipped with statutory powers, may I ask the Home Secretary what message she has for local leaders in my region who think that they can still get away with saying no, and what message she has for victims such as Fiona Goddard, who is also from my area and who will no doubt be worrying, like me, that there will still be no focus on Keighley and the wider Bradford district?

Yvette Cooper: I know that the hon. Member has met the Safeguarding Minister. She has spoken again to Fiona Goddard this morning to ensure that the voices of victims, survivors and campaigners are at the heart of the inquiry. He will know that the Safeguarding Minister said to him in their meeting that she would not allow local councils to be able to turn their backs and say no to investigations where they are needed. That is why we have accepted Baroness Casey's recommendation to have a national inquiry that will underpin those local investigations. Obviously, the final decisions will be matters for the independent chair of the commission, but we will ensure that the hon. Member's concerns and those of victims are passed on the national inquiry.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. I also pass on my thanks to Dame Louise Casey for meeting Oldham victims and survivors of CSE. They want no further delays to justice, and for perpetrators to face the full force of the law now. It is unacceptable that some are being given court dates for 2028, with all the risks that that implies. They want no more red tape, and they want survivors to be at the heart of rooting out perpetrators and getting justice. Can the Home Secretary ensure that this will happen, and will she now consider making misogyny a hate crime?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome what my hon. Friend has done over many years to champion victims in Oldham and across her constituency, and to work with survivors. She is right to point to the terrible delays in the justice system. She will know that the Lord Chancellor is taking forward reforms to look at how the huge backlog, particularly in Crown court cases, can be dealt with. Justice delayed is justice denied, and so many survivors have already waited far too long for justice. I assure my hon. Friend that those concerns are uppermost in the Lord Chancellor's mind.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Regardless of whether local inquiries are commissioned by councils, will there be an opportunity for those same areas to fall under the remit of the national inquiry, to ensure that some of the ongoing issues to which the Home Secretary herself has referred are caught within the new framework of the inquiry?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important question. Ultimately, the final decisions will need to be for the independent chair and the commission—that is what happens when we set it up as a national inquiry, rather than a Government process. He will know that concerns have been raised about investigations and inquiries that have taken place in Greater Manchester, where some areas could not be compelled to take part. As a result, there has been work with His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary to pursue the final stages of an investigation and inquiry. We did look at whether there were other powers, either through local government Acts or through police inspection powers. However, the simplest way to address this issue is for it to be done through the national inquiry. The right hon. Gentleman will be able to make representations about his area, and other MPs will be able to make representations about their areas too.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the absolute determination of Baroness Casey and this Government to hold to account perpetrators and those who may have been involved in cover-ups. One of the report's recommendations is about the confusion between different agencies, and a particular element of that is about taxi licensing and taxis from out-of-town areas. I know from my city of Peterborough the challenge to law-abiding, decent taxi drivers who are undercut by different licensing laws, but also to law enforcement and the safety of passengers when we have number plates from different areas. I note that that is the focus of one of the recommendations. Can my right hon. Friend give us more details on how we will move at speed to create a level playing field nationally, so that passengers are safe and drivers have the support they need to keep everyone safe?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's point. As he will know, many local authorities across the country have worked to ensure that they raise standards and checks in their licensing arrangements, particularly those in areas where there have been serious problems and criminal cases. However, those checks and safeguards can end up being undermined by the licensing of taxis in other areas that do not have such checks, so we are looking to take forward reforms to the law. The Transport Secretary is looking at exactly this issue to make sure that we find a way to close the loophole.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): As a survivor of child sexual abuse myself, I stand in solidarity with the many victims and survivors the system has failed over many, many years. I can say that the horror, the trauma and the guilt never leave you, and I so hope that every survivor who is identified receives the mental health and other support that they deserve to help rebuild their lives.

Survivors have witnessed very many promises, the 20 recommendations and the call of "never again" time and again. What will the Home Secretary do, and how will she reassure them that this will not be another one of those examples?

Can I just say that I am really let down and disgusted that the Leader of the Opposition began her remarks with a party political assault on her opponents? Victims and survivors deserve more than a smug "I told you so" diatribe. Victims and survivors deserve action.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for speaking out about his experience. I do not underestimate how brave it is and how difficult it can be to do that, and he will be giving all kinds of support to other victims and survivors simply by the fact that he has done so.

The hon. Member is right to raise the challenge of how we ensure that recommendations are actually implemented. He will know that we want to extend therapeutic support to victims and survivors, but as the Health Secretary is setting out, we will start by providing additional support and training for those who provide mental health support in our schools.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): At Manchester Minshull Street Crown court last week, seven men were convicted for sickening crimes as part of a grooming gang. One of their victims, girl A, who was abused by in excess of 50 men, was advised by the police to make a claim for criminal injuries compensation, for which she would have received just £22,000. She did not make a claim, but that did not stop the defence from arguing that she made up accusations to bolster a claim for compensation.

The Government will be aware that I have raised on many occasions the inadequacies of the criminal injuries compensation framework for victims of sexual violence and exploitation, and they will be aware of recommendations from the IICSA review and the Victims' Commissioner on this matter. While no amount of money could be adequate to compensate victims such as girl A, we owe it to them to ensure that they have the financial support required to rebuild their lives and do not have to choose between that and justice. How much longer will we all be waiting for this?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The Safeguarding Minister takes this issue very seriously, and we cannot have issues relating to the criminal injuries compensation scheme being raised in court in a way that undermines victims and survivors, who have bravely shown that they are able to speak out about abuse that has haunted their lives for so long. We will look at this issue further.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary, and the fact that there will now be a national inquiry. Does the Home Secretary think that it will be finished within, let us say, two years for the British people? Given that she

[Richard Tice]

quite rightly apologised to the victims and survivors, will she apologise on behalf of the Prime Minister, who smeared and labelled those of us who called for a national inquiry?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member raises the timescale. In the discussions we have had with Baroness Casey, and recognising the many issues that people want to raise in the inquiry, we had expected that it would take around three years, but if the commission is able to work faster than that, people will clearly want answers as swiftly as possible. The final details about the timings are obviously to be determined.

We need to make sure both that we are implementing the recommendations of previous inquiries and that we are pursuing further the investigations in local areas as swiftly as possible. I reiterated in my statement a recognition of the huge harm that has been done to victims and survivors through the decades. I would urge the hon. Member to look at the 17-page section of Louise Casey's report on the failure, year after year, to follow through and take action, and I do believe that victims and survivors are owed an apology for that failure over very many years.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I think it is fair to say that although there are many issues in this House we disagree on, an issue of this magnitude is something that should bring all of us, as parliamentarians, together to work to ensure that we get justice for the victims. The Home Secretary outlined the next phase, but if we are really honest with ourselves, for every victim who has come forward to share her horrific testimony, there are so many more girls up and down the country who have not come forward. It is in their interests that we make sure we get this right. The Home Secretary outlined the issues around data and the lack of data gathering. One area I have raised consistently is criminal exploitation by gangs who sexually exploit young people and then use them to carry out their horrific county lines up and down the country. Does the Home Secretary agree that the collection of data must also lay with the Metropolitan police, other police forces across the country and the British Transport police?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that so many victims and survivors do not come forward. We need to make it easier for people to do so, and recognise the scale of abuse. I agree with her on the really important issue about county lines and the interaction between criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. Too often, the county lines and criminal exploitation is seen as an issue involving teenage boys, but very often teenage girls are also drawn in—and very often, that also means sexual exploitation. I do not believe that enough investigation has yet been done into that particular pattern and form of child sexual abuse and exploitation. As we strengthen the law on the criminal exploitation of children, we need to ensure that this issue is properly pursued, as she says, as part of the data gathering and through further research.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): This Government have been dragged kicking and screaming to deliver a national inquiry, having dismissed the pleas of the nation as

jumping on a far-right bandwagon. That reluctance is why my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) will continue his inquiry and why I will be supporting him in it. Will the Government's inquiry investigate the political motivations behind the cover-ups, including the role of the Labour party, or will that continue to be swept under the carpet?

Yvette Cooper: Everyone should want not just to get to the truth about past failures, but to ensure we make the changes to protect children for the future. That includes changes in social services; changes in policing and the police operation, which I hope the right hon. Lady would welcome, to take action to put perpetrators behind bars; and action to gather proper ethnicity data, which simply has not been gathered properly before. Louise Casey's report is very clear: the data gathering that the right hon. Lady's Government left behind is totally inadequate. I hope she will agree to all those factors being extremely important, so that we can get stronger protection, and truth, for victims.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I welcome the Government's announcement that there will be a national inquiry. Every penny spent on stamping out the evil of child abusers is money well spent. Although welcome, notice of this inquiry will undoubtedly cause a great deal of trauma and distress for both historic and present-day victims, as violations committed against them are revisited. As the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) referenced, what steps can the Government take to ensure that victims and witnesses have access to robust mental health support? How can we ensure that our courts—as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)—especially in places like Greater Manchester that face extensive court backlogs, are sufficiently resourced to ensure that at the end of the process justice is finally delivered?

Yvette Cooper: I know that my hon. Friend has championed victims and survivors in her area and community. She is right to say that we have to make sure that victims and survivors get support. Some 7,000 victims and survivors gave evidence to the original Professor Alexis Jay inquiry. It is so important that they did not do so in vain, and that we make the reforms and the changes related to that recommendation. My hon. Friend is also right to say we need to increase the therapeutic support for victims and survivors. That will start with providing additional support for children.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): One of the reasons I was not supportive six months ago, in January, of the Government's strategy was that it could not compel local inquiries to bring forward witnesses, which is key. Listening to our questions carefully, could the Home Secretary clarify whether those local inquiries will be able to compel witnesses, whether that is also the case on the national side, and whether those powers will be used to ensure that no stone is left unturned?

Yvette Cooper: The answer is yes. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue. Back in January, I said that I would undertake further work to ensure that the local investigations had the powers to compel witnesses in order to be able to get the evidence. We agree with

Baroness Casey and have concluded that the right way to do this is to have the national inquiry, which will mean that every local investigation has full powers to compel witnesses and evidence. Where and how those investigations take place will be directed by the national commission and the national inquiry, in order to ensure they have those full powers in place.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): The crime we are discussing today is not just an historic crime; it is happening right now out in communities, and we are failing to protect the current victims of this awful child abuse. I welcome the new inquiry, but my concern is about delay. We have had plenty of inquiries, taskforces and reviews whose conclusions have not been implemented. My concern is that this new inquiry will monopolise our attention, when we should also be focused on protecting victims right now. Will the Home Secretary commit to this inquiry not detracting or diverting resource from the recommendations that we know need to be implemented and to rolling out nationally the devolved child trafficking pilot, which we know has been working for four years, in order to protect child victims?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell my hon. Friend that we are going to expand that, and that we will not let up the pace of implementing measures and recommendations. That includes the work that the Education Secretary is already doing on the mandatory sharing of data on children at risk, the new identifiers and the measures in the Crime and Policing Bill on mandatory reporting. Crucially, we have also already increased the resources for policing operations to be able to review closed cases. That is why we already have 800 cases identified for review, although we expect that figure shortly to rise to over 1,000 cases. Those are cases that were closed with no further action being taken that are now being looked at again—not waiting for the inquiry, but taking action now to protect children.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and I are the sole remaining Members of the House who served on the Communities and Local Government Committee when we conducted the inquiries into Rotherham, in both November 2014 and March 2015. We heard from the victims then about the terrible abuse they had suffered and interviewed Dame Louise Casey at great length about her concerns over what was happening and what was being allowed to happen. There is clearly still something going on, which is that most victims are young girls from broken homes who have been taken into care by local authorities and have never experienced the love of a family. They then take the view that someone expressing some form of love is something that they should like and enjoy, when the reality is that they are being ruthlessly exploited by individuals who should know better, and are evil.

The key concern here is the lackadaisical approach that has been taken by many local authorities, social workers, police forces and other bodies. My genuine concern, which I am sure is shared by other Members, is that a local inquiry will not get individuals who either turned a blind eye or actually participated in the abuse to give evidence. Will the Home Secretary ensure that witnesses are called to those inquiries under oath so

that we can get to the bottom of this, and make sure that those who turned a blind eye to or connived in this abuse are brought to justice as well as the perpetrators?

Yvette Cooper: I reassure the hon. Member that the point of having the national inquiry is to ensure that where local institutions are being examined, the commission has powers to compel witnesses, take evidence under oath and gather information, papers and evidence as it sees fit to make sure that we can get to the heart of this institutional failure.

The hon. Member is also right to say that this is about vile criminals knowing when young children—teenage girls especially—are vulnerable to the most appalling exploitation and coercion. They play with children's emotions and vulnerability to draw them into what is ultimately violent crime and the most terrible abuse. This raises questions, particularly when the number of child protection cases around sexual abuse identified by social services has dropped. We are very concerned about that, and the Education Secretary is now investigating. There is also a failure to properly share data about the children who are at risk—the ones who are going missing. The hon. Member mentions the evidence from the work he and the Communities and Local Government Committee did 10 years ago about missing children and children in care. It is all the same evidence now, and we have got to be better at pursuing the evidence.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Home Secretary's announcement of an inquiry and its commitment to survivors. It is absolutely right that the inquiry focuses on local areas where we know that survivors have been failed by the authorities that were supposed to protect them, but it is also essential that we draw lessons for the whole UK. Earlier this year, Professor Alexis Jay from the University of Strathclyde warned the Home Affairs Committee that Scotland is not immune to the kind of organised abuse that we have witnessed elsewhere in the UK. Scotland's victims and survivors deserve the same assurances on accountability and robust safeguarding measures as anywhere else in the UK, so will the Home Secretary actively seek engagement with the Scottish Government, and offer them support and advice to ensure that they wholeheartedly implement the Jay recommendations effectively?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend's point. The Minister for Safeguarding will follow up these issues with the devolved Administrations. My hon. Friend is right that this is a devolved issue but that this kind of appalling crime is happening everywhere. Action is needed everywhere to safeguard and protect children.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I appreciate how sensitive the topic is, but longer questions mean that fewer colleagues will get in. Shorter answers from the Secretary of State will help as well.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): At one of my surgeries, I heard from a civil servant who had gathered evidence for the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse across the whole of England. They described themselves as being

"left emotionally and physically drained"

[Richard Foord]

after collecting evidence, only for the Government not to act on it. I welcome this Government's acceptance of the 12 Casey review findings, but will the Secretary of State assure my constituent and other civil servants that there will be no delay in implementing the findings of the IICSA?

Yvette Cooper: I can assure the hon. Member that we are taking forward the recommendations already. The Minister for Safeguarding updated the House on all the IICSA recommendations before Easter. Some require legislation, including legislation that is passing through the House at the moment. We will have further discussions on those issues later this week. We are already able to take forward some of the issues, and we will continue to update the House on the progress of the recommendations.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I welcome this evidence-led action on grooming gangs. It takes courage to come forward and share deeply traumatic experiences, so will the Home Secretary confirm that this inquiry will build on the evidence already collected and recommendations made over previous inquiries, investigations and reports, including the last national inquiry, which in 2022 produced a 200-page report specifically on grooming gangs and looked at over 400 recommendations that had already been made? Crucially, will she ensure that there is no delay to the action that this Government are already taking to bring perpetrators to justice, stamp out these vile crimes and protect our vulnerable children?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have agreed to implement all the recommendations from the two-year inquiry into child sexual exploitation conducted as part of the Professor Alexis Jay review. We are taking forward one of those—on aggravated sentencing for grooming offences—as part of the Crime and Policing Bill. We are also introducing similar, parallel arrangements for online abuse because we must ensure that we are also taking action on online grooming, which has escalated and accelerated since Professor Jay's work.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My Hillingdon constituents have seen the work that the local authority has had to do over many decades to deal with child sexual exploitation and trafficking arising from Heathrow. When I led the Local Government Association's response—when these cases first came to light—one issue that arose was the sharing of information. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that, following this inquiry, she will upgrade the status of the "Working Together to Safeguard Children" guidance and, in particular, ensure that those bodies accountable to the Home Office, such as the police, understand it and take it as seriously as other bodies do so that we do not see people falling through the cracks between agencies?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member's points. Baroness Casey's review identifies that sexual exploitation is a central part of trafficking, and modern slavery as well. I agree with him about the importance of sharing information. Time and again on these basic things, everybody says the right words and then it does not happen in practice. We need the law to change, but we also need systems to change to make it easier to share

that information. We will take that forward both in policing and as part of the work that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is doing so that it is much easier to share that information.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there has been no vote on whether to have a national inquiry into grooming gangs—the vote was about the safeguards of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill—and that following the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse and the 200 pages that dealt specifically with grooming gangs, the Government were right to have the local inquiries and the rapid national audit? Now that Baroness Casey has recommended a national inquiry into grooming gangs, the Conservative party should be working with us for the sake of the victims rather than attempting to score political points, as the Leader of the Opposition did.

Yvette Cooper: Baroness Casey's audit was conducted in just four months but looked at some of the issues in considerable detail. It also sets out the fact that we have had 16 years of different reports and inquiries—that includes some of the issues around the 200-page report that my hon. Friend refers to, and other reports as well. The crucial thing is that we need action. Victims and survivors need answers, and we need to pursue serious failings wherever they are found, but we must also ensure that when recommendations are made, they are implemented.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Plaid Cymru welcomes the Government's statement and hope that it will lead to concrete, properly funded action. In February, a Plaid Cymru amendment called on the Welsh Government to work with police forces on an all-Wales audit of child abuse cases, and it was backed unanimously. What concrete steps have been taken between the Welsh and UK Governments since the passing of that vote to bring justice to victims?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that many of the issues around social services provisions are matters for the Welsh Government, but issues around policing are covered by the Home Office. We have already been working with police forces across the country to strengthen the work of the child sexual exploitation taskforce to be able to look at different cases that have been closed, as well as to strengthen their work with local partners to be able to pursue these terrible crimes. As part of the policing operation that will be led by the National Crime Agency and draw on expertise from across the country, we will ensure that that connects with the work being done by the Welsh Government. The Safeguarding Minister is following up with devolved Administrations.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the quite pertinent comment from the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), this country's broken social care system for children is potentially creating future victims today, and while a review at local level will look at what happened in the past, we need to do our best to make sure that these crimes by appalling people do not continue. What more will the Home Secretary be doing with the Department for Education to ensure that young people who are being groomed online and groomed in public can spot the signs so that

they know when and how to ask for help? Otherwise, unfortunately, we could see this cycle continuing for decades to come.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need action across social services, and that is why the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that the Education Secretary is taking forward is so important. The issues around online grooming and exploitation are immensely important. This is both about the abuse that stays online, often forcing children to get involved in the most appalling abuse and acts through online blackmail, pressure and coercion, and about the way in which this is used to provoke offline activity leading to offline physical abuse and contact abuse. We are working with the National Crime Agency on new technology to address this and with the Education Department on how we build children's resilience in dealing with these crimes.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Much has been made in the House this afternoon of the fact that the former Director of Public Prosecutions, now the Prime Minister, instigated a prosecution against grooming gangs. That being so, he was clearly better placed than most of us to understand the need for the national inquiry that he initially so rigidly resisted, but I would like to associate myself with the apology offered by the right hon. Lady to the House on behalf of all of us and all the authorities that have failed young people so dismally. Those young people now want to know that they can have confidence and trust in the national inquiry, and in who leads it. Can she tell the House who that is likely to be, and what terms of reference they will have?

Yvette Cooper: The terms of reference will be set out in due course. We have not yet appointed or determined the chair for the national inquiry. We will do so and set that out for the House. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's response on the issue of the national apology for the historical and current challenges that have led to victims being let down over very many years. I think his response echoes the way in which the whole House came together in 2022 around similar support for victims.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): I welcome the Casey report and the new actions outlined by the Secretary of State today. I specifically welcome the requirement for the collection of ethnicity and nationality data. The report refers to different and changing models and patterns of abuse. The Secretary of State will be aware that there have been historical allegations involving the grooming and sexual abuse of Sikh girls. Will she ensure that the requirement to collect ethnicity and nationality data extends to victims, so that we can see the evidence for any such model once and for all?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important issue about victims. Victims in the many communities that he has talked about, including Sikh girls, often lack the confidence to come forward and feel the sense of shame that prevents young people from being able to ask for help when they need it. It is therefore essential that we strengthen the ethnicity data around victims as well as around perpetrators, to make sure that victims and survivors in all communities get the support and safeguarding they need.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The official document published online by the Government says that the national inquiry will only

"co-ordinate a series of targeted local investigations."

How many local investigations will the inquiry co-ordinate? Will it cover the whole of England and Wales—yes or no?

Yvette Cooper: The decisions about which areas are looked into, and how many, will be matters for the commission. We envisage the commission lasting for three years. I know that the Leader of the Opposition suggested two years, but we think it will need around three years to be able to pursue the scale of work that is needed. I think it is right that the final decisions are ones for the commission and the independent national inquiry itself, and it will be able to look anywhere across England and Wales and to pursue the evidence wherever it sees fit.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the robust measures she has laid out. Can she reaffirm the commitment that the Government made in January that the IICSA recommendations relevant to the Home Office will be implemented in full?

Yvette Cooper: Yes, I can. That work is either completed or well under way.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): In an era when information is increasingly contested and weaponised, political parties would do well to lead by example by providing credible information and avoiding the spread of disinformation, including about the events, proceedings and procedures of this House. Given that Baroness Casey's report addresses what is, frankly, a matter of the utmost sensitivity involving highly vulnerable young girls, will the Secretary of State ensure that the operation and eventual findings of the report are communicated clearly, responsibly and in a timely manner to the public, and that disinformation is actively countered to prevent political distortion, the incitement of harm and the further diminution of public trust?

Yvette Cooper: I respect the hon. Member's important points. In fact, inaccurate information was one of the issues that Baroness Casey raised. Whether it is about ethnicity or anything else, inaccurate information can cause huge problems, and the more we ensure that information is robust, the better. As the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee said, Baroness Casey will also give evidence tomorrow, so people will be able to hear directly from her as well as reading her report.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): The victims and survivors of grooming gangs and CSE have been institutionally let down, and we must ensure that they are front and centre in our approach. I join other colleagues in saying that court delays must be looked at. They are a particular issue in West Yorkshire, and it is traumatic for the survivors. Baroness Casey reports on the Smith algorithm developed by West Yorkshire police, which brought hundreds of people into scope as victims and survivors and helped prosecution rates. Will that best practice be shared?

Yvette Cooper: Baroness Casey was impressed by the work that West Yorkshire police had done using what it called the Smith algorithm; it is included in her report. It looks at risk factors, such as children missing from home or school, those with repeated missing episodes, and children in care, and at areas where risks were high. It uses that to identify people who might be victims of child grooming and sexual abuse and exploitation, and then to pursue that evidence. West Yorkshire police has had a series of effective and successful prosecutions that have put perpetrators behind bars, so I join my hon. Friend in welcoming that work.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I would like to ask the Home Secretary about the historical sexual abuse and child sexual abuse of Sikh women and children. The Sikh community has said that when Sikh girls went to the local authority or the police, they were told—even by the media—that it was an “ethnic problem”, or that it was an “Asian problem”. I welcome the fact that the Home Secretary will be recording data, but what data will that be? Will Sikh girls who have been abused no longer just be told that it is an “Asian problem”?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member’s point. It is immensely important that victims and survivors in every community of every ethnicity can get justice and the support they need, and that issues around race and ethnicity are never used as an excuse to ignore victims or to fail to pursue criminals committing the most terrible crimes. We want to work with the police to ensure not only that we can get effective data and recording on victims, but that the right kind of services and support are in place so that every victim is heard.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I am shocked that the Conservatives do not seem able to recognise that they were in power for 14 of the 15 years to which Louise Casey refers in her report. If they had had any kind of enthusiasm for an inquiry when they were in government, they would have called one—so we can dismiss them.

Is my right hon. Friend confident that we are hearing the voice of the victims—the children and their parents? When we had a similar problem when I was in local government back in the ’90s, we set up a thing called Childline to give a direct voice to young people so that they could raise their concerns. Does she think that we should have a similar thing here so that victims of child sexual exploitation can have their voices heard?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. On the history and the action that has been taken, one thing that Baroness Casey criticises in particular is a 2020 report produced by the Home Office under the previous Government. She says that the conclusions that it came to were simply not justified by the data, and that the data gathered was inadequate. I think everyone should recognise that sufficient action has not been taken, be it on data, sharing or implementing recommendations. On victims and survivors, the Minister for Safeguarding is doing immensely important work to look at ways of ensuring that their voices can be at the heart of the new national inquiry and all Home Office work in this area.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I do not believe that I heard an answer to a number of the questions asked by the Leader of the Opposition, so I will ask the Home Secretary again. When did Baroness Casey submit her findings, and did the Government request any changes?

Yvette Cooper: Ten days ago, and this is Baroness Casey’s independent report. Anybody who suggests that she would change her views and reports for anyone has not met her.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the pace and focus that the Home Secretary has brought to Baroness Casey’s report. She is right to highlight the risk of the online space and the rapidity with which it has become a focus. Can she give assurances that protocols will change accordingly, so that we look for the information that we do not know about, and that the cases of survivors and victims who have been criminalised will be quashed, so that those people do not carry convictions for the exploitation that they experienced?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome my hon. Friend’s point about the need to ensure that victims are not criminalised for the coercion and crimes committed against them. That failure—the tendency to blame victims for the appalling crimes committed against them—has been a pervasive problem through the years. We are looking further at the issues of online grooming and exploitation, which are escalating. In a complication, more teenagers themselves are involved in that exploitation. It is more complicated to identify where people are being coerced and where they are actually criminals committing these crimes.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): It is amazing, staggering, that Labour MPs can come here today and welcome an inquiry, yet when they were given the chance, they all voted against one. These girls—the victims of the Pakistani grooming gangs—were kidnapped, abused, drugged and raped, and when they reached out for help, everybody ignored them. It is little wonder that they have no faith in the system. But they can regain faith if the Home Secretary agrees with me and appoints Maggie Oliver as chair of the inquiry.

Yvette Cooper: I say to the hon. Member that child sexual exploitation and abuse are some of the most vile crimes that our country faces. What Baroness Casey’s report sets out in some detail, over 17 pages, is that there has been report after report after review after review but so many of the recommendations were never implemented, so concerns that were raised at the time of the Rotherham inquiry about issues around ethnicity, lack of information-sharing and lack of protection for children were simply not acted on. Baroness Casey herself says:

“If we’d got this right years ago—seeing these girls as children raped rather than ‘wayward teenagers’...then I doubt we’d be in this place now.”

The hon. Member was a member of the previous Government, who failed to do that. I hope that he agrees that successive Governments and agencies across the country have failed to act. We need to ensure that there is a proper independent inquiry, as well as, most

crucially of all, action by police in the operations that will bring perpetrators to justice and put them behind bars.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for her statement. One of the questions running through Baroness Casey's audit is "Why?"—not just why that type of offending has been allowed to grow unchecked in our society, but why people are driven to commit such vile crimes. Can the Home Secretary assure me that the Government will commission serious, thorough and considered research into the drivers of group-based child sexual exploitation, including looking at all the issues around ethnicity and age? Will those findings be shared with the devolved Administrations who, as we have heard, have not been exempt from these issues?

Yvette Cooper: Yes, I can say to my hon. Friend that we accept that recommendation in Baroness Casey's report and we will commission research into the drivers of child sexual exploitation and, more widely, violence against women and girls, so that we have stronger evidence to keep children safe.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Bradford and Keighley taxis operate in Skipton and south Craven—there have been some horrific cases in that area. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the inquiry will not be restricted to Bradford and the bigger conurbations? In the UK, we have a crisis in our inquiry system: they all take too long. The covid inquiry is still ongoing, which is an absolute scandal. Can she accelerate the timings? Will she give serious consideration to this public inquiry being held in the north of England?

Yvette Cooper: I agree that there are challenges with inquiries that can take a long time, which means that victims and survivors, or those affected by the inquiry, wait a very long time for answers. That is why it is critical that we introduce and implement recommendations from previous inquiries—that we get on with it and strengthen police operations now to put perpetrators behind bars. I can also tell the right hon. Gentleman that we will not restrict where the inquiry goes or where the commission chooses to investigate.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome Baroness Casey's audit and the Government's instigation of the national inquiry, which must leave no stone unturned, lead to convictions and lead to perpetrators and anybody complicit being put behind bars where, as far as I am concerned, they can rot. It is also important that this most serious of issues demands serious and considered conduct from people in this place, including not misrepresenting what happens here. Will the Home Secretary confirm that if the reasoned amendment referred to by the Leader of the Opposition had passed, it would not have led to a national inquiry; it would have blocked child protection measures, and it weaponised child rape to go after clicks—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call the Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper: We want action to be taken across the board to make sure that children are protected and that the recommendations are introduced. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that the Opposition voted

against is an opportunity to implement two of the recommendations in Baroness Casey's audit. It is right that we implement those changes to strengthen the protection of children and to keep young people safe.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I welcome a lot of what the Home Secretary has said today; she keeps referring to institutional failures. In Bradford in 2020, a little girl, Star Hobson, was murdered by her mother's partner. Evidence came to light from neighbours and social services that the case was dismissed because it involved a lesbian couple and people feared being accused of being homophobic. I have also had issues in my constituency since the last election where social workers have been worried about the other labels that they may get; they have a tick box and leave the child at the bottom. I ask the Home Secretary to consider that institutional failure where people are afraid to offend one group or another, and they often lose sight of the fact that the child is the most important part of the care service.

Yvette Cooper: Crime is crime, and the safety of children should always be paramount, whatever the circumstances, and we must always pursue the evidence. That is why the mantra around policing is to pursue the evidence "without fear or favour", and that is the standard that British policing has long applied. That is the approach we always have to take to children's safety, wherever issues or concerns are raised.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I put on record my thanks to Baroness Casey and the Home Secretary—the first Home Secretary in 16 years to come here with an independent review. These girls, now women, were abused, traumatised and then retraumatised by a system that did little to protect them or help them get justice. We should always put the lives and safety of young girls before any political concerns, which is why I welcome today's decision. Will the Home Secretary lay out how predators, and those who denied victims justice, will be held accountable following this inquiry?

Yvette Cooper: We must ensure that recommendations are implemented. One conclusion in the Baroness Casey audit states:

"The timeline set out above—"

that is the history of failed reports in the past—

"shows a pattern of case after case of offending that is prosecuted, reviewed and then recommendations for improvement made and repeated, but not followed through. We become so used to hearing about these issues that they become more about justifications for failures rather than problems that need to be fixed."

We must ensure that these problems are fixed.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement that those who are convicted of such crimes will not be able to take part in the asylum system, and I suggest that she may want to extend that to all crimes against the person. The question that my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) asked was this: will the Home Secretary ensure that no fallacious human rights claims can be made that mean that these people cannot be deported if convicted of these crimes?

Yvette Cooper: We are strengthening the safeguards in the asylum system. The system that we inherited was too weak and not strong enough to ensure not only that the rules are respected and enforced, but to deal particularly with issues of criminality and public risk. We are strengthening those safeguards, including the law around sexual offences, and we are looking particularly at issues around the way article 8 is being interpreted. We are also strengthening public protection arrangements. We are bringing in new arrangements to ensure that, should any issues be raised by the police or others about any safety risk or anybody in the asylum system, joint public protection agreements and arrangements between the police and Immigration Enforcement, people can be kept safe.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I welcome the clarity and focus on action that the Home Secretary has brought to the House. This morning I spoke to the father of a young woman in my constituency who was the victim of child sexual exploitation. He thinks that this is the right way forward, but his concern, and mine, is for those victims and survivors whose trauma will be opened up again by the process. As he put it:

“When you open Pandora’s box, you’ve got to have the tools to deal with whatever comes out.”

Will the Home Secretary say more about the tools that she will put in place to support the survivors at the heart of this issue?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Too often, victims and survivors have been asked to tell their story, often to multiple agencies, and then have seen no action, which simply strengthens the distress that they feel. Seven thousand victims and survivors gave evidence to the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. As we draw up the arrangements for the national inquiry, we will work closely, as will the safeguarding Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips), to keep victims and survivors in our minds. We must ensure that they have support, and that the point my hon. Friend has raised on behalf of her constituent, and for the victims and their families, is taken seriously.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, specifically about allowing the NCA to head the operation, with partner agencies, and working across all regions. As a barrister, I have spoken to many NCA officers and law enforcement officers, and one consistent criticism is that they do not have enough resources. This will be an enormous investigation, up and down the country, so will the Home Secretary assure the House that the resources that those officers will need to complete the investigation will not be limited?

Yvette Cooper: We have already provided some additional resources for policing, so that officers will be able to undertake the assessment and identification of cases that were closed but need to be reopened, or where other lines of inquiry need to be followed up. The hon. Gentleman will know that the National Crime Agency already does immensely important work through Operation Stovewood around South Yorkshire, and through its work on online child abuse. We need to bring all the different programmes of work closer together, involving both the National Crime Agency and the new centre for

public protection that we are setting up, which will be about setting new standards across the country and rolling out the national operating model that all forces can then follow.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary for the dignified way in which she gave her statement. I associate myself with her apology to the victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and grooming gangs for past failures. I welcome the Government having accepted the recommendations of Baroness Casey’s rapid audit and the announcement of a national criminal operation to pursue and convict perpetrators. Justice for victims of these horrific crimes must always be our top priority. West Yorkshire police have taken a proactive approach to securing justice for victims. As recently as January this year, eight men were given jail sentences of nearly 58 years for multiple sexual offences against two children in Keighley in the 1990s. Will she join me in commending the work of West Yorkshire police in bringing the perpetrators of those vile crimes to justice?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the work of West Yorkshire police. They have done pioneering work to find new ways to identify victims who may be at risk and to summon evidence where there are repeat missing cases, and they have been forensic and determined in pursuit of action. I commend the work of the assistant chief constable. Learning from the work that the police have done, we want to make Baroness Casey’s recommendation a central part of the national criminal operation.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The sexual exploitation of vulnerable children in this country is a stain upon our society, and the victims want not just the truth out but transparency. With that in mind, will the Home Secretary confirm whether the Government asked Baroness Casey to change any elements of her report—yes or no?

Yvette Cooper: This is Baroness Casey’s independent report. The whole point about asking somebody like Baroness Casey to do an independent report is that we know that they will come to their own conclusions, not anybody else’s. As the hon. Gentleman will see, the report has Baroness Casey’s forthright style and conclusions. In her evidence tomorrow at the Home Affairs Committee, I think she will make it clear that these are her conclusions.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): I pay tribute to victims, survivors and campaigners. I am 40 years old and it has taken being that age for me to be able to talk about some of the abuse that happened when I was a child. As one of the countless victims living with the impact of grooming, sexual and psychological abuse, I found it galling to watch Tory and Reform Members who never once lifted a finger—[*Interruption.*] No, you didn’t—not one finger lifted.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. “You didn’t”—you are talking through the Chair. Please ask a quick question as there remain colleagues who hope to contribute.

Dan Aldridge: I found it galling that those Members have appointed themselves as defenders of abused people for political gain. Does the Home Secretary agree that neither history nor the British people will be kind to the sickening political opportunism that we have seen from the Conservative and Reform parties?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for speaking out about his experiences. To speak out as a victim of child abuse in that way is immensely difficult, and I think everyone should listen to what victims and survivors have to say. I thank him for speaking out, because by doing so he provides strength and inspiration to other victims and survivors across the country, and I pay tribute to him for doing so. He is right that this should be something that everyone can agree on, because it is about the protection of children and the tackling of serious crime. I hope all of us can do that with respect and together.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I hope something else we can all agree on is our admiration for the former Labour MP Ann Cryer, who exposed what was going on back in 2003, which was only five years into a 13-year-long Labour Government, and was disgracefully smeared as a racist for doing so. Let us belatedly make an apology to her and thank her for her courage.

Yvette Cooper: I do thank my former honourable Friend Ann Cryer, because she did speak out and stand up for children who were being abused. It is because of that that I recognise, as part of the response I made to the 2022 child abuse inquiry and again today, that this has been a historic failure over very many decades. Just as I recognise that historic failure, which everyone should recognise, I hope the right hon. Gentleman will persuade those on his Front Bench also to recognise the historic failure and to take some responsibility. It is really sad that the Leader of the Opposition did not choose to respond to, or join in, the historic apology in 2022, which was a cross-party apology involving the former Home Secretary. I am really sorry that she chose not to do so today.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I very much welcome the Home Secretary calling a national inquiry. I am particularly taken with Baroness Casey's first recommendation that children must be seen as children. I am extremely concerned by the number of cases she has identified that were dropped because those children were seen as consenting to sex with their perpetrators. Will the Home Secretary reassure me that those cases will be opened and looked at immediately and that we do not have to wait for the outcome of the national inquiry?

Yvette Cooper: I can tell my hon. Friend that we are working with the Lord Chancellor on taking forward this recommendation now and not waiting for any further local inquiry. Baroness Casey is really clear that the adultification of children, treating them as consenting to something into which they were coerced and in which they were exploited, lies at the heart of a lot of the institutional failure to take this crime seriously. That is why we need to change the law, but we also need to change attitudes, because some of the cases that Baroness Casey refers to are recent, and that cannot go on.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Home Secretary refers to this inquiry as a national inquiry, but it is not, is it? The inquiry's terms of reference and scope will exclude concern about grooming and organised sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland, whether by foreign

nationals, paramilitary groups or others. Is that less important to this Government? Will the legislative change increasing the statutory rape age to 16 apply across the whole United Kingdom?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. and learned Member will understand that Home Office responsibilities around policing and crime cover England and Wales. The Safeguarding Minister will be following up with the devolved Administrations, and it will be for them to decide how they want to take these issues forward, including in Northern Ireland. The Lord Chancellor will consult in the normal way with devolved Administrations on changes to the law.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Any and every instance of child sexual exploitation should shame all of us, but I think what so many of us found particularly horrific about the grooming gangs scandal was the fact that those crimes continued to be perpetrated because of a failure to act by stakeholders and agencies that had completely indefensible preconceived notions about the victims they were speaking to. As such, I welcome the Government following the evidence, not the politics—first in appointing Baroness Casey to conduct the review, and then in ensuring that we do not shy away from a national inquiry when she has called for one. Will the Home Secretary ensure that the inquiry has all the powers it needs to compel any and every stakeholder who potentially played a part in walking on by from this scandal to take part and give evidence, and will she legislate where necessary so that anyone who is shown to have played a part in those victims not getting the justice they deserved to begin with is accountable before the law?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that those attitudes towards teenage girls—towards children—and treating them as adults still persist. Baroness Casey quotes a serious case review of a case involving a teenager online. She was just 12 or 13 years old, and was being drawn into the most explicit and abusive chatrooms and pornographic sites online. This was treated as somehow being the child's choice, even though there was evidence of exploitation and crime taking place. We have to ensure that we do more to protect our teenagers, and we will bring in the mandatory duty to report to strengthen the law in that area.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Dr Ben Spencer to ask the final question.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and for changing her mind on the need for a national inquiry. She has had the Casey report for the past 10 days. Could she lay out what evidence in that report was most persuasive in changing her mind, or, if she reached that conclusion independent of the report, which factors led her to do so?

Yvette Cooper: That is an important question. I undertook to this House in January that I would look further at how to ensure that local investigations had the powers they needed to compel witnesses or evidence. That was raised with us by Members of this House, but also by mayors, to ensure that those investigations

[Yvette Cooper]

could properly get to the truth. We pursued that and looked at other powers—those in the Local Government Act, inspection powers and so on. All those powers had complexities attached to them, so we asked Baroness Casey to look at this issue, as well as the responses we got from local authorities. We looked at that evidence, but also asked Baroness Casey to look at it as well and make final recommendations. That is why we have agreed with Baroness Casey's recommendation to have a national inquiry in place.

Iran-Israel Conflict

5.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will remind the House that the Foreign Office has been responding to two crises in this past week. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), will update the House on the Government's extensive efforts to assist those whose loved ones lost their lives in Thursday's devastating Air India plane crash. Just nine days ago, I was in Delhi, strengthening our friendship. Our nations are mourning together, and my thoughts are with those suffering such terrible loss.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will now turn to the middle east. Early last Friday morning, Israel launched extensive strikes across Iran. The targets included military sites, the uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, key commanders and nuclear scientists. The last 72 hours have seen Iranian ballistic missile and drone strikes across Israel, killing at least 21 Israelis and injuring hundreds more, and Israeli strikes have continued, including on targets in Tehran, with the Iranian authorities reporting scores of civilian casualties. Prime Minister Netanyahu has said that his operations will

"continue for as many days as it takes to remove the threat".

Supreme Leader Khamenei has said Israel "must expect severe punishment".

In such a crisis, our first priority is of course the welfare of British nationals. On Friday, we swiftly stood up crisis teams in London and the region. Yesterday, I announced that we now advise against all travel to Israel; that is in addition to our long-standing travel advice not to go to Iran. Today, I can update the House: we are asking all British nationals in Israel to register their presence with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, so that we can share important information on the situation and leaving the country.

I can announce today that we are further updating our travel advice to signpost border crossing points, and we are sending rapid deployment teams to Egypt and Jordan to bolster our consular presence near the border with Israel. That presence has already been supporting British nationals on the ground. Israel and Iran have closed their airspace until further notice, and our ability to provide support in Iran is therefore extremely limited. British nationals in the region should closely monitor our travel advice for further updates. The situation remains fast-moving. We expect more strikes in the days to come. This is a moment of grave danger for the region. I want to be clear: the United Kingdom was not involved in the strikes against Iran. This is military action conducted by Israel.

It should come as no surprise that Israel considers the Iranian nuclear programme an existential threat. Khamenei said in 2018 that Israel was a "cancerous tumour" that should be "removed and eradicated". We have always supported Israeli security. That is why Britain has sought to prevent Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon through extensive diplomacy. We agree with President Trump when he says that negotiations are necessary and must lead to a deal. That has long been the view of the so-called E3—Britain, and France and

Germany, with whom we have worked so closely on this issue. It is the view of all the G7, which has backed the efforts of President Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff. For more than two decades, it has been the cross-party view in this House. Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton and Lord Hague of Richmond led diplomatic efforts on this issue, as did Baroness May of Maidenhead and the former right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip. This Government have continued to pursue negotiations, joining France and Germany in five rounds of talks with Iran this year alone. Ours is a hard-headed, realist assessment of how best to tackle this grave threat. Fundamentally, no military action can put an end to Iran's nuclear capabilities.

Just last week, the International Atomic Energy Agency board of governors passed a non-compliance resolution against Iran, the first such IAEA finding in 14 years. The director general's comprehensive report details Iran's failure to declare nuclear materials. Iran remains the only state without nuclear weapons accumulating uranium at such dangerously high levels. Its total enriched stockpile is now 40 times the limit in the joint comprehensive plan of action. Its nuclear programme is part of a wider pattern of destabilising activity. The Government have taken firm action in response.

When Iran transferred ballistic missiles for use in Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, we imposed extensive sanctions, including against Iran Air, and we cancelled our bilateral air services agreement. In the face of unacceptable Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps threats here in the UK—there have been some 20 foiled plots since 2022—the Crown Prosecution Service has for the first time charged Iranian nationals under the National Security Act 2023, and we have placed the Iranian state, including the IRGC, on the enhanced tier of the new foreign influence registration scheme.

A widening war would have grave and unpredictable consequences, including for our partners in Jordan and the Gulf: the horrors of Gaza worsening, tensions in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq rising, and the Houthi threat continuing. That is why the Government's firm view is—as it was last October, at the time of the ballistic missile attack on Israel—that further escalation in the middle east is not in Britain's interests, or in the interests of Israel, Iran or the region. There are hundreds of thousands of British nationals living in the region, and with Iran a major oil producer and with oil flowing through the strait of Hormuz accounting for a fifth of total world oil consumption, escalating conflict poses real risks for the global economy. As missiles rain down, Israel has a right to defend itself and its citizens, but our priority now is de-escalation. Our message to both Israel and Iran is clear: step back, show restraint, and do not get pulled ever deeper into a catastrophic conflict, the consequences of which no one can control.

The Prime Minister chaired Cobra to discuss the situation last Friday, and spoke to Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The Prime Minister is now at the G7 summit in Canada, discussing with our closest allies how to ease tensions. The Government have deployed additional assets to the region, including jets for contingency support for UK forces and, potentially, our regional allies concerned about the escalating conflict. In the last 72 hours the Minister for the Middle East, my hon.

Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), and I have been working flat out trying to carve out space for diplomacy. I have spoken to Israeli Foreign Minister Sa'ar and Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi, underlining Britain's focus on de-escalation. I have also met the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal, and had calls with United States Secretary of State Rubio, European Union High Representative Kallas, and my counterparts from France and Germany, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Those conversations are part of a collective drive to prevent a spiralling conflict.

This new crisis has arisen as the appalling situation in Gaza continues. This weekend, hospitals in Gaza reported that over 50 people had been killed and more than 500 had been injured while trying to access food. This Government will not take our eye off the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. We will not stop calling for aid restrictions to be lifted and for an immediate ceasefire, and we will not forget about the hostages. This morning I met Yocheved Lifschitz and her family, whose courage and dignity in the face of Hamas's barbarism were a reminder of the plight of those still cruelly held in Gaza. We will not stop striving to free the hostages and end the war. Our vision remains unchanged: an end to Iran's nuclear programme and destabilising regional activity, Israel secure in its borders and at peace with its neighbours, and a sovereign Palestinian state, as part of a two-state solution. Diplomacy is indispensable to each of those goals. Britain will keep pressing all sides to choose a diplomatic path out of this crisis. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.38 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): These are deeply dangerous times, and as the Foreign Secretary has said, last week's IAEA report makes it abundantly clear that Iran's nuclear programme has grown. Its stockpile of uranium has passed 400 kg and is enriched to 60% purity, which has been widely noted as a level unprecedented for a state without nuclear weapons, and as being beyond the amount needed for any civilian use. The IAEA director general has said that Iran's actions and its failure to co-operate have led to a significant reduction in the agency's ability to verify whether its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful. We share those concerns, and the reasons why Iran must never obtain nuclear weapons are clear. The Iranian regime is a prolific state sponsor of terrorism, with a stated intention of annihilating the world's only Jewish state. Given the concerns, and the clear threat that Iran poses, not only to Israel, but to wider regional stability, Israel has the right to act in self-defence to degrade Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

As well as posing a threat to Israel, Iran poses a direct threat to the United Kingdom and our interests. The Minister for the Middle East stated in a written parliamentary answer in April that

"Iran's nuclear programme has never been more advanced and threatens international peace and security."

Earlier this month, the strategic defence review stated that Iran's

"escalating nuclear programme presents a risk to international security and the global non-proliferation architecture."

[Priti Patel]

With that in mind, can the Foreign Secretary tell us what discussions he has had with the IAEA, and give us his assessment of how close Iran was to having nuclear weapon capabilities that could strike Israel and our interests in the region?

Given the report from the IAEA earlier this week, what direct bilateral discussions did Government Ministers have with their Israeli counterparts on this matter prior to the action that was undertaken last week? The Foreign Secretary has spoken about the conversations he has had since the strikes commenced on Friday, but what discussions took place in the days preceding that? Can he update us on the discussions with our partners in the region before the strikes on Friday, and since then? For example, what discussions has he had with our friends in Bahrain in the light of the comprehensive security integration and prosperity agreement, and with Jordan in the light of the previous airspace violations by Iran? Are those discussions purely diplomatic, or do they cover defence and military planning?

Last week, on 10 June, the Minister for the Middle East said during his statement that the Government were in contact with the Israeli Government that day. As that was after the IAEA report was published on 9 June, can the Foreign Secretary say whether the nuclear threat from Iran and the IAEA assessment were discussed, or were they discussing other matters? We also know from recent statements by the Minister for the Middle East that relations between this Government and Israel have become strained since last July. What message does the Foreign Secretary have for all those who are concerned that constructive dialogue and diplomacy with Israel is not taking place?

On British nationals in Israel and the wider region, what efforts are under way to expeditiously help those who want to return to the UK? Although the Foreign Secretary cannot give operational details to the House, can he confirm whether contingency plans for the evacuation of British personnel and assets from Iran have been updated recently? At the G7, will the Prime Minister have substantive bilateral discussions with President Trump on this matter?

Iran's strikes on Israel are indiscriminately targeting civilians, and the whole House should condemn Iran for doing this. The UK has previously supported Israel, defending it from missile and drone attacks. Has the UK offered military intelligence and other forms of assistance to our Israeli allies to counter the attacks from Iran? The German Chancellor has offered that, and is providing assistance to Israel. Has the UK made such an offer, too? It is right that UK military capabilities increased in the region over the weekend. Can the Foreign Secretary tell the House whether he is prepared to tackle any retaliation from Iran and its proxies, including the Houthis?

Although Iran's nuclear capabilities have been degraded, we know that it is in regular contact with China and Russia on nuclear issues, and has been for some time. Has the Foreign Secretary assessed whether Russia and China may have been involved in supporting Iran's nuclear programme to get it to where it is today? Is he concerned that they will support Iran, with materials and expertise, so that it can rebuild its capability following

Israel's actions, and is he looking at applying new sanctions to constrain Iran's ability to rebuild, advance and accelerate its nuclear ambitions?

I turn to the direct threats that Iran poses to the UK. The Foreign Secretary has rightly mentioned the plots foiled, the recent arrests, and putting Iran on the enhanced tier of FIRS. Can he give an assurance about the work taking place across Government—including with the Home Office, the police, counter-terrorism operations and the intelligence services—to tackle any retaliation that Iran, the IRGC and those acting on its behalf might direct towards us? Has the threat risk level been reassessed, and is extra support being provided to secure synagogues, schools and other parts of the Jewish community in the UK?

Finally, we all want to see peace and stability in the region, where Iran is responsible for so much of the bloodshed that is now taking place, so can the Foreign Secretary update the House on the ongoing steps being taken to secure the return of the hostages from Hamas captivity, on the work to get more aid into Gaza, and on the efforts to bring about a sustainable ceasefire?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for her remarks, for the cross-party support that I sensed in them, and for her questions, which I will certainly endeavour to answer.

The shadow Foreign Secretary asked about our contact with the IAEA. I can confirm I spoke to Director General Grossi just a few days ago—certainly before the action last week—and discussed his report. She asked what the latest is on that. She will know that the assessment was that the enriched uranium stockpile is now standing at 8,413 kg, which is more than 40 times the limit in the joint comprehensive plan of action, with the total stockpile considered to be nine significant quantities of highly enriched uranium.

The shadow Foreign Secretary asked what co-ordination we had done, given that information, and I want to reassure her that I have been in close touch and worked in concert with my French and German colleagues over this period—with the three of us co-ordinating our work across our political directors, but also as Foreign Ministers—in our messaging to the Iranian regime. I can also confirm to her that we will be speaking to the Iranian regime again in the coming hours to raise those concerns and heighten what I said about the need for diplomacy at this time.

The shadow Foreign Secretary quite properly asked about our long-standing relationship with Bahrain, and I can confirm that the Minister for the Middle East has spoken to Bahrain. She asked about our long-standing relationship with Jordan, and I can confirm that I have spoken to Foreign Minister Safadi in the last few days. We continue to co-ordinate with our Jordanian friends, and to offer them whatever support we can at this time.

The shadow Foreign Secretary obviously asked about our ongoing relationship with Israel. She will know that our relationship with Israel remains a complex and intense one. As she would expect, I have spoken to Foreign Minister Sa'ar on numerous occasions, and of course I spoke to him again on Saturday, when he was in a bunker and separated from his family; I offered him condolences.

As hon. Members would expect, the United Kingdom and Israel co-ordinate and work together in such times. We have disagreements, of course—we have discussed that over the Dispatch Box—particularly about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, but we recognise that, as we speak, there are many Israelis in their bunkers. There have been 21 casualties over this last period and over 500 people injured. There is a sense of trauma compounding trauma in Israel, and I want to reassure the shadow Foreign Secretary that we recognise that.

The Prime Minister is of course discussing these issues with President Trump at this time, and the G7 meeting is going on as we speak. I also want to reassure the shadow Foreign Secretary about our contact with hostages. I met hostage families just today, and I undertook to raise that issue again in this place. They asked me to ensure that, with this crisis, we do not take our eye off the situation in Gaza. That is why I made it a part of my statement.

The shadow Foreign Secretary quite rightly asked about state threats from the Iranian regime and the IRGC. I refer her to the work of Jon Hall, who has found gaps in our legislative framework in relation to how we deal with these state threats. I am pleased about the arrests that have been made recently, but we will be coming forward with the appropriate legislation to deal with the state threats from the IRGC in the coming months.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): It is completely understandable that Israel feels threatened by a bellicose neighbour with uranium mines and a nuclear programme, but the rest of the world is unanimous in saying that the way to deal with Iran is through discussion, negotiation and a nuclear agreement. There once was such a deal, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Baroness Cathy Ashton among others, but that deal was derailed by President Trump, egged on by Israel. Now, belatedly, even President Trump has come to the view that the solution has to be a nuclear agreement with Iran secured through discussion and diplomacy. Yet in the middle of that, Israel has decided that the solution is a regional war. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Britain must remain firm, with the rest of the world, in urging both Israel and Iran to step back from a conflict? Military action can predict only one thing; it will not stop the Iranian nuclear programme, but it will ensure the deaths of innocent victims on both sides.

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend is right to put on record our thanks to former EU High Representative Baroness Ashton for all her work to get the JCPOA agreement. The previous Government and successive leaders of the Conservative party also worked to secure that agreement. It is hugely important that we get back to diplomacy. It is right to say, though, that the assessment of the IAEA is that there has been deception from the Iranian regime. How do you account for having stockpiles that are 40 times over what they should be, if you were sticking to the agreement? That is why we must come together, yes, calling for restraint, but we do need diplomatic action. Iran cannot have nuclear capability, full stop.

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

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement, and to him, Ministers and officials from the Department for their efforts to support British citizens in the region.

People across the UK have watched with horror as war has broken out between Israel and Iran. As we consider the UK's response, let me begin with key principles on which I hope the House will agree. The state of Israel has a right to exist and to defend itself, in line with international law. We stand against Iran's stated goal to wipe out the state of Israel, and its use of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to support global terrorism and foster regional instability.

Will the Foreign Secretary go further to protect UK residents, including Iranian and Jewish communities, from IRGC-sponsored terrorist actions on our soil and finally proscribe the IRGC? Iran's ambition to create a nuclear weapon is a grave risk to the UK's interests and Israel's survival. Successive Governments have been right to seek to contain that risk through diplomatic means. However, the Netanyahu Government's unilateral military action, which they took against the advice of allies and without forewarning, has severely undermined those efforts. It was ill-judged, reckless and not the behaviour of a responsible ally. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the Prime Minister will press, at today's G7 summit, for a return to negotiations, with the UK included alongside the US?

Iran has now retaliated with its own strikes and may look to respond further, including by threatening the assets of other states in the region. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the sole purpose of UK military deployments will be to protect our assets, personnel and citizens, and that he will not allow us to be drawn into the conflict between Israel and Iran?

What specific steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure that while the focus is on this crisis, we do not lose sight of the need to secure the unconditional release of the hostages held by Hamas, and to maintain scrutiny of the extreme actions of the Netanyahu Government towards Palestinians in Gaza, east Jerusalem and the west bank? And, in order to protect the possibility of a two-state solution, will the UK Government heed the call of all 72 Liberal Democrat MPs for the immediate recognition of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and the tone with which he made them, because in matters of war it is always important that this House can speak with one voice. On proscription, I refer him to the work of Jon Hall and remind him that we are dealing with state threats. To be absolutely clear, no country in the world is deploying more state threats across the world than Iran. That was why it was important to look at that issue specifically. He has found gaps in our architecture. We are looking at those gaps and we will come forward with our plans shortly.

The hon. Gentleman rightly talks about the important work of negotiation and diplomacy, and what sits behind that. It is absolutely right that we continue to work with France and Germany. I reassure him that that work has continued and was continuing alongside—a parallel track, if you like—the work of President Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff. We applauded that work and that effort to get to a negotiated diplomatic solution, but it is a

[Mr Lammy]

solution that will require Iran giving up its nuclear capability. It will involve Iran getting serious about what those centrifuges under mountains are really for. We are very serious about that; that is what we were insistent on, and why we said there would be a snapback and we would impose very severe sanctions—that those sanctions would hit Iran once again if we did not see compliance.

The hon. Gentleman puts on record his views on Gaza. We have had those exchanges many times across the Chamber.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I welcome the work of the Foreign Secretary and the diplomatic actions that have taken place so far. Israel's unprovoked attack on Iran has opened yet another dangerous front and risks dragging the entire region into a wider war, with devastating consequences for ordinary people across the middle east—people who have already borne decades of conflict and intervention. Given that Israel's claims have been challenged even by US intelligence assessments, can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that no UK military support, whether direct or indirect, will be given without the clear and explicit consent of this House, and that the Government have learned the hard lessons of Iraq and Libya, and will not repeat them?

Mr Lammy: I say to my hon. Friend categorically that the UK is not involved in Israel's strikes. We do have an important regional role. We have UK assets in Cyprus, Bahrain and Qatar, and we have an important role in Operation Shader, where we are dealing with terrible threats to us and our allies from Daesh and others. We have important relationships in the Gulf and the wider region. That is why the Defence Secretary has, as a precautionary step, sent further military aid to the area.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Until the people of Iran rise up and overthrow the dreadful mullahs' regime, it is obviously true what the Foreign Secretary says when he says that no military action can put an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions, because even if its capacity was entirely destroyed, Iran could start rebuilding it. Having said that, though, it is true that it is possible to contain those ambitions by knocking back Iran's capacity repeatedly, until such time as it no longer wishes to acquire nuclear weapons. I advise the Foreign Secretary to think carefully about the question of diplomacy alone containing those ambitions, because one day we might wake up and find that a successful nuclear test has been carried out by Iran.

Mr Lammy: I am always prepared to take friendly advice from the right hon. Gentleman. This is a very serious threat. We know that the JCPOA has been breached. President Trump has been pretty clear in his expectations, as I have been pretty clear with the Iranian Foreign Minister. I recognise that if Iran is to take the off-ramp, it must get serious in the coming days about its obligations to the international community and about ending that nuclear capability.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As always, civilians are paying the heaviest price: there were 1,195 casualties on 7 October, with at least 74 hostages

since; there have been 55,000 casualties in Gaza; this weekend, 24 Israelis were killed by Iran, and 224 Iranians were killed by Israel. We need to de-escalate this conflict, and quickly. Those 55,000 people in Gaza deserved a future. I understand that the conference to be co-chaired by Saudi Arabia and France on the two-state solution has now been delayed. What are we doing to get that back on track, and how will we progress that solution?

Mr Lammy: I recognise that my hon. Friend has long been a champion of these issues. He is right that the French, alongside the Saudi Arabians, took the decision to postpone the conference, which I think was the right decision. As my hon. Friend will understand, many partners—particularly Arab partners and partners in the Levant—want to be in their countries at this time. There is a lot of diplomacy; he will have heard the list of countries I have been speaking to. We must focus our efforts both on ensuring that ceasefire in Israel and Gaza and on dealing with Iran's nuclear capability.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I urge colleagues to keep their questions short and the Foreign Secretary to keep his answers short.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Does our closest ally, the United States, agree with this position on the situation? If not, what do we differ on?

Mr Lammy: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the remarks made by Secretary Rubio on the outbreak of this new war and to the statements made by Donald Trump, in which he clearly indicates an off-ramp for Iran if it gets serious about diplomacy and accepts the olive branch that he extended through Steve Witkoff.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Ealing has long had a big Iranian diaspora. In 1978, when England did not qualify in the world cup and Iran did, a lot of my classmates were supporting the latter; now, they are my adult constituents, and they have been caught up in all this. Could my right hon. Friend tell me what steps he is taking to ensure the safe passage of our constituents back home, including one of my constituents, who needs to resume her cancer treatment and wants urgently to come back to England?

Mr Lammy: Let me just put on the record the huge admiration that I am sure many across this House have for what was formerly known as Persia and the great history of the Iranian people—how remarkable they are, and how awful it is that they are suffering under this horrendous regime. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend knows, the airspace over Iran is closed at the moment. We have advised against travel to Iran for many, many years because of our concerns. However, our embassy staff will do all they can to support British nationals.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Foreign Secretary knows that many of us have been prepared to speak up again and again on behalf of suffering Palestinians and be a critical friend of Israel, but will he agree that

on this occasion we must stand shoulder to shoulder with our Israeli ally? The fact is, Iran is a death cult, and death cults like the Nazis or Iran cannot be appeased simply through diplomacy. Iran is cocking a snook at us—it is inches away from a nuclear bomb. I am sure he is going to make this absolutely clear, but will the Foreign Secretary therefore stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel and our American ally in proclaiming the right of Israel to exist at all?

Mr Lammy: Absolutely.

Sir Edward Leigh: Thank you.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): A painful lesson of Israel and, indeed, Jewish history is that when someone says that they want to destroy them, we must believe them. The Iranian regime has made its intentions to destroy Israel clear for decades now. We will all be familiar with the term “never again”, which came out of the concentration camps of Europe. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is one of those moments where we can say that never again is now?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has worked on these issues for many years—long before he came to this place. We recognise the threats that Israel is facing, and we also recognise the tremendous threat to not just Israel and the region if Iran were to get a nuclear weapon, and what it would mean for all of us who have worked so hard against nuclear proliferation, as where Iran leads, others would come in its wake. We must stop that happening.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement today. Although we clearly have differences with the Netanyahu regime, Israel is a close ally and friend of the United Kingdom. Iran is a terrorist-supporting state—Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, Assad—that is destabilising the region, rejecting the IAEA and international proposals to prevent nuclear proliferation and limit uranium enrichment, and sponsoring terrorist actions on the streets of Britain. Does the Foreign Secretary not feel that Israel is now doing the world’s dirty work on behalf of us all?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman brings his usual eloquence to these matters. I agree with him save for his initial remark: I would not call it the Israel regime; it is a democracy, with all the ups and downs and faults of any democracy. Of course, I recognise that this is an existential threat for Israel and its people, which is why it is important that we ask for restraint at this time, because we do not want to see regional escalation. That is why it is important that diplomacy prevails.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): The Iranian regime threatens peace and security around the world: it destabilises the middle east through its terrorist proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis; it supports Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; and it is sworn to wiping Israel off the face of the earth. It must never be allowed to have a nuclear bomb. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that that aim should be achieved through diplomacy, and that all the world’s efforts must be placed on Tehran to back down, sign a deal and end this conflict?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I do.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement. The Iranian regime is a malignant international force—who knows how many British lives have been lost to its sponsorship of international terrorism. The Iranians have explicitly stated a threat towards our assets and our people in the middle east. How much confidence does the Foreign Secretary have in our ability to mitigate those threats?

Mr Lammy: I have huge confidence in our force protection measures. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we have important military and intelligence assets in the region and bilateral defence relationships with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and, of course, Israel.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I am concerned about my constituents Natasha, Joshua and Jemma, who are stuck in Israel after travelling there for a wedding. They sent me a desperate message saying that they are worried about their safety and are facing a daily cascade of missiles. They have registered their presence with the Foreign Office. I have heard what the Foreign Secretary has said today, but could I ask him to publicly reassure their families in my constituency that he is doing all he can to bring British nationals home to safety?

Mr Lammy: For Iranian dual nationals, British nationals who are in Iran—as I said, 224 casualties just over the last two days and 1,277 injuries—this is of course a terrifying time, as people hide in their homes. That is why we have embassy staff working around the clock, and we of course offer our full support, notwithstanding that the airspace is currently closed.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I have been contacted by a significant number of constituents who are currently stranded in Israel, unable to leave because of the lack of flights to the United Kingdom. This includes a constituent with significant medical needs. I urge the Foreign Secretary to further strengthen the Foreign Office’s offer. I do welcome the advice it is now providing on routes back to the UK, although I note that it has taken some time for that to happen. What contingency plans are the Foreign Office and wider Government undertaking for repatriation should the situation deteriorate further and that be required, and are they registering details of UK nationals in Israel to that end?

Mr Lammy: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are asking all UK nationals in Israel to register their presence, so that we know that they are there and can update them in what is a very fast-moving situation. I also reassure him that we have sent a rapid force of diplomats to the border to facilitate exit. As he will understand, the airspace is closed, so there is no way of leaving by commercial flight, but there are routes, particularly out of Jordan, and we will do all we can to facilitate that.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): The Chancellor confirmed yesterday that UK military assets could potentially be used to help defend Israel. We are sending military aircraft to the middle east, and the Prime Minister has not ruled out them being used to help Israel. The Minister for the Armed Forces recently confirmed in response to a written question that the

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

UK is training Israel Defence Forces personnel on UK-based training courses. Does the Foreign Secretary acknowledge that through bolstering Israel's military in this way we are actively demonstrating our support for one side in this conflict, and does he therefore accept that this undermines our calls for a diplomatic solution and de-escalation?

Mr Lammy: It is important to state that the UK did not participate and is not participating in Israeli strikes, but we do have a proper role to play in regional security. My hon. Friend would not expect me to comment on operational defence and intelligence matters, except to pray in aid the defence bilateral relationships that we have in the region.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): The reality is that there is a long history of diplomacy being used as a cover to reach the ultimate aims of what countries want to do—for example Russia signing the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty while constantly building hundreds of nuclear weapons, making that treaty worthless. I want to put it on the record that Israel has my absolute full support in the action that it is taking; it is doing the world's dirty work. Are the Foreign Secretary and his right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary in the middle of working out how we ensure that the strait of Hormuz stays open for vital international trade?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for putting square the economic interests that we have at this time and highlighting why diplomacy is so important against that backdrop. The price of oil has jumped to \$78 a barrel, and some are predicting it going up to \$125 a barrel—that would certainly be the case if the strait of Hormuz were blocked. That is why this is so delicate. Let us be under no doubt that this affects British people at the pump and that there would be massive inflationary growth if that were to happen.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The deaths of Palestinians, Iranians and Israelis this weekend show why we must all push for peace and stop this from spiralling out of control. Does the Foreign Secretary support, as I do, a nuclear-free middle east? If so, what steps are the Government taking to also address Israel's vast nuclear arsenal, which is thought to include at least 90 nuclear bombs and which, let us not forget, one Israeli Minister said should be used against the people of Gaza? What is the Foreign Secretary doing about Israel's refusal to sign up to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and to co-operate with the International Atomic Energy Agency?

Mr Lammy: I have to say to the hon. Member, the story of Israel's nuclear ability goes back some long way, to the 1980s—I remember studying this many years ago. We work with Israel, and we remain a country that does not want to see nuclear proliferation. We will do everything we can to ensure that others do not get nuclear capability in the region.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Let us be clear: there are no good guys in this conflict. The concept of pre-emptive self-defence does

not exist in international law, and nor should it. Israel's decision unilaterally to retaliate first has made the region—indeed the world—a much more dangerous and unstable place. To what extent does the Foreign Secretary believe that the impunity that Israel has enjoyed for previous acts of aggression and war crimes was a factor in Netanyahu's decision to retaliate first?

Mr Lammy: We have had a very serious debate in this House so far that recognises the serious threat that Iran's nuclear capability poses to the global community and the existential threat that the Israeli people are facing. I have been absolutely clear that diplomacy is the way. Donald Trump is urging a path back to diplomacy. The UK was of course not involved, but we have to be mindful about the many people in both Israel and Iran who are hiding in their bunkers, fearing the loss of their life.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I am sure the whole House is behind the diplomatic efforts of the Prime Minister and the Government to avoid any further escalation of this conflict, and I thank my right hon. Friend for the reassurances he has given about not taking his eye off the horrors that continue to unfold in Gaza. Can he give a guarantee today that if there were to be an escalation that would drag the UK into any conflict, a vote in this House would be held first, before our armed forces were deployed?

Mr Lammy: As this conflict escalates, our message to both Israel and Iran is very clear: de-escalation and restraint.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): All our thoughts are of course with the British citizens caught up in this horrible and alarming exchange of ordnance. The Foreign Secretary said he was keeping his eye on Gaza, but I am not quite sure what that means. It is certainly the case that the eye of the world has been drawn to the footage that has emerged as the missiles have flown—footage of young children shot and bleeding out their lives in the sands of Gaza. As he said, 50 people were hospitalised over the weekend or shot dead while begging for food. Just this morning, 38 people were killed while queuing for food or attempting to obtain food from the new American-sponsored distribution system. What comfort should all the bereaved families in Gaza take from the fact that he is keeping his eye on this situation?

Mr Lammy: Today in my office I was with a hostage family. A wonderful woman who lost her husband was there with her daughter asking me to keep Gaza at the forefront of my mind and to raise it in the Chamber this afternoon. That is why there was an extensive part of my speech on it. I have spoken to all partners in the region, and I will very shortly speak again to Prime Minister Mustafa. We are absolutely clear that aid needs to get in, that hostages need to get out, and that we want to see a ceasefire. I will continue to talk and work particularly with our American partners and our partners in Qatar to bring about that ceasefire.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I have spent nearly a year in this Chamber watching our country pleading with the Israeli Government to de-escalate in Gaza. They have not. Strong words and desperate pleas have not worked. Is now the time to recognise the state of Palestine, as we promised in our manifesto? Is now the time to extend last week's

welcome sanctions to other members of Netanyahu's regime, including the Prime Minister himself? If not now, when?

Mr Lammy: I understand my hon. Friend's strength of feeling on Palestinian recognition. She will know we have always been clear that there is a role for recognition as part of a process, and we will continue to work with allies in the region and in Europe to bring about the process that will bring about recognition and the two states that we hold dear.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have only another 15 minutes to go, so long questions are just taking away time from other colleagues.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and welcome in particular the measures about bolstering our consular support. He has also made reference to our assets and the hundreds of thousands of British citizens in the wider region. What reassurance can he give us that their wellbeing is being thought about and that preparations are being made, should the conflict escalate further?

Mr Lammy: Let me put on record my huge gratitude and respect for our diplomatic staff in Israel and Iran and across the region, and for their families and children who provide them with such support. To be absolutely clear, on Monday last week we had a tabletop exercise in Whitehall on Iran, which I chaired. There are contingency plans. None of us could have envisaged two crises at the same time—this one and India, which the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), will talk about shortly—but our staff are standing ready.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I know that my right hon. Friend will be working tirelessly and using all his diplomatic skills and those of his office to resolve this new, immediate crisis, but as others have said, how will he balance that with getting aid in, a permanent ceasefire, getting hostages out and recognition?

Mr Lammy: Balance it we must, because those are the issues that we are currently dealing with. We remain determined to press for what we want to see in Gaza and to stand up for those we are hugely concerned about in the west bank—my hon. Friend will have seen the statement I made last week in relation to that—as well as being absolutely clear about Iran's intent and capability at this time and what we must do to stop that.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I agree with the Foreign Secretary that a nuclear-armed Iran is not in Israel's national security interests or in the security interests of other countries in the region—or indeed of this country, which has received direct threats from the current Iranian regime. Some 8,000 UK nationals are living on RAF Akrotiri along with 7,500 Cypriots and others also working on base—some civilian; most in uniform. What reassurance can he give those on the base that they are safe from Iranian threats?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Member will know that, working with partners, we have capabilities that can ensure that our people are as safe as they need to be. He is right to reference RAF Akrotiri. The work of our colleagues in Cyprus, Bahrain and Qatar is hugely important at this time.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): When the UN's nuclear watchdog says that Iran is closing in on the ability to develop up to nine nuclear weapons, I worry. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is in our national interests that Iran never acquires those nuclear weapons?

Mr Lammy: Yes, 100%.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): We all watched in horror as the conflict between Israel and Iran escalated. Today, we have heard strong calls in the House for the UK to be a prevailing voice of restraint and diplomacy in this fragile and volatile time. While everyone in the Chamber recognises the brutal nature of the Iranian regime, the focus must be on de-escalation, so I am concerned to hear about RAF jets being sent to the middle east. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear that the UK will play no part in any aggression? Will he explicitly rule out any further military support for the Israeli Government?

Mr Lammy: This is a precautionary measure. The Government would be irresponsible if we did not account for all possibilities at this time.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The failure to get transparent information from the United Nations Special Commission and the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission caused untold damage 22 years ago. What discussions has my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary had with Director General Grossi at the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure that there is real transparency and real information on which we can base any action?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I spoke to the director general at the beginning of last week, reassured him of our full support and thanked him for all his work that is ensuring a common understanding of what Iran is doing and why we have to act.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that just as Russia is run by an authoritarian regime that wants to destroy its democratic neighbour Ukraine and has carried out attacks on British soil, so Iran is run by an authoritarian regime that is out to destroy its democratic neighbour and has also carried out attacks on British soil? Is it not the case, therefore, that for the same reasons we stand with Ukraine, we need to stand with Israel now?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman puts it well. We should also mention what those in Iran are doing to destabilise neighbouring countries—Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq—with their proxies. We absolutely have to keep our guard up in relation to Iran.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My constituents will be extremely concerned by the developments in the region, so I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the efforts he is making to

[Johanna Baxter]

encourage de-escalation. Will he assure me that this escalating conflict will not undermine the UK's efforts to end the war in Gaza, free the hostages and lift all restrictions to humanitarian aid in Palestine?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I will do all that I can.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It was reported that the Israeli Government planned to kill the leader of Iran over the weekend. As history shows, attempts to collapse a regime with nothing to put in its place risk creating a power vacuum and state collapse. They also risk creating further waves of refugees and instability in the energy market. What assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of those reports and the wider implications that such a strategy would have on the UK?

Mr Lammy: I remain hugely concerned about the appalling human rights record of the Iranian regime, but who runs Iran must, quite properly, be a matter for the people of Iran.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right that the UK as part of the international community comes together to urge all sides to show restraint through diplomacy to prevent Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, and that it is also right that our focus is not diverted from Israel's continued assault on Gaza and the rest of occupied Palestine and from securing the release of the hostages back to their families?

Mr Lammy: Every colleague I have spoken to over the last few days has emphasised diplomacy and de-escalation; I reassure my hon. Friend of that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the State of Israel has a declared policy on its nuclear weapons of no first use and that there is no evidence that it has ever misused or threatened to misuse its nuclear weapons in any irresponsible way whatsoever? Does he agree, moreover, that in international law there is the right of pre-emptive military action, and it is hard to imagine how that would not apply in this case, given Iran's determination to destroy the State of Israel?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman brings tremendous experience to these matters, but he will understand that it is right and appropriate that I leave that to the international lawyers.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The nuclear ambitions of a bloodthirsty terrorist-sponsoring regime in Tehran pose a real threat to world peace, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that Israel's own conduct as an increasingly rogue state when it comes to international law endangers not just Israeli citizens but the Palestinian citizens of Gaza, as we have seen over the weekend, and makes the case for a Palestinian state more urgent, not less?

Mr Lammy: Israel has been raising its concerns about Iran for years. It is an existential threat, and one that we recognise, which is why we have been working in concert with our partners in France and Germany on this issue for so long, and it has remained a cross-party issue.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): This is obviously a dangerous and perilous time, and we need to do everything we can to bring about a ceasefire between Israel and Iran. Can the Foreign Secretary assure us that no British weapons or components are being used to bomb Iran, which could be used as a pretext for saying that Britain is directly involved? What assurances has he had from the Government of Israel that they will not use or even consider using in any way the nuclear weapons that they possess?

Mr Lammy: We have the most robust export licensing regime in the world, and I am proud of that. That was a matter that this House voted on just a few years ago under the last Government, and the right hon. Gentleman will know that we made a decision to restrict arms sales to Israel that could be used in Gaza. I also refer him to the statements that I have made about Iran's nuclear intent, the work of the IAEA, the huge global concern and the UN resolution that the UK did so much to secure last Thursday.¹

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for the Government's calm leadership on these ever-changing and seriously concerning matters. Given our close maritime connections, can he update the House on his discussions with our Gulf allies and partners?

Mr Lammy: I can reassure my hon. Friend that I have spoken to partners in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel, and been in touch, of course, with our friends in Egypt over this last period, and I will continue to do so at this time of intense diplomacy.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We knew that Iran had the ballistic missiles to hit Europe, let alone Israel or other parts of the middle east. Last week, the IAEA reported that Iran was within a whisker of producing atomic weapons. In the absence of diplomatic efforts and the failure to introduce the snapback mechanism, Israel had a right to react to protect itself. Will the Foreign Secretary now look at the diplomatic efforts to introduce the snapback mechanism and to impose sanctions on Iran to ensure that it cannot ever obtain nuclear weapons?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I will.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his commitment to de-escalation and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the middle east, who has worked so hard over the last few days. Could the Foreign Secretary say a little more about our commitments to our long-standing friends and allies in the region, particularly countries such as Bahrain?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question, because this is a very tense time if you are in Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or Cyprus. For that reason, it is hugely important that the UK meets its obligation, and that is why the Defence Secretary made the decision he did to deploy certain assets into the region.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Of course we should uphold the right of every state to live in peace, but in what way is the UK military involved in this? We have

1.[Official Report, 19 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 1WC.](Correction)

just heard that IDF soldiers have been trained on UK soil. Is this the same IDF that has been engaged in atrocities, including the murder of UK aid workers in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: The UK of course provides military courses for our allies, but we always emphasise, in all those courses, the critical importance of international humanitarian law. It is important that we work with our allies to meet the amazing standards of our own armed services, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman would not want us to depart from that.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for making so clear what the UK Government's actions are. However, it is very clear that the suffering in Palestine will continue, if not accelerate, given the situation pertaining in the middle east, so what action can be taken to try to ensure that aid gets into that beleaguered area? Also, what efforts can be made to ensure that the recognition of Palestine is kept firmly on the diplomatic table?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will know that recognition has certainly been an issue that many colleagues around the world have been speaking about just in the last few weeks. I reassure her that I was discussing the aid issues just today with a hostage family who are worried, of course, about the aid available to those who remain under the ground in Gaza.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Israel is a democracy, a pluralistic society and an ally. In contrast, the unhappy and ignoble regime in Tehran is a theocracy that wants to wipe Israel from the map, that foments terrorism around the globe and that suppresses its own people to the extent that even dancing is a crime. Is not the best use of British military assets in the eastern Mediterranean to try to do something to stop the rain of hypersonic missiles and drones on civilian areas in Israel?

Mr Lammy: It is hugely important that we do all we can. I believe the best way forward is diplomatic, because attempting to do this militarily, I am afraid, cannot be achieved, and I think that is widely understood.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, his reassurance that Gaza will not be forgotten, and for having been really quick to come out and ask for de-escalation and a negotiated settlement. Nobody wants to see a nuclear Iran, not least the people of Iran, who are paying for this investment by the Iranian regime, but Netanyahu justified the bombing raids by saying that Iran was close to having a bomb and that it could be years or just months away. Was Netanyahu correct?

Mr Lammy: I call to mind the work of the IAEA, and refer my hon. Friend to the resolution of the UN Security Council just last week, all of which confirmed Iran's intent and its deception.¹

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Last week, this House was united in supporting the long-overdue recognition of a Palestinian state, and we urged the Minister to advocate for that at the United Nations conference in Saudi. That has now gone up in smoke. We believed that the US-Iran nuclear peace negotiations

were coming close to fruition, so does the Minister share my concern that Netanyahu's Government may be seeking to create further instability in the region, to block progression for peace and the recognition of the Palestinian state, and to distract from the genocide in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I do not believe that that sits behind the action that we are seeing at this time. I do believe that the way forward is de-escalation and diplomacy.

Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): A full-scale war between Israel and Iran is clearly in no one's interests, but neither is a nuclear-armed Iran, so what is the Government's realistic proposal to return to diplomatic solutions as soon as possible and to get Iran to give up its nuclear weapons programme? How realistic is it that Iran will engage in such an effort?

Mr Lammy: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that, along with my colleagues in France and Germany, I expect to be engaged with Iran on this very issue in the coming hours.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has said, and just repeated, that no military threat can prevent the Iranians from acquiring nuclear weapons, but surely that is not correct. Given the danger to us all from Iran, which the Foreign Secretary acknowledged in his statement, and its continued attempts to increase its ability to enrich uranium, will he very clearly agree with me that Israel was right to strike the nuclear sites?

Mr Lammy: The phrase that I have used about no military endeavour being able to achieve this without diplomacy has been used by the US and by the Israelis themselves.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): While I deplore the alleged Israeli war crimes in Gaza, that should not cloud our view of the Iranian regime. As a British diplomat covering Syria, I saw how the Iranian regime was directly complicit in the torture and murder of hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians. I was a British soldier in Iraq in 2020, and the British Lance Corporal Brodie Gillon was killed by the Iranians a few months before I arrived. There have been too many catastrophic British foreign policy decisions in the middle east this century, so I commend the Foreign Secretary for his commitment to a realist and hard-headed approach. Does he agree that the first question for any policy choice should be: where does it all end?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman, though new to this House, brings so much experience. I agree with his sentiment.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): My constituent Greg contacted me this afternoon. He is worried about his 24-year-old daughter who is in Tel Aviv on her own. What reassurance can the Foreign Secretary give to my constituents that we will repatriate British citizens as quickly as possible?

Mr Lammy: I would first urge the hon. Member's constituent to register his daughter's presence, to recognise that we are surging staff to the region and that the way

1.[*Official Report*, 19 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 2WC.](Correction)

[Mr Lammy]

out at the moment is through Jordan, and to reach out to staff. The hon. Member can reach out on the hotline if that is what his constituents so wish.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): May I take the Foreign Secretary back and ask that he clarifies the nature of the Israeli military personnel training on British soil and whether those involved are participating in operations in Gaza? If so, how does that align with the UK's international legal obligations given that Israel faces proceedings standing accused of genocide at the International Court of Justice, given that its leadership has arrest warrants issued against it at the International Criminal Court, and given that this Government have also moved to sanction senior Israeli officials?

Mr Lammy: As I said before, this is an academic course, non-combat. We have extremely high standards in this country, and it is important that we share them—although in the instance that he raises, this is fewer than ten people.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Given the UK's long-standing friendship with Israel, what assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of the increased risk to our military personnel in the countries in the wider region?

Mr Lammy: We are at the highest level of force protection at this time because of the ongoing conflict and the dangers that exist, and it is why we emphasise de-escalation and restraint.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): A despotic middle eastern dictatorship, a rogue state, a terrorist state perilously close to achieving a weapon of mass destruction so serious that it could disrupt the entire region—hon. and right hon. Members, as well as the public listening at home, may hear echoes of 2003 in that description of current events. With talk of regime change again in the air, what will the Foreign Secretary do to personally talk back the Israeli authorities in Jerusalem, because what they are doing at the moment strikes me as providing the Iranian regime with the best possible propaganda tool they could have?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Member is right to emphasise in his words a degree of caution. He will have heard what I said in the House this afternoon, which forms the bedrock of the diplomacy that our officials are exercising in Israel, in Iran and across the wider region.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I support the Foreign Secretary in his call for de-escalation. In April last year, the RAF participated in the shooting down of drones that Iran fired at Israel. Will the Foreign Secretary comment on why the UK acted to defend Israel from drone attack at that time, but did not do so at the weekend?

Mr Lammy: Each military situation is different. There was a particular context at that time of ballistic missiles coming in and a particular request. We had the assets that could support, and we obviously make those assessments, as the hon. Gentleman would expect, with our regional allies depending on the circumstances and the context.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I concur with the Foreign Secretary's view that this can only be resolved through diplomacy and that that is the only way we will get a resolution. I know he is a learned friend—a fellow colleague at the Bar. He will understand international law. Does he agree that the Caroline principles that would allow Israel to conduct that strike were not engaged? Does he not smell a rat with the timing of what is happening?

Mr Lammy: At this Dispatch Box, I speak as Foreign Secretary, not as a lapsed member of the Bar who qualified in 1995.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The role of the IRGC in life in Iran over the years has been human rights abuses, religious freedom abuses and gender abuses, with acts of global extremism and terrorism often having their roots and support in Iran. The war in Israel is a prime example of that. Anyone who pretends that Iran, with its nuclear potential, is in any way an innocent bystander is being deliberately dishonest. Will the Foreign Secretary commit again to working with allies, such as the US, to minimise bloodshed and ensure that Israel is able to remain safe and free from all attacks?

Mr Lammy: Yes, I will. The hon. Gentleman is right to bring to mind the human rights record in Iran. I remind the House that just three years ago, Iran arrested 20,000 people, executed many, and many died, all because a young woman—Mahsa Amini—did not cover herself up. She died in prison. That is the regime we are talking about.

Air India Plane Crash

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before we come to the statement, may I from the Chair pass on my condolences to the family of Ketan Shah, one of my constituents in Shipton Bellinger, who was tragically killed in the Air India crash? Ketan was a valued member of the local community, where he ran the village stores, and the whole community is devastated by his loss.

6.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to update the House on our response to Thursday's devastating Air India plane crash. I know the whole House joins me and you in offering heartfelt condolences to all those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy. The images of those boarding the flight are heartbreaking. Families across both countries, including in my constituency and yours, have been shocked and horrified. They are mourning, and we mourn with them.

Official casualty figures are not yet confirmed. However, our understanding is that of the 242 passengers and crew, 53 were British nationals, and just one has survived. Also, many people in the medical college that the plane hit died or were badly injured. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has passed on our deepest sympathies to Prime Minister Modi. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary also spoke to his friend Minister Jaishankar on the day of the crash.

The Foreign Office immediately stood up crisis teams in London, Delhi and Ahmedabad. Our high commissioner in India travelled to Ahmedabad and remained on the ground throughout the weekend, visiting the local hospital and the crash site. We have increased consular assistance and are in contact with all the families of British nationals who have asked for our help. In Ahmedabad, we have set up a UK reception centre to help British nationals in person. A team of four investigators from the Air Accidents Investigation Branch arrived on Friday to support work on the ground. That same morning, we also deployed five people from the rapid deployment team to strengthen the support that we are offering in person. We also supported the provision of a British Red Cross psychological support officer, who is now in India helping families to cope with the tragic emotional impact. We deployed specialist disaster victim identification experts on the ground; they are liaising with those involved in the Indian authority-led identification process. In the UK, police family liaison officers were deployed over the weekend to support families based here during an incredibly difficult time. We are of course in regular close contact with Air India about the support package that it is offering, which includes funding flights and full repatriation costs to bring loved ones home.

I understand how frustrating it is for families who have not yet been able to lay their loved ones to rest, and I recognise the pain and frustration that this is causing. The Indian authorities are working around the clock, with UK support, on this. Unfortunately, these processes take time, but it is important that they are done properly to avoid causing more pain for families.

At the same time, we are of course also focused on understanding what happened. The Indian Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau has accepted the UK's

offer of help, and a team of British inspectors are now on site. Our high commissioner also met Gujarat Home Minister Sanghavi yesterday to offer our support. The Government continue to work tirelessly with our Indian partners to establish what happened and support all those who are grieving.

With an India diaspora about 2 million-strong here in Britain, and with a particularly prominent Gujarati community, we feel the pain of this tragedy together. It reminds us not only of the deep personal ties between our people, but of the strength of our partnership with India—a partnership built on trust, shared values and mutual support in times of crisis. Just over a week ago, the Foreign Secretary was in Delhi celebrating the conclusion of trade talks, discussing the expansion of our strategic partnership and meeting so many people dedicated to strengthening the ties between us. In the face of such profound loss, the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with India, not only in grief but in our shared resolve to ensure that those we have lost are never forgotten. I commend this statement to the House.

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

6.51 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The tragic deaths of 242 men, women and children on Air India flight 171 from Ahmedabad to Gatwick on Thursday, and the reports of at least 29 fatalities on the ground, are beyond distressing and upsetting. It is still difficult to comprehend the scale of the tragedy. Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with everyone affected, particularly the families and relatives of lost ones. All our thoughts are with those who are in hospital having suffered injuries, and with Vishwash Kumar Ramesh, whose survival of the crash is an absolute miracle, though he sadly lost his brother.

Many of those who died—52—were British, and many families in the UK will have lost loved ones who were Indian nationals, too. Over the past few days, we have started to hear about the lives of those who died, and the grief that their families are going through. There was the loss of Akeel Nanabawa, his wife Hannaa Vorajee and their four-year-old daughter Sara; of Javed and Mariam Syed, and their two children, from London; of Hardik Avaiya and Vibhooti Patel, a couple from Leicester who had gone to India to celebrate their engagement; of Fiongal and Jamie Greenlaw-Meek; and of the former Chief Minister of Gujarat, Vijay Rupani. Their passing, and that of everyone who died, will be greatly felt. Our condolences go to all of them. The pain that they are all experiencing is clearly unimaginable.

Following the tragedy, we have seen communities come together in mandirs, gurdwaras and other places of worship to pray and seek comfort in these difficult times. This evening, a vigil is being organised by the Indian high commissioner, at which the community will come together to reflect, mourn and pray. I thank the high commissioner's team for their help and kindness in their consular support. I pay tribute to all those offering assistance to communities across the country who have been affected. The support shown at trooping the colour on Saturday will have been greatly appreciated. I put on the record our thanks to the emergency services in India for their response.

[Priti Patel]

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has set up a reception centre at the Ummid hotel in Ahmedabad, but concerns have been raised this afternoon that there is not enough of a British presence on the ground at the hospital and elsewhere where families will identify their loved ones. The Minister may have seen the statement issued earlier by three families referring to an

“inadequate and painfully slow government reaction”.

They also said that there was

“no UK leadership...no medical team, no crisis professionals stationed at the hospital”.

They are asking the Government to

“immediately step up its presence and response on the ground in Ahmedabad.”

The Minister has said that this is incredibly delicate and difficult, and we all understand that, but what is his response to that statement? Will changes be made to provide the assistance that is needed, because we understand that the circumstances that the local hospital and mortuary are operating in are deeply harrowing and difficult? Will he guarantee that consular support will be in place for as long as is necessary?

The pain that families are going through is unimaginable, and identifying and returning the bodies of their loved ones to enable funerals to take place will take some time. Forensics are being used to help identify bodies, and families have been providing samples to help with that awful process. Will the Minister give an update on any support that the UK is providing to help with that process, and with the forensic work that must take place? Does he know at this stage how many of the bodies have been identified? Can he give assurances that work is taking place across Government, with local authorities and schools in affected communities in the UK, to ensure that counselling and trauma support services are available, especially for children who have lost close family members?

The affected families deserve to know what happened to the plane. Thoughts are turning to the investigations. It is early days yet, but can the Minister give details of conversations that have taken place with counterparts in India, as well as with Boeing, on the investigation? We welcome the involvement of four officials from our Air Accidents Investigation Branch. Will the Minister give assurances that they will have the support and resources that they need to assist the Indian authorities? On the cause of the crash, will the Minister give an assurance that the UK Government will work with India to get answers and provide updates to the families?

Last Thursday was a dark, sad and traumatic day for India, the UK and all those affected, wherever they are in the world. I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I say that we stand with them in seeking answers; in working to give them the support that they need; and in mourning the sad deaths of their loved ones.

Mr Falconer: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for the tone of her questions. She rightly points to the scale of this; it is the single largest loss of British life in an aviation accident since 9/11, and one of the single largest losses of British national life overseas in one incident in a long time. Ten years ago this month, practically, I was

part of the diplomatic service on the ground in Sousse after a terrible tragedy. I know well the agony for families seeking to pick up the pieces after an incident like this.

The right hon. Lady asks an important question about the mortuary process, which can be particularly traumatic in another country. I can confirm that any British national who wants consular assistance in going through that process will have it from my officials. She rightly raises questions that have been asked by some of the families about the location of our reception centre and our presence at the hospital. Since becoming aware of those reports, I have sent officials to the hospital. We are not aware at the moment of British nationals congregating there. I have asked officials to review the signage and general arrangements to ensure that people know where our reception centre is. It is at Ummid hotel, which is close to the airport, because we thought that would be the best place to receive British nationals, rather than the hospital, where, tragically, there are no living British nationals.

We keep these questions under review. As I know from my experience, in tragedies like this, it is difficult to get right the first time the assistance that British nationals need. We will learn lessons with each step. I spoke to some of the families who made those points this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Will the Minister please convey the gratitude of this House to the Foreign Office staff and the police officers who have had such difficult work to do on behalf of us all? Public service can be very hard sometimes, but we are very grateful.

Mr Falconer: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for those remarks. The family liaison officers and the consular staff on the ground are trying to stand with British nationals during some of their darkest moments, and their work is very hard, exactly as she says. We will stay with those affected by this situation for as long as it takes, as the shadow Foreign Secretary asked us to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I associate myself with his remarks and those of other colleagues about our collective grief and shock at so many lives being lost in this appalling crash, including the lives of 52 UK citizens. I express my condolences to the families of all those who lost their lives in the tragedy. It will be utterly devastating for them, and it is vital that the Government ensure that they are fully supported. What reassurances can the Minister provide that each of the families is receiving the support that they need, and is being kept updated with any and all new developments related to the crash?

Reports suggest that investigators have now recovered the cockpit voice recorder from the flight, which should provide crucial new insights into why the plane went down. British and American teams are on the ground to

support India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau in the inquiry into the cause of the crash, and I thank those teams for their work. What steps is the Department taking to support them and other investigators to ensure that no stone is left unturned in the search for answers?

A British citizen, Vishwash Kumar Ramesh, was the only survivor of the crash. I speak for the whole House in expressing our relief that he is alive, but I also recognise what a traumatic experience this will have been for him, including having to come to terms with the loss of his brother, Ajay, who was also on the flight. Can the Minister outline what support the Government are providing to Mr Ramesh and his family to enable his physical recovery and access to wider support?

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am sure she will understand why I will decline to comment in too much detail on Mr Ramesh's case in the House. We can all only imagine the agonies that he and others affected by the incident will be feeling.

I will not comment too much on the ongoing investigation. It will be a complex operation, but I know that our Air Accidents Investigation Branch is among the best in the world and will do everything it can. It is fully supported by our high commissioner in India and by the Foreign Office to do that vital work. As the hon. Lady said, the black box has been retrieved and further insights will no doubt be gleaned over time.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I am deeply shocked and saddened by the tragic Air India crash in Gujarat. My thoughts are with the victims, their families and all those affected in India and in the UK. Air India is an important operator for many of my constituents, especially for those in the Indian diaspora, and about 100 Air India flights arrive in Birmingham airport every month. What reassurances can the Minister give my constituents that the UK Government are supporting efforts to determine the cause of the Air India crash with our Indian counterparts?

Mr Falconer: As I said, British investigators are now in India working with the Indian authorities. We are also in direct contact with Air India.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Around 30% of my constituents emanate from Gujarat originally. On Saturday, we came together in one of the Hindu temples with the interfaith council, and people of all religions and none expressed their condolences. At that temple, 20 people have lost relatives. Last night, we attended another vigil at a temple where four relatives of people who work there have lost their lives.

Can the Minister give us an update on one issue? For the 53 UK nationals who sadly lost their life, we have been able to communicate to their family that they have unfortunately died, but there were 169 Indian nationals who were almost certainly due to visit family in the UK—families that extend across the country. Has the FCDO been able to advise those families of the loss of those lives, so that instead of being by the telephone waiting in hope that their relatives were not on the plane, they have a certain outcome?

Mr Falconer: I am happy to talk to the hon. Member about the particulars of the cases that he is referring to. We will, of course, do everything we can to try to minimise uncertainty.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): All hon. Members will have the victims in their thoughts and prayers. I thank the firefighters, the first responders and the emergency service workers who helped at the crash. On Saturday, a vigil was held at the Mahatma Gandhi statue at Manchester cathedral. I was one of the speakers, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan) and for Bolton West (Phil Brickell). We had prayers from a local Hindu priest, an imam, a member of the Sikh community and the dean of the cathedral.

The Minister mentioned the British high commissioner in India, Her Excellency Lindy Cameron, who is doing an important job. Can the Minister assure me that the high commissioner's team in Delhi, and that of the deputy high commissioner in Ahmedabad, will have all the support and resources that they need to make sure that the victims and the families are supported?

Mr Falconer: I have spoken to our high commissioner and the team on the ground this afternoon to ensure that we have adequate resources in place, including in the places where British nationals and their families might be congregating, to ensure that we can provide the best possible support to families affected.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Unfortunately, several of my residents have been directly affected by Thursday's air crash. I place on record my gratitude to local community leaders like Councillor Vishal Patel for offering support and organising events, such as the vigil I attended on Friday, to allow those affected to come together and grieve.

Councillor Patel raised a tragic case with me, in which the wife of one of my constituents passed away, leaving behind him and his two children. He is currently relying on his mother to help with childcare support around his shift work, but she does not have permanent residence in the UK. What will happen to those who have lost loved ones who they or their family rely on for care, who will now need to look to other members of their extended family for support?

Mr Falconer: I am happy to talk to any hon. Member about particular cases of people affected by the incident.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): This is an incredibly tragic occurrence, and my heartfelt condolences go to the bereaved. Considering the involvement of the UK Air Accidents Investigation Branch, can the Minister give further information about the UK's role in the ongoing investigation? How will he ensure that the questions of families and relatives are answered and that there is transparency and accountability in the process?

Mr Falconer: The UK AAIB will be supporting the work of the Indian authorities, and we will do everything we can to ensure that families are kept fully apprised of the conduct of the investigation.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Will the Minister join me in expressing heartfelt condolences to my constituents, who have tragically lost three beloved members of their family—Adam Taj, Hasina Taj and Altaf Patel? I sincerely thank the Minister for his prompt support

[Mr Adnan Hussain]

and action for the affected families, and I place on record my appreciation for the outstanding efforts of the members of the Foreign Office in assisting all the families in need through their darkest time.

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Member for his kind words about me and the officials, and I join him in sending my truly heartfelt condolences to his constituents for the loss of life.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I extend my heartfelt sympathies to all those, including the many British and Indian families, who have lost loved ones. The UK and India are closely connected, and many people in both our countries are grieving after this dreadful crash. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Foreign Office staff working in the UK and India to support the families and loved ones of all those affected. I understand that around 120 victims have been formally identified using DNA samples. What assistance is the UK providing to the Indian authorities to ensure that the remaining victims can be formally identified as quickly as possible?

Mr Falconer: Regrettably, in incidents of this scale, identification tends to take some time. Through family liaison officers in the UK and consular staff, we are trying to support British nationals and those affected in India and here in the UK to enable the contribution of DNA. If any right hon. or hon. Member wants to ensure that their constituents get support through that process in India or here in the UK, they should please not hesitate to be in touch.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): When news of the tragedy came last week, it served as a real unifier in my great city of Leicester—it unified us in shock, absolute disbelief and mourning. I take this opportunity to remember the names of those who lost their life who were associated with my great city: Hardik Avaiya, Vibhooti Patel, Pooja Patel, Harshit Patel, Ajay Kumar Ramesh and Faizan Rafik. We also had the one sole survivor, Vishwash Kumar Ramesh.

When I visited the families, it was great to see so much support from their neighbours, of all faiths and no faith. Indeed, during our darkest time we saw the best of my city. A couple of families mentioned some difficulty in accessing information. Will the Minister look urgently at communications with the families, so that they can get support at this very difficult time? My message to them, as I am sure the whole House will agree is this: you are not alone.

Mr Falconer: I agree with the hon. Gentleman—they are not alone. In relation to any questions about the experience of our consular support, I invite right hon. and hon. Members to ensure that I am aware, both in relation to the tragic incident in India, but also in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Iran. As the Minister for consular affairs, let me say that it is important that we understand what the experience is like for people on ground. In relation to this incident, as I told the shadow Foreign Secretary, I spoke with teams this afternoon to ensure that UK support is as clearly signposted as possible on the ground.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the support that he and his team have given my constituents and my team over the weekend. My city of Gloucester is in mourning for the loss of Akeel Nanabawa, Hannaa Vorajee and four-year-old Sara Nanabawa. I am sure the whole House will join us in sending our thoughts and prayers to their family and friends, and to the wider Barton and Tredworth community at this time. Understandably, the Indian authorities and hospital staff are overwhelmed by the scale of this tragedy, and I would be grateful if the Minister could outline what more we can do to support our constituents who have travelled to India to identify bodies and lay them to rest. He mentioned the support that has been given by Air India. Understandably, a number of my constituents who travelled to India at great personal expense over the weekend have real reservations about travelling with Air India at this time. Without wanting to sound alarmist, what support or financial assistance is being given to those who may have had to travel at great personal expense at very short notice?

Mr Falconer: I spoke to some of my hon. Friend's constituents earlier in the day, and they were full of gratitude for his work on behalf of his city and constituency over the weekend. I also pay tribute to that. As I said earlier, I am happy to talk to any Member about the particular circumstances of their constituents, and see what can be done to help them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister, his Department and all his civil servants for their sterling efforts on behalf of the families. At this time we all think about how we can help; we help through our Minister, our Government, and our officials, so I thank them.

On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party and myself, may I convey my thoughts and prayers for all those families who lost loved ones in the Air India crash—for the pain, the void they have and the ache in their hearts? Our hearts ache for them. The air accident is a tragedy, and the loss of life is incredibly difficult to understand. All our focus is with families within this United Kingdom, and globally, who mourn today. But although they mourn today, there will come a day when they want to understand how this could have happened. Will the Minister confirm how we can be assured that current global airline safety measures are adequate and robust? What role does this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have in the safety of air travel?

Mr Falconer: The UK has a proud record of playing its full part in global aviation standards. As I said, our Air Accidents Investigation Branch will be assisting the investigation into this incident fully, and taking full note of its findings.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I will not be alone in having shed tears over the heartbreaking photograph of the Royal Derby hospital doctor, Dr Prateek Joshi, his wife Dr Komi Vyas, and their three beautiful children, Miraya, Nakul and Pradyut, in the aeroplane moments before take-off and then the crash. I was with their friends and hospital colleagues at Derby's Hindu temple on Saturday, and it made real and vivid the tragedy of all the lives lost in this crash. Can the Minister tell us anything more about how the UK Government are supporting the Indian Government in their safety investigation, and those friends and families who are devastated by this tragedy?

Mr Falconer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in Derby on this—those photos are heartbreaking, particularly the one she mentions that so many in this House will have seen. We are trying to support Indian investigations in two areas: in relation to the Air Accidents Investigation Branch and through our disaster victim identification service, which is also on the ground. This is a truly horrific tragedy, and we are doing all we can to try to understand how it happened, and to support those affected as quickly as possible.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and all the first responders who were on the scene. I thank the British involvement in helping the Indian authorities. When this is all over, and attention has shifted away, will our officials be there until our residents are satisfied that we have done all that we can for the Indian authorities?

Mr Falconer: I confirm that we will provide British families with all the support they require during this horrific incident.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): This is truly a terrible tragedy. As an elected representative in Greenwich where we have a large Gujarat community, over 40 years, both as a councillor and an MP, I have got to know many people from the community, particularly those who are members of the South East Gujarati Association. Like all of us, they will be grieving today after this terrible tragedy. In his statement the Minister mentioned that family liaison officers have been appointed. What resources do they have? They must be able to get information to families promptly, and people may need further assistance, such as with travel. Do they have access to those sorts of resources?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks an important question. Family liaison officers, often known as FLOs, support families in the UK and are part of UK policing. They are always able to talk to my officials—the consular officials who take care of British nationals overseas—and we always try to ensure that the relationship between consular officials and FLOs works as smoothly as possible, so that families are provided with the full support of the UK. If families in the UK or overseas have any questions about how that operates, I am happy to talk to my colleagues about that.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents, may I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your moving eulogy to Mr Shah who lived in Southbourne in my constituency for more than a decade? Many of my constituents remember Mr Shah and mourn his passing. They send their love to his family. Bournemouth and India have a deep bond; Britain and India have a deep bond. What is the Minister doing to ensure that everybody affected by this tragedy is getting the support they need? Will he join me in commending the community leaders of the Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch Indian Community for all that they are doing at this difficult moment?

Mr Falconer: I thank one of my hon. Friends from Bournemouth—the other MP for Bournemouth is unable to speak as she is a Parliamentary Private Secretary, but I know they have both been very engaged with the

tragedy that is being felt across the city. We are doing everything we can to support people both in India and here in the UK, and we will continue to do so until people have navigated the full depths of this tragedy. I am particularly conscious of those going through the difficult but necessarily time-consuming process of identifying remains.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that as we speak, the Indian High Commission in London is holding a commemoration service for those who have been lost. He also knows that my constituency of Brent West, which includes Wembley, is the epicentre for the Gujarati community—more than 30% of my constituents are originally from Gujarat. I thank him for the way in which his officials have engaged and the help that they have been able to offer, but some of my constituents have had problems. The Saiyed family—mother, father and two adult children—were travelling together. Three of the bodies have been identified, but one body has not yet been identified. I understand that the DNA testing has now been randomised, but I urge the Minister to try to do everything he can to ensure that the four bodies can have the necessary funeral arrangements celebrated together, rather than waiting longer. He is absolutely right to say that it is important that the testing process is done correctly, to avoid further problems down the line, but families are in deep distress at the moment and it is important that we send every possible help to get the DNA testing done as quickly as possible.

Mr Falconer: I understand the force and the emotion behind my hon. Friend's question. I have spoken to families about the obvious agonies of the process of identification. I will look into the circumstance that he describes. He mentioned the Indian High Commission, to whom I pass on my thanks for its hard work, particularly in rapidly facilitating visas for family members to be able to go out to see their loved ones.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): My constituency has a significant Indian community, and there has been collective grief and dismay at this tragic event. I am sure that members of the community will welcome the Minister's condolences, as do I, for the families affected, both here in the UK and in India. I welcome the Minister's statement and his confirmation of support on the ground for the affected families, but will he keep the consulate's resources under review, both in capacity and locations of support, as events unfold? I welcome the confirmation that British crash investigators are on site to provide support, but will the Minister confirm that he is in close dialogue with the Department for Transport to ensure all UK resources and expertise in this area are available and can be deployed, to get the families the answers that they deserve so much?

Mr Falconer: I confirm to my hon. Friend that we will, of course, keep our consular response under review, as events develop. I can also confirm that there remains close co-ordination between the Foreign Office and the Department for Transport. The Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Transport and I were all in the first ministerial Cobra in response to the incident, and I know the Transport Secretary continues to have a close engagement in these issues.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): This Air India crash was a devastating tragedy and my thoughts are with all those who were affected. Many of my constituents in West Bromwich have family in India and they are deeply shaken and saddened by what has happened. I am grateful to the Minister for setting out all the work that the British Government have done, in association with the Indian Government, to offer support at this terrible time. You have mentioned our aviation experts who are on-hand, but can you say a bit more—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I believe you mean the Minister.

Sarah Coombes: Will the Minister say a bit more about our ongoing support for the Indian Government and how we can give my constituents in West Bromwich confidence when they go to visit their family in India?

Mr Falconer: I have set out some of the detail around our support for the Indian Government. The High Commissioner remains in regular dialogue with the Indian authorities and met Prime Minister Modi to discuss the case in recent days. We will continue to do all that we can so that your constituents—*[Interruption.]* Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is obviously contagious. We will continue to do all that we can so that my hon. Friend's constituents, and the constituents of all right hon. and hon. Members across the House, can feel confident.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): This is a terrible tragedy and I join the Minister in paying my respects to those who have lost their lives. I send my condolences to friends and family members who have had their lives ripped apart by this terrible tragedy. Will the Minister give further detail on what the UK Government will be doing, with the Indian Government, to understand how this tragedy happened, and what we can do to prevent something as awful as this happening again?

Mr Falconer: The Air Accidents Investigation Branch will be playing its full role, and we will consider the findings of the Indian and the British and American-supported investigation and take any actions that are required.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments made by the Minister, the shadow Foreign Secretary and many others from across the House in expressing condolences. My thoughts have been with the families, friends and the people who have lost loved ones in the Air India crash. I represent a lot of people in Leeds South West and Morley, including a group of wonderful families who organise under the name Morley Indians. They have sent me here today with a couple of questions for the Minister, so on behalf of one of their representatives may I ask what support are the UK Government providing for the families in the UK who have lost loved ones? In addition, what support can the Government provide to the wider community, following the impact of this horrific crash?

Mr Falconer: For families who have chosen to remain in the UK, a family liaison officer has been appointed by their relevant police force and should have been in contact over the weekend. I invite any right hon. or hon. Members who think there are gaps in that to get in touch with me, but hopefully every affected family will have now heard either from the Foreign Office or their relevant police force, if they are in the UK. We will continue to keep all of that support under review.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting,

(i) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of Lucy Powell relating to Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (Policy Framework and Assurance Board) not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on that Motion may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(ii) the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may be proceeded with for up to two hours, or until 10.00pm, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; those proceedings may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—*(Lucy Powell.)*

Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I inform the House that the Speaker has selected the following amendments as listed on the order paper: (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e).

7.27 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I beg to move,

That this House notes the report of the House of Commons Commission entitled Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme: Policy Framework and ICGS Assurance Board (HC 579), further notes the Decisions of the Commission on 12 May, and agrees:

(1) That the ICGS Policy Framework in respect of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct annexed to the Commission report shall have effect from 14 July 2025.

(2) There shall be a body called the ICGS Assurance Board.

(3) The ICGS Assurance Board shall conduct assurance of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme on behalf of the parliamentary community, in accordance with terms of reference published by the House of Commons Commission on 17 December 2024.

(4) The terms of reference of the Assurance Board may be varied by agreement between the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords Commission.

(5) The ICGS Assurance Board shall consist of:

(a) the Clerk Assistant,

(b) the Clerk Assistant of the House of Lords,

(c) the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards,

(d) the Chair of the Independent Expert Panel,

(e) a Member of the House of Commons who is a member of the House of Commons Commission, appointed by the Commission,

(f) a Member of the House of Lords who is a member of the House of Lords Commission,

(g) a representative of the House of Lords Conduct Committee, and

(h) a representative of the human resources department from each House Administration.

(6) The ICGS Assurance Board shall have authority to approve ICGS Procedures, in accordance with the ICGS Policy Framework, provided that:

(a) nothing in the ICGS Procedures document may amend or override provisions in the Policy Framework;

(b) procedures cannot create new obligations for individuals' conduct.

(7) The policies and procedures relating to bullying and harassment and sexual misconduct endorsed by the House on 19 July 2018 and amended on 17 July 2019, 28 April 2021 and 26 April 2022 shall cease to have effect on 14 July 2025, save that they shall continue to apply to any complaints received on or before 13 July 2025.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this we shall discuss the following:

Amendment (a), in paragraph (1), after “2025” insert

“, subject to the removal of paragraphs 7.1, 9.4, 10.3, 13.2, 14.3, 17.7, 17.8 and 18.7”

Amendment (b), in paragraph (5)(e), leave out—

“a Member of the House of Commons who is a member of the House of Commons Commission, appointed by the Commission” and insert—

“two Members of the House of Commons, elected by the House of Commons”

Amendment (c), in paragraph 5(f), leave out—

“a Member of the House of Lords who is a member of the House of Lords Commission”

and insert—

“two Members of the House of Lords”

Amendment (d), leave out paragraph 5(h).

Amendment (e), leave out paragraph (6) and paragraph 1.4 of the ICGS Policy Framework.

Lucy Powell: The establishment of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, known as the ICGS—the first scheme of its kind in any legislature in the world—was an important step forward in tackling inappropriate behaviour in Parliament. Its establishment was agreed in 2018 with cross-party support.

The ICGS provides a dedicated, independent mechanism for handling complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct in both Houses. It deals with those complaints assiduously and anonymously, with a professional, well-resourced team, and has a range of appropriate sanctions and mechanisms at its disposal. The ICGS works alongside the independent expert panel, which determines appeals and sanctions for cases that have been brought against Members of Parliament. These arrangements ensure complaints are investigated fairly, objectively and to a high standard.

The ICGS has been an important driver in establishing higher standards and improved culture in Parliament and we should all support it. I thank the ICGS for its continued work, and in particular the contribution of its director, Thea Walton, who will be stepping down from her role later this year.

Last year, Parliament published the findings of an independent review into the effectiveness of the ICGS, conducted by Paul Kernaghan. The review broadly praised the ICGS's performance, with Kernaghan being clear the ICGS is making a difference to standards in Parliament, and has demonstrated its ability to hold people to account for unacceptable behaviour. He said that the ICGS is something

“the parliamentary community should take pride in”.

The review found that the scheme has continued to take positive steps to improve timeliness and the quality of its service. Of course there is always more work to be done. It should rightly have the ambition to be the gold standard in workplace grievance schemes. In total, the review made 26 recommendations. Of those, eight have already been delivered, and a further eight will be taken forward should the motion before the House be agreed. Work on the remaining recommendations is under way. These are recommendations from an independent review of the independent grievance scheme of this House: they really should not be contentious.

Kernaghan's first recommendation is to consolidate the various policy and procedure documents into one policy document and one procedure document, and that the existing ICGS assurance group should become a permanent ICGS assurance board.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I am looking through the document and the Opposition's amendments. Two of the amendments that they have put forward talk about the size of the ICGS assurance board and, in particular, adding two members. Is it the feeling, from the

[Chris Vince]

evaluation of the independent process, that the board is actually the right size and that we do not need those amendments?

Lucy Powell: I certainly do not think that we need the amendments. The assurance board is made up of representatives of both Houses, the HR department and other appropriate people, which is as it should be. It also includes a Member of this House, who I think will be contributing shortly and who is also a member of the House of Commons Commission. The make-up of the assurance board as proposed is right.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I make a declaration of interest: Max, in my parliamentary office, is one of many trade union reps across this House. In fact, he is so very good at what he does that 77 hon. and right hon. Members signed an early-day motion in the last Parliament recognising his service. What consideration has been given to representation of the unions of House staff and MPs' staff on the ICGS assurance board, either as permanent members or in how the board engages with the unions in this place?

Lucy Powell: I put on record my thanks to Max, Ken and many others who have done great work representing those who work in this House, whether it is for an MP or as House staff. The role that the trade unions play is absolutely important, and their role in this process should be recognised.

Both the House staff and Members' staff trade unions are represented on the ICGS stakeholder group, and the ICGS has an obligation to consult with that stakeholder group before any proposals are brought to the assurance board. I put on record that I hope the ICGS continues to do that very closely, because the trade unions provide an invaluable voice in the operation of the ICGS, and that should continue. The assurance board will scrutinise the day-to-day performance of the ICGS and ensure that investigations are timely and of a high quality. It will also have responsibility for updating the ICGS procedures document, but only that document.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this motion. She is absolutely right that no one should have any doubts about the reason for it, and no one should have any opposition to it. I understand that there will not be any opposition to it—that is what I am told. Will she outline very quickly the process for those who have a grievance or a complaint, whether for Members or staff, so that staff will know all their rights?

Lucy Powell: It is important that we advertise this service—the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to do that. Any member of staff, any Member of Parliament or anybody working in the broader parliamentary community who has been subject to bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct should get in touch. There is a helpline, and there are well-advertised ways of getting in touch with the ICGS, not just to make a complaint but to get advice about whether a complaint is in scope and can be taken forward. As I said earlier, the ICGS has a range of means: it does not always involve a full investigation with sanctions. The ICGS might often

come to some resolution, and there are other means through which any such behaviour could be resolved. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, because it is important.

To be absolutely clear with the House, the policy framework of the ICGS remains a matter for this House. That includes the definitions, parameters, obligations and key rights and permissions of the scheme as well as its scope. I have laid in the Library and attached to the motion on the Order Paper a letter from the ICGS that sets out the difference between policy and procedure, because I know that is of concern to people.

Colleagues may want an update on a couple of other recommendations from the Kernaghan review that are not a matter for the motion today. Recommendation 3, which asks that political parties work more closely with the ICGS when dealing with complaints through a memorandum of understanding, is being taken forward by the Modernisation Committee with the co-operation of the political parties, and I thank all those concerned for that. The House has also taken forward recommendations on behaviour training. As of the end of March 2025, 639 out of 650 new and returning MPs have attended behaviour training.

Taken together, the recommendations from the Kernaghan review will improve ICGS performance and accountability, provide greater clarity about where complaints should go and how they should be dealt with, and speed up necessary changes to its day-to-day procedure. In total, they will improve behaviour and culture in this place. This is an important moment for the House to come together, I hope, on a cross-party basis, to show that we stand behind the ICGS, what it stands for and the work it does, and to show that we will improve and take forward the independent recommendations to keep improving its work.

I am disappointed that Opposition Front Benchers have broken with years of consensus on this matter to oppose some of the changes proposed, which came from an independent reviewer. I see that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is not in his place, despite his amendments being selected. His amendments, which are supported by Members on the Conservative Front Bench, undermine the integrity of the Kernaghan review recommendations, and I cannot support them. I hope the shadow Leader of the House will take the opportunity to distance himself from those amendments. The reputation of Parliament is low, with poor trust in politics and politicians, and it is for all of us to turn the page on that era.

The safety of those who work on the estate is paramount. I am clear, as I am sure everybody is clear, that there is no place for bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in Parliament. Those who perpetrate it should be accountable and sanctioned where necessary. I commend these recommendations to the House and call on all Members from all parties to support these improvements.

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

7.37 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I will speak to the motion and specifically to the amendment in my name on the Order Paper.

As the Leader of the House has said, successive Administrations, in collaboration with the House, have supported across this Chamber the development of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. It was initiated in 2017 under the then Conservative Government, and it has always been developed on a collaborative and cross-party basis.

In that context, it is surprising, disappointing and a pity that the Government should table a motion on the business of the House when it has not been agreed in that collaborative and cross-party way. Indeed, they are whipping their own Members; that is highly unusual for a motion on the business of the House. Our position has always been that these matters should be worked through together, through the usual channels and with other senior bodies of the House in a spirit of consensus. In that spirit, I will not press the amendment in my name to a vote.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I am very concerned that the amendment tabled by Opposition Front Benchers would fly in the face of the body's independence, so I am glad to hear that the right hon. Gentleman will not be pushing it to a vote. Will he confirm whether his party supports an independent process and the ICGS? If his party were in government, would it make changes to the scheme or even scrap it?

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for the question. Of course, it is a Conservative body in the first instance, developed on a cross-party basis. As far as I am aware, there is no desire in my party to make it anything other than a continuously independent body to suppress and prevent the abuses that occurred before it was brought into being—abuses with which we are all familiar.

In many ways, the ICGS has not been without its problems—it is in the nature of the House's deliberations and the secrecy and privacy associated with these things that we do not always hear about those problems—but broadly speaking, it has been successful. That means, however, that in the context of the point of conflict between my side of the House and those on the Leader of the House's side, there is no problem that the motion as drafted seeks to address and cure. Let me explain in more detail.

The motion frames the issue as supposedly not one of policy, but of procedure. As it sets out, the assurance board has many members. It is not simply composed of parliamentarians; it includes the Clerk Assistants of both Houses, Members of both Houses—but on a nominated basis, rather than elected—the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, a lay member of the House of Lords Conduct Committee, and members of the human resources teams of both Houses. The proposal before us is that this body should be able to set rules for Members of this House without the House itself having any say in the matter, so this is not about the nature of the board; it is about the question of what say the House has over rules that are being set for everyone affected by the ICGS, but for Members of this House in particular.

It is nonsense to suggest that laying a motion before the House, as we have suggested, would be difficult or need to involve any delay. Our position is extremely simple: there should be a motion before the House to approve or disapprove any decision taken by the assurance

board. Such motions can be laid before the House in a very short period of time—literally in a day or two, and perhaps even overnight in some circumstances. There can be no proper suggestion of a delay in the implementation of decisions made by the assurance board, and therefore no reason—at least in my judgment and that of my colleagues—why this should not be a matter for the House to decide.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is extremely surprising that the right hon. Gentleman is taking this position, given that his party is generally associated with deregulation and removing bureaucracy. Does he not agree that the proposal he is describing would create additional bureaucracy around an independent organisation?

Jesse Norman: No, that is not true. The motions of this House are not traditionally regarded as a form of bureaucracy; in fact, in many ways they cut through bureaucracy, because they allow us to get to a democratically ratified decision very quickly and transparently. The trouble comes when decisions are made without that transparency, simplicity and speed of action, which is what we are opposed to.

As I have said, the present proposals draw a distinction between policy and procedure, and would mandate the assurance board to act on its own behalf in matters of procedure. Of course, the board contains only one Member of the House of Commons, and as I have said, that person is nominated rather than elected by the House. In other words, the assurance board potentially has wide-ranging and coercive powers, which are to be exercised almost entirely by people who are outside any direct framework of democratic accountability. It potentially has the power to overturn decisions that are ultimately made by an MP's constituents at the ballot box. The House has rightly been concerned about the exercise of such powers for at least 400 years.

The motion, too, draws a distinction between policy and procedure. Of course, contrary to the suggestion that has been made, procedure includes important substantive matters. Indeed, Paul Kernaghan's review set out an illustrative table of potential changes, which included changing whether somebody may be accompanied to an ICGS interview. As I have pointed out, this is an issue of powers as well as procedure; the assurance board has the ability to empower people who are under review by the ICGS to bring another person along to an interview, or to prevent them from doing so. In turn, this reflects a tacit or explicit policy decision about what may be fair or just under the circumstances. It is not simply a matter of procedure.

Mr Kernaghan's review also included, as an illustration of what he called procedure, changing the timing of when the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is notified of a misconduct complaint—whether that is before or after an initial assessment. Of course, that too reflects a tacit policy judgment about what a just process would be. Such tacit policy judgments show that there is no hard and fast distinction to be drawn between policy and procedure, and underline that these are not matters for officials—for unelected people—but for Members of this House acting through this House.

I remind the House that the ICGS sets rules not merely for members of Parliament, but for more than 15,000 passholders, and even—although this is slightly unclear, and in my judgment has not properly been resolved—for

[Jesse Norman]

tourists and visitors to the Palace of Westminster. It is not accountable to any other body. Today's decision to reject amendment (e)—of course, we are not moving that amendment, so that will be the decision—will be a one-off decision to give up powers of scrutiny, and it will be hard, if not impossible, to reverse that, once those powers are yielded. This is happening at a time when more and more decisions are being taken by people who are not accountable in any direct, genuinely democratic way, through the emergence of what people have often thought of as a kind of bureaucratic or legal sludge. That is absolutely deplorable. All that we in the Conservative party have said is that any decision of this type that is taken by people who are not Members of Parliament should be placed before this House, in line with its constitutional status and the Bill of Rights 1689. It has always been our procedure in this House not to recognise a superior, let alone a bureaucratic or non-democratically elected superior, and we should not do so on this occasion.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I should note for the record that I am proud to serve on the Modernisation Committee, and in my previous role before coming to this place, I gave evidence to Paul Kernaghan.

I am listening to the right hon. Gentleman carefully, and I am struggling slightly to understand his argument. I point to what might be the latest version of the constitution of the Conservative party—I cannot be sure about that, because unlike the Labour party, the Conservative party does not regularly publish its constitution online. I am looking at a version from 2021. The section dealing with ethics, disciplinary investigations and so on says that the governing committee of the Conservative party has empowered an independent ethics and integrity committee to determine matters of conduct, and whether rules have been broken. The committee is made up of a host of independent KCs and the chair of the 1922 committee. This goes to the point that he was making, because paragraph 82.1 says that

“The Committee will be the master of its own procedure”.

If that principle is good enough for the Conservative party, why should it not apply to us in this House?

Jesse Norman: I do not know in what capacity the hon. Gentleman gave evidence to Paul Kernaghan, but that is an extraordinarily misconceived idea. This House is a democratically elected Chamber, and it has been the constitutional doctrine of the United Kingdom for hundreds of years that it should have no superior. That is what we are contesting now. What may or may not be the case in some other body that the hon. Gentleman has dragged into this conversation, in a way that rather breaches the spirit of this cross-party discussion, is completely irrelevant. I am surprised that you have allowed that point to be made, Madam Deputy Speaker, since it is so obviously irrelevant to these discussions. That body is not the legislative body democratically elected by the people of this country.

7.48 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest: I am a member of the House of Commons Commission, which has nominated

me as a member of the independent complaints and grievance scheme advisory group, so I am a member of the group that we are discussing.

When I was first elected, I attended the training on the ICGS, along with my colleagues from the 2024 parliamentary intake, and I was deeply sobered by some of the appalling behaviour I heard about—examples of why the ICGS had to be brought in. I am very grateful that the ICGS is in place, and I know that my staff and other members of the parliamentary community are also grateful for this independent process through which people can raise their complaints and grievances. I fundamentally disagree with the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), in his characterisation of the scheme, and I disagree with the way that the powers of the advisory group have been characterised. At no point does the advisory group have a chance to make any particular judgments about individuals. As the Leader of the House set out, the advisory board governs the procedures that establish how the scheme should operate, through its independent investigators.

Without an independent complaints and grievance scheme for this parliamentary community, we would be far poorer. In this day and age, when trust and confidence in politicians is at an all-time low, it is vital that we are open to scrutiny, and that we attract all possible talent into the parliamentary community. That will happen only if people feel safe to work here. We must have confidence that an independent scheme is available to everybody who chooses to work here, so that they can safely do their jobs.

I hope that everybody supports this motion—I understand that there will not be a Division—and I welcome this opportunity to celebrate the positive work done in this area by the Leader of the House. It is regrettable that all the work she has put into trying to encourage cross-party support for this measure was not recognised by the shadow Leader of the House. His characterisation of that discussion was not representative of what actually took place, but I look forward to there being more support for the motion from other Members of this House, perhaps from other parties, who recognise how vital this independent scheme is for the whole parliamentary community.

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

7.51 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I am pleased to support this motion, which, as the Leader of the House says, has come about as a result of the Kernaghan review, an independent review of the ICGS published just last year. The review's recommendations included the creation of an ICGS policy framework, and the formalisation of the ICGS assurance group into an assurance board with responsibility for the creation of and future changes to an ICGS processes document. The motion is designed to implement those recommendations, and I am happy to support it.

The public are understandably fed up with what many perceive as accepted poor behaviour from those elected to represent them. The ICGS is designed to help restore trust by ensuring that poor behaviour is dealt

with swiftly and appropriately, but that cannot happen if MPs are constantly marking their own homework. If it is thought that there are attempts to manipulate the system, or to wriggle out of tight spots for political gain, we will have no chance of regaining the trust that has been eroded, particularly over recent years. That is why I am so disappointed to see the amendments that have been tabled. After so many years of trust being eroded, we need to find a way to win that trust back, and that is what this scheme does.

Let me go through the amendments to explain what I mean. Amendment (a) would, among other things, remove the right to make collective complaints, making it harder for complainants with the same issue to support each other in coming forward. It would also prevent the ICGS from accepting a person's complaint if it was substantially the same as a complaint they had previously withdrawn. That would worry me, as I do not find it hard to imagine a scenario in which a complainant is—how shall I put this?—encouraged to withdraw their complaint, perhaps following promises of improved behaviour, but then feels the need, and has the courage, to raise the issue again. That amendment would prevent them from being able to come forward again.

Amendments (b), (c) and (d) appear to be a rather blatant attempt to stack the membership of the assurance board, so that it can be politically manipulated. Amendment (e) trashes the recommendation from the Kernaghan review that the ICGS assurance board should be able to approve ICGS procedures. The Kernaghan review clearly recommends that the assurance board should be able to create and make changes to ICGS procedures. That is to speed up a process that the Kernaghan review found to be unduly cumbersome and impacted by political considerations.

Chris Vince: I am just trying to get my head around the amendments. Is the hon. Member suggesting that we avoid these amendments, because we want to ensure that there cannot be political influence over the decisions being made, such that, as she says, those who have committed these terrible acts somehow get away with it?

Marie Goldman: Indeed. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, because I completely agree. Unfortunately, what he suggests is what some of these amendments are designed to do, and that is why I cannot support them. They are an attack on, and a blatant attempt to manipulate, the system, and that is totally wrong. In short, I fully support this motion and do not support any of the amendments. I encourage Members from all parts of the House to do the same.

7.54 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I intend to speak briefly, and I draw the House's attention to my role as chair of the parliamentary group for the GMB, the union that represents the largest number of workers on the parliamentary estate, and to my declarations to that effect in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Parliament is, on the whole, a more professional, safer and more sober place to work than it once was. Such progress, however, is no excuse for complacency. Inappropriate and predatory behaviour can occur anywhere, but the risk factors are higher here, and I pay tribute to

all the workplace representatives who have worked quietly down the years to raise standards and challenge poor practice in this place. I welcome the steps outlined in the motion to clarify and strengthen the ICGS, and I also wish to comment briefly on the Opposition amendments.

The shadow Leader of the House said that amendment (e) will not be moved, but we did not hear about amendment (a), which is in the name of a Back-Bench MP, but is co-signed by the shadow deputy Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey). If I have understood the amendment correctly, it would strike out the scope for collective complaints, and it would block the investigation of complaints if a police investigation has not resulted in a conviction, even though the standard of proof is different for the two things. The amendments would also, as far as I can tell, prevent the reinvestigation of a complaint if a respondent succeeds in persuading or pressurising a complainant into withdrawing. That point was made powerfully by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman). Amendment (a) could provide a cover for abuse, were it agreed. That is plain and apparent, and it is a matter of deep regret that it appears to have some degree of sponsorship from the Opposition.

While I do not wish to depart today from the recommendations of the Kernaghan report, I will raise some matters on workforce representation. We have already heard that the workforce representatives in this place will continue to be consulted, and that is welcome. Can the Leader of the House confirm whether workforce representatives will be able to attend meetings of the assurance board in an observer capacity? It would also be good to hear whether there will be scope for direct representation of those workforce voices on the assurance board. That would improve its functioning. I know that she recently met GMB reps to discuss those same concerns, and I hope that she can comment further tonight.

Finally, some 7,000 people provide support to parliamentarians. They all deserve to work in a modern environment, secure in the knowledge that there is a robust and independent process providing accountability and redress if they are mistreated. The politicisation of those processes in recent years is deeply regrettable, and I hope that cross-party support for them can be swiftly restored.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Standards Committee.

7.58 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): May I begin by welcoming the Government's motion to put the assurance board on a proper footing, and to introduce a clear policy framework under which the ICGS will operate? As some colleagues have said, the ICGS is an extremely important parliamentary workplace scheme, covering all members of the parliamentary community—more than 10,000 people.

Unusually for a body set up only six years ago—by a former Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom—it has undergone a number of reviews, which have highlighted concerns about the operation of the scheme and made recommendations to this House. The most recent was the Kernaghan review, from which today's Government motion has its genesis. The motion will set up in permanent form an assurance board to oversee the workings of the

[Alberto Costa]

ICGS. I welcome the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake) on to that new assurance board on a permanent footing.

Why are we here today? The ICGS has experienced a number of concerning process issues since it was set up, particularly in respect of the quality of its investigations and the excessive time delays in the processing of those investigations. If complainants and respondents are to trust the ICGS, it is of paramount importance for the assurance board to ensure that the issues encountered with the investigatory process are resolved, and that complainants and respondents are subject to a process with a credible and, importantly, timely outcome. As I am sure all Members agree, it is not acceptable to complainants and respondents that, in what is an internal workplace process, they must sometimes wait for years for an outcome on, for instance, bullying.

The Committee on Standards is specifically prohibited from involvement in individual ICGS cases. Preserving the independence of those investigations is vital to the success of the investigations, and to the confidence of those who seek the aid of the ICGS and those who are investigated under the scheme. However, the ICGS is part of a wider standards landscape within the House, and the Committee on Standards has a useful voice in highlighting how the scheme is operating and in commenting on policy. In the standards landscape report produced shortly before the last general election, our predecessors—some of whom remain members of the Committee, particularly the lay members—noted that the Committee had not had time to consider fully the recommendations of the Kernaghan review. In paragraph 175 of that report, the previous Standards Committee recommended to the House that the new Committee, which I now chair, should continue to consider the analysis and recommendations contained in the review.

As Chair of the Committee, I can inform the House that the Committee has since had discussions about the work of the ICGS with its outgoing director, Thea Walton—I thank her for the work that she has done—and that it is due to discuss that work further next week. Owing to the pressure of other work—notably the complex inquiry that we have undertaken at the request of the Modernisation Committee and the Leader of the House into outside interests and employment—we have not had time to consider fully all Mr Kernaghan's recommendations and their implementation, but we will continue to make that a focus of our work during the current Parliament.

Members may have noted that the proposed new assurance board would contain a member of the House of Lords Conduct Committee, but not a Member of the Standards Committee in the Commons. Dame Laura Cox, in her 2018 report on the bullying and harassment of Commons staff, recommended that processes to determine such complaints should be entirely independent of Members of Parliament, and that is the course that the House adopted. The House of Lords is responsible for its own processes, and its Committee retains a greater role than this House's Committee in these matters. Let me emphasise that it is absolutely proper for MPs not to be involved in determining complaints, but there may be scope for involvement in the policy framework surrounding complaints.

I have not sought to amend the motion today—as I have said, I welcome it—but given that involvement in policy does not equate to interference in complaints, and nor should it, it may be worth revisiting in future whether, since the Lords Committee will be represented, this House's Committee on Standards ought to be represented as well. It might also be worth revisiting whether a valuable member voice—and by “member” I mean not just a Member of Parliament but a lay member of the Committee—beyond the House of Commons Commission might also be useful. I do not expect the Leader of the House to respond to that suggestion today, because it is proper for the Committee on Standards to consider this matter fully, as recommended and as approved by the House. Once it has had the opportunity to do so, it may well revert with further recommendations on how today's motion might be enhanced as we go forward together, on a cross-party basis, seeking to ensure that we have the best parliamentary workplace scheme, with the appropriate parliamentary stakeholders included in this welcome assurance board.

Let me end by acknowledging what some other Members have said about trade unions. Only a few hours ago, Unite's parliamentary staff branch emailed all MPs about this very point. I think that the point that I have made about the Committee on Standards sits well with the parliamentary staff branch's own views on ensuring that all relevant parliamentary stakeholders are included in this welcome assurance board.

8.5 pm

Lucy Powell: I thank all Members for participating in the debate, and for the spirit in which they have done so. I particularly thank the Chair of the Standards Committee, the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), for his work and that of his Committee in this space and, indeed, many other spaces. They do a huge service to the House in upholding standards and ensuring that we are operating under the very best behaviour requirements at all times. I also join him in thanking Andrea Leadsom—who I have a great deal of respect for—for her initial work in setting up the ICGS.

The Chair of the Committee was right to say that there have been concerns, especially when the scheme was first set up, about timeliness, about some of the processes and about the quality of some of that work. As the Kernaghan review found, that is improving significantly and steps have been taken, but I want to make it clear that the motion will accelerate progress in ensuring that processes are as effective as they can be. I expect the Standards Committee to take a keen interest in the work involving the ICGS as part of its remit, and I look forward to any further recommendations that it wishes to make about the make-up of the assurance board or, indeed, any other aspects of its operation.

I want to make it clear—and the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), referred to this—that the policy of the ICGS remains a matter for the House. That includes the definitions of what might be deemed bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct; the parameters and scope of the scheme at all times; the obligations on people who make complaints and on, for instance, witnesses; the right to make collective complaints; the right to receive draft assessment reports; and

the right of decision-making bodies to reject reports. Those all remain matters of policy and not procedure, in respect of which the House will retain a right.

Charlotte Nichols: My right hon. Friend has said that scope is an issue that the Modernisation Committee is looking at, and that it forms part of policy rather than procedure. Can she give an indication of when the outcome of that consideration might be coming forward, so that the Kernaghan recommendations can be taken forward further?

Lucy Powell: The issue of scope was covered in the Kernaghan review. Kernaghan made it clear that the scope of the ICGS in when a case involves any two or more members of the parliamentary community. Perhaps there have been times when that scope has been unintentionally narrowed operationally. What the Modernisation Committee is considering is recommendation 3, which relates to a memorandum of understanding between the political parties and the ICGS in relation to how they deal with complaints. I think we can all agree that when complaints are within the scope of the ICGS, they should go to the ICGS and not to political parties, which, unfortunately, have shown themselves not able to deal with such complaints in the same way. That is not just a matter for the Modernisation Committee; it is a matter for the political parties as well, and we are making progress in that regard—particularly with the Labour party, which is keen to engage with the issue.

I will not detain colleagues much longer, but I will pick up on a few points that have been raised. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake) for her brilliant contribution, and for all the work that she is doing on the House of Commons Commission and the assurance board. As ever, I thank my colleague on the commission and the Modernisation Committee, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), who made an excellent contribution on why the amendments are gutting amendments, which we should not support.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), I put on record my thanks to the trade union reps who operate in this House. They should absolutely be involved, through the stakeholder group, in a formal consultation about any changes to procedure. After this debate, I will approach the ICGS to ask it to consider allowing the trade unions to attend meetings of the assurance board in the same capacity in which they come to the House of Commons Commission to make representations, because that will be important.

Finally, I want to take on the arguments made by the shadow Leader of the House. First, these are not my proposals—they are not Government proposals. This is a motion on the business of the House in my name, because that is how such motions get to the Floor of the House. These proposals were put forward by an independent review—to which all political parties and all Members of this House had the opportunity to contribute—of an independent grievance scheme, which has rightly improved behaviour and standards. They are not my proposals; they are independent proposals. This body will not be setting the rules—that is just wrong. It will be looking at procedures, and at how they can be streamlined and made more effective. As I have just said, the rules—that is, the policies—will continue to be set by this House.

It is about time we moved on from the age-old argument that Members of this House have a right to behave however they want and the only time they are accountable for that is at the ballot box five years later. That is the argument that the shadow Leader of the House was proposing—I am sorry, but we put that argument to bed a long time ago, as I think the Chair of the Committee on Standards agrees.

If colleagues, cross-party, support the ICGS and the improvements in behaviour and culture that it has brought to this House, and if they want to see that body becoming more effective and having more timely and quality investigations, they really need to support today's motion. As others have said, we all have a duty to ensure that this is a workplace where people can work safely and securely, free from bullying, harassment and bad behaviour.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Amendments (a) to (e) have been selected for separate decision. However, I understand that no Member wishes to move them, so I will move straight to the main Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the report of the House of Commons Commission entitled Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme: Policy Framework and ICGS Assurance Board (HC 579), further notes the Decisions of the Commission on 12 May, and agrees:

(1) That the ICGS Policy Framework in respect of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct annexed to the Commission report shall have effect from 14 July 2025.

(2) There shall be a body called the ICGS Assurance Board.

(3) The ICGS Assurance Board shall conduct assurance of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme on behalf of the parliamentary community, in accordance with terms of reference published by the House of Commons Commission on 17 December 2024.

(4) The terms of reference of the Assurance Board may be varied by agreement between the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords Commission.

(5) The ICGS Assurance Board shall consist of:

(a) the Clerk Assistant,

(b) the Clerk Assistant of the House of Lords,

(c) the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards,

(d) the Chair of the Independent Expert Panel,

(e) a Member of the House of Commons who is a member of the House of Commons Commission, appointed by the Commission,

(f) a Member of the House of Lords who is a member of the House of Lords Commission,

(g) a representative of the House of Lords Conduct Committee, and

(h) a representative of the human resources department from each House Administration.

(6) The ICGS Assurance Board shall have authority to approve ICGS Procedures, in accordance with the ICGS Policy Framework, provided that:

(a) nothing in the ICGS Procedures document may amend or override provisions in the Policy Framework;

(b) procedures cannot create new obligations for individuals' conduct.

(7) The policies and procedures relating to bullying and harassment and sexual misconduct endorsed by the House on 19 July 2018 and amended on 17 July 2019, 28 April 2021 and 26 April 2022 shall cease to have effect on 14 July 2025, save that they shall continue to apply to any complaints received on or before 13 July 2025.

Backbench Business

Windrush Day 2025

8.13 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Windrush Day 2025.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate.

On 22 June 1948, HMT Empire Windrush arrived in Tilbury docks from the Caribbean, carrying 1,027 passengers and two stowaways. More than half the passengers came from Jamaica, and there were many from Trinidad, Bermuda and British Guiana. There were other nationalities too, including Polish passengers who had been displaced during the second world war. The passengers were responding to advertisements in local newspapers, including *The Gleaner* in Jamaica, for jobs in the UK, with an opportunity to travel on the Windrush for £28.

As we mark this 77th anniversary, I want to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Windrush pioneers who have passed away in the last year. They include Windrush passengers Alford Gardner, who I had the privilege of meeting at the 70th anniversary reception in Speaker's House, and "Big John" Richards. They also include the Windrush pioneers Nadia Cattouse, Eddie Grizzle, Enid Jackson, Claudette Williams, Gerlin Bean, Lord Herman Ouseley—the former chief executive of Lambeth council—Paul Stephenson, Norman Mitchell, Nellie Louise Brown and my constituent Neil Flanigan, a founding member of the West Indian Association of Service Personnel. Their loss is an important reminder of the importance of capturing the stories and oral histories that are part of our national story while there is still time to do so.

In 1948, the UK was desperate for labour to help rebuild the country following the devastation of the second world war, and the passengers on the Windrush brought a wealth of skills. They included dozens of airmen who had volunteered to serve in the Royal Air Force during the war and who had played a hugely significant role in fighting fascism in Europe, including the late Samuel Beaver King—Sam King—who became the first black mayor of Southwark. Windrush passengers from the Caribbean travelled as British citizens as a result of the British Nationality Act 1948, which created a new category of "citizen of the United Kingdom and colonies" for anyone born or naturalised in either the UK or any of the countries subject to colonial rule.

About 200 of the Windrush passengers found temporary accommodation at the Clapham South deep air raid shelter, from where they found their way to the nearest labour exchange, on Coldharbour Lane in Brixton in my constituency, to look for work and permanent accommodation. Many of them found accommodation through Jamaican landlord Gus Leslie, who had bought property in and around Somerleyton Road, and they settled in the area close to what is now called Windrush Square. The Windrush passengers found London still devastated by the war, and they found work in a wide variety of different sectors of the economy, including in construction and on London's public transport network. It is fitting that one of the London overground lines has now been named the Windrush line.

Of course, many of the passengers came to work in the NHS, which was formally established less than a fortnight after the arrival of the Windrush. King's College hospital is at the other end of Coldharbour Lane from the site of the labour exchange in my constituency. Members of the Windrush generation have helped to sustain our NHS from its inception, not only in London but right across the country.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my constituency neighbour for making such a powerful opening speech. Does she recognise the valuable contributions of the Windrush generation staff at King's College hospital in her constituency and, equally, the valuable contribution—and powerful statue—of Mary Seacole at St Thomas' hospital, in my constituency, that overlooks this Parliament?

Helen Hayes: Of course, in our two boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark, the contribution of the Windrush generation is extraordinary. It is demonstrated most powerfully in the statue that my hon. Friend mentions.

The lives of Windrush passengers, and of others from the Caribbean who followed them to Brixton, were captured by commercial photographer Harry Jacobs, who set up shop on Landor Road, close to Brixton town centre, to provide photographic services so that people could send images to their loved ones. Harry's photos poignantly captured the hopes, dreams and achievements of people in the process of making a new life: a woman in her nurse's uniform; families dressed in their Sunday best, showing off their prized possessions; and the first image of a new baby or a new spouse.

However, as we remember those stories with affection, our commemorations of Windrush Day must avoid any sentimentality. The contribution of the Windrush pioneers was made in a context of widespread racism, the clearest and ugliest illustration of which was found on signs on the doors of boarding houses—stating "No Irish, no blacks, no dogs"—and which in many situations ran much deeper, often resulting in daily discrimination and humiliation. An egregious example is the appalling and still unaddressed scandal of black children being deemed emotionally subnormal in the 1960s and '70s and being placed in special schools, where they were denied an education and made to feel inferior.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. She talks about the experience of black children in education, and could I remind her of my constituent, Eric Huntley, whom I serendipitously bumped into at the weekend? He and his wife Jessica, who lived at 141 Coldershaw Road in West Ealing, established the Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications Bookshop back in the 1960s and 1970s. They also established the Black Parents Movement, which was to help children who were stuck in such schools and were not being given the education they were entitled to. Does she agree that we still need to continue that work to make sure that black children in our schools are treated fairly and get the education they deserve?

Helen Hayes: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's constituents, who, like so many of the Windrush generation, demonstrated their resilience by taking initiatives to circumnavigate the racism to which they were subject.

We still live with that racism and discrimination today, and we can never be complacent about that. We must continue to address all the issues that still need to be dealt with.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): In the 1960s and 1970s, lots of young black children were identified as educationally subnormal, and were sent to such schools even though they were not educationally subnormal. Does my hon. Friend believe that their descendants and the people affected by that really need to be given an apology to acknowledge what they experienced during that time?

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work she is doing on this issue. As I have said, I believe this is an unaddressed issue on which there is still work to do.

In that vein, it is devastating to read the words of John Carpenter, which I have shared before in this House, who travelled on the Windrush aged 22. Speaking in 1998, he said:

“They tell you it is the ‘mother country’, you’re all welcome, you all British. When you come here you realise you’re a foreigner and that’s all there is to it.”

Despite the hardships and injustices they endured, the Windrush passengers and those who followed them settled in the UK and put down roots, using the Pardon Hand community savings scheme to buy property to circumvent the racist landlords, and to establish businesses and churches. Sam King became a postal worker, was elected to Southwark council and became the first black mayor of the borough. It was a very brave achievement since he faced threats from the National Front, which was active in Southwark at that time. Sam was also instrumental in establishing the Notting Hill carnival and the *West Indian Gazette*. He later established the Windrush Foundation with Arthur Torrington, who still runs it.

In my constituency, the Windrush generation helped to forge the Brixton we know today. In doing so, they made a huge contribution to a community where everyone is welcome, where difference is not feared but celebrated, and where we are not strangers but friends and neighbours. To mark the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, talented young people from Brixton designed a beautiful logo, which is based on the pattern of human DNA.

The Windrush generation and subsequent migrants who have come to this country from all over the Commonwealth sparked the emergence of modern multicultural Britain. They are part of us, and part of the UK’s 21st-century DNA. The Windrush generation made an extraordinary and enduring contribution, because the Windrush generation continued to endure—

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Hayes: Yes.

Dawn Butler: On that point about the expats who came over from the Caribbean and what they endured, does my hon. Friend agree that we sometimes fail to recognise the strength and the resilience of the Windrush generation, which often gets overlooked?

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for intervening and helping me make sense of a sentence in my notes that did not quite work.

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that the Windrush generation made an extraordinary and enduring contribution, and showed immense resilience, but they continued to endure racism and injustice. In 2018, journalist Amelia Gentleman exposed what became known as the Windrush scandal—the systematic denial of citizenship rights to British citizens who had come to the UK from across the Commonwealth in the decades after the second world war, which saw them deported or denied entry to the UK, unable to work or claim their pension, and refused healthcare and housing.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making a fantastic speech, and for securing this debate. It does seem sometimes quite unfashionable in this day and age to look at the discrimination that that community has endured for so many decades, and not to see it as structural racism. In other words, there is a thread from colonialism, empire and slavery all the way through to Windrush and what we still experience to this day. Would she comment on that issue?

Helen Hayes: I will come on to the wider implications of the scandal, which I think speak to the issue my hon. Friend highlights.

The Windrush scandal was the most egregious breach of trust. The Windrush compensation scheme was poorly set up by the previous Government, justice has been far too slow and, sadly, many victims of the scandal have died still waiting for redress. It was very moving to attend, with my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), the Windrush national vigil on Windrush Square on 6 April, led by Bishop Dr Desmond Jadoo, to remember the victims.

A comparative analysis by King’s College London of the compensation scheme compared with other redress schemes, including the Post Office Horizon scheme and the infected blood scandal scheme, has demonstrated that the Windrush compensation scheme has a much lower success rate for applicants, more complex initial eligibility requirements, a higher required standard of proof, an inaccessible application process, an absence of funding for independent legal representation for applicants, decision making that lacks independence, and a process that is inaccessible. It is vital that changes are made so that victims of the Windrush scandal can have confidence in the compensation scheme.

That is important because the impacts of the scandal are experienced not only by the victims themselves, but across the Windrush generation as a whole and for subsequent generations, who live with the emotional weight and the economic cost of what their loved ones have endured, and whose trust in British institutions and the Government has been fractured as a consequence.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. Does she share not just my tribute to Amelia Gentleman for the work she did to uncover what happened with the Windrush scandal, as well as people like Colin McFarlane and the Justice 4 Windrush Generation campaign, but my horror at the evidence we have seen this week that

[Ms Stella Creasy]

those given compensation to date have not actually been given the same amounts as those in other comparable scandals? Does she agree that we must right that wrong from this place?

Helen Hayes: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is a question of trust and a question of basic fairness. There cannot be any excuse for a lack of clarity across compensation schemes dealing with similar structural injustices for which the state is responsible.

There is more work to do to ensure that such a scandal can never happen again. This means reflecting on the causes of the Windrush scandal in future policy and legislative decisions. For example, we must make sure that the introduction of e-visas allows no scope for anyone who is legitimately in the UK to be wrongly denied their status because they cannot access a document online.

It also means ensuring that we understand our own past. The Government have commissioned Professor Becky Francis to undertake the curriculum and assessment review, and I hope she will be thinking about how subjects such as history and geography can be taught through the prism of an accurate understanding of our past, so that through a prism of migration to our country, whether, like me, people come from a town with a Viking name and a Norman church or whether their family arrived in the UK in more recent times, they can locate their own story in our history and understand that there is no us and them. We are a nation that has always been formed and sustained by people who have come from overseas to make their home on these islands.

And it means resourcing properly the organisations that are the custodians of history, including the National Windrush Museum, and the Black Cultural Archives in my constituency. The BCA was established in 1981 by Len Garrison, who had come to the UK from Jamaica as a child in 1954 and became a great educationalist in our city. The BCA has an extensive archive documenting the history of black people in the UK, from the African-Roman emperor stationed at Hadrian's wall, Septimius Severus, to black Georgians, the Windrush generation and much, much more. It is a national resource that is critical to our understanding as a society and vital for the sense of place and belonging for many black British people. The BCA needs stable core funding from the Government commensurate with its national role to enable it to do the work of outreach and interpretation, and to secure it for the long term. I mention very briefly the important and ambitious campaign led by Patrick Vernon to retrieve the anchor of the Empire Windrush from its current resting place in the Mediterranean sea, so that it can be restored as a memorial and as a tool for the education of younger generations.

In preparing for this debate, I have been in touch with many people who have campaigned and continue to campaign for Windrush justice. They have differing views about the role of celebration on Windrush Day. I know there are some who are concerned that celebration undermines the fight for justice and that they cannot celebrate until justice has been done, and I understand that perspective, but there are others who passionately believe that assertively celebrating the Windrush generation

and all they have contributed and achieved, giving visibility to the community, is a part of the fight for justice. That celebration sustains their campaigning and it is also important for health and wellbeing. I am looking forward to joining the Brixton Immortals Domino club celebrations on Saturday and the Big Caribbean Lunch on Sunday, organised by Ros Griffiths, both to be held on Windrush Square in my constituency.

Finally, I want to consider the wider importance of fully addressing the Windrush scandal and all its implications. As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) highlighted, the Windrush scandal happened as a consequence of structural injustices and it happened as a consequence of our history. Windrush must not be compartmentalised, because if we do that we cannot be sure that such a scandal will not be repeated. I mentioned the extraordinary role of members of the Windrush generation and their descendants in our NHS, which continues to this day. Our NHS today, in King's College hospital in my constituency, is also sustained by nurses from the Philippines and south India, who were asked to come by our hospitals because we needed their skills in our healthcare system. We cannot rest until we are sure that they, or any other group, will not face the horrific injustice of discrimination based on racism and ignorance that is embedded in law and policy.

I welcome very much the personal commitment of my hon. Friend the Minister to Windrush justice. I was pleased to attend the Windrush summit last week at the Home Office. It is a credit to the approach my hon. Friend has taken and the work she has done that so many people who have campaigned for Windrush justice felt able to attend an event in the Department that had done them such wrong. I know that many of the attendees would not have thought that possible just a few months ago. I welcome the Minister's commitment to implementing all the recommendations of Wendy Williams' lessons learned review and the imminent appointment of a Windrush commissioner. I thank her for all the work she is doing to listen, engage and take meaningful steps to restore trust and confidence. I know that she understands that there is much more still to do, and I look forward to continuing to work with her on behalf of my constituents to secure the depth and breadth of the change we need.

8.32 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this important debate. She has long been a friend to the Windrush community and their descendants, and has long played a major role in celebrating and commemorating their contributions to this country.

I am proud to speak in this debate as the first black MP for Liverpool; I am proud of my African and Irish heritage. Many Members might not know that the SS Ormonde docked in Liverpool the year before the Empire Windrush made her final destination at Tilbury in June 1948. The Windrush generation came to Britain as citizens—invited by Enoch Powell, we should remember—to rebuild a broken nation after the war. In Liverpool, they settled mostly in the south of the city, building a vibrant community and contributing to our culture in many different ways, from music to food to football and to the unique Scouse spirit. They included Lord Woodbine,

a Trinidadian who helped The Beatles to achieve fame, but who sadly was written out of history. They worked in the shipyards, the hospitals, the buses and the schools. Against the daily struggles and common racism, they built our city and claimed it as their home.

Today, we honour their courage and celebrate the legacy they built. In so doing, we reject again the disgraceful “island of strangers” narrative that has reared its ugly head recently, evoking the shadow of Enoch Powell as he whipped up hatred against the Windrush generation and other migrants he invited to this country. Today is a reminder that our diversity is the best of us. For the sacrifice these immigrants made to better our country, we all owe them a debt.

With that in mind, I want to use the opportunity of this debate to call for swifter action to fix the Windrush compensation scheme. The Windrush scandal was a national disgrace. It was a deliberate and inevitable outcome of the Tories’ hostile environment policy, and a nightmare for so many who had come to this country as children—citizens who had worked their whole lives in service to our country and had always paid their taxes. The injustices these people still face are deeply felt. They are denied access to employment, healthcare and other services, often becoming homeless, and are even detained and removed from the country they have called home for decades. The scandal has had a chilling effect on the entire community, and many now fear coming forward to access services in case they face repercussions.

To date, the scheme has been incredibly slow and bureaucratic. Data from this time last year shows that 8,800 claims were made for compensation, only 2,600 of which had received payments. The Government have recently made more funding available for grassroots organisations to support claims through the Windrush scheme, but we still need to go so much further and faster. We need to adapt the recommendations made by the Williams review, rebuild trust and relations with the black Caribbean community and consider the implications of our current immigration policies, which risk a continuation of the hostile environment. Today, we reaffirm our fight against hostile immigration policies and celebrate our diversity as strength.

8.37 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I congratulate my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this vital debate.

The legacy of Windrush and the plight of the Windrush generation is a matter very dear to my hon. Friend and her constituents, as it is to me and my constituents, not least because her constituency is home to Windrush Square, which sits on the edge of my constituency, and to which we both have the pleasure of making numerous visits throughout the year. Most recently, I had the pleasure of joining my hon. Friend and neighbour, along with our other neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), at the Windrush national vigil, organised by the Windrush National Organisation. This event brought together community members for a moment of reflection, remembrance and solidarity for the Windrush generation and their descendants, and provided an opportunity to

acknowledge the profound contributions they have made to the fabric of our society. It is that aspect I want to focus on before coming to the Windrush scandal and compensation scheme.

I have spoken before in this Chamber about the role the Windrush generation played in not only rebuilding our nation, but transforming our society and culture. My constituency of Clapham and Brixton Hill was completely reshaped by the Windrush generation, with a legacy that is still evident in the people, the culture, the music, the art, the cuisine and in so many other ways. Beyond rebuilding our cities and enriching our culture, the Windrush generation played a crucial role in shaping and sustaining the public services that we continue to rely on every single day. They were the nurses, midwives and doctors who formed the backbone of our NHS, often working long hours in difficult conditions to care for the sick and vulnerable. They were the bus drivers and train operators who kept our transport networks running, ensuring that Britain’s economy kept going. They were the teachers who educated generations of children, instilling in them the values of hard work and perseverance. They served in our armed forces, fighting for a country that did not always recognise them as equals. Their contributions were not just significant—they were indispensable. Without them, Britain would not be the country it is today.

We in this House often speak of the values of tolerance, diversity, resilience and community—what we call British values. The Windrush generation embodied those values through their courage, determination and unwavering belief in a better future, but they were not always treated with those same values in mind. Their influence runs through the fabric of our nation, and we must ensure that their contributions are not just remembered, but celebrated, honoured and upheld for generations to come. We have to celebrate them, but we must also understand and remember that the Windrush generation were not always treated with the dignity and respect that they deserved, and that has to be as much a part of our commemorations as anything else.

Those who travelled across oceans to come to Britain did so thinking they were coming to a mother country that would welcome them with open arms. Instead, they were met with hostility, discrimination and barriers to opportunity. They were denied housing, turned away from jobs for which they were over-qualified, and often made to feel unwelcome in the very nation they had come to help rebuild. Many of them and their descendants faced similar treatment during the appalling Windrush scandal.

It was very much a scandal of the previous Government’s making. The Mother of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), recently gave a lecture in this very building as part of the Windrush summit. I remember the immigration legislation that caused all the problems and led to the Windrush scandal unfolding. I remember the Mother of the House standing in this House and warning the Home Secretary at the time that if the Government passed the legislation, it would affect people they had not intended it to affect—people who looked different to a number of people across this country. She was pointing to the black community and saying that the legislation would be applied in a way that would cause this scandal, and it did.

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

I remember when the scandal was brought to the fore. I remember the news at the time and the people coming forward with individual cases. I pay tribute to the Mother of the House, because it was she who led the first urgent question on the issue, and it was she who continually brought the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister to the Dispatch Box to apologise, repeatedly—until one of them ultimately paid the price with her job and until certain guarantees were made and we started with the review. The previous Government took some steps towards recompensing people for how they had been treated, and that was important, but for so many—me included—it never felt as though there was genuine remorse for the pain, humiliation and torment inflicted on the Windrush generation. It never felt as though the Government at the time truly cared.

I am pleased that that seems to have changed. The Minister for Migration and Citizenship was the first Government Minister to visit Windrush Square and joined us at the vigil in April. It did not go unnoticed that this token of respect for the Windrush generation was one that no previous Government Minister had ever displayed. I am so pleased that the Government have now taken steps to re-establish the Home Office's Windrush unit, which will focus on the action needed to ensure that the Windrush scandal is never repeated. I am also pleased that the Home Office is recruiting a Windrush commissioner. I hope the Minister can update the House on the progress of that appointment.

Most importantly, the Minister has stressed that the Government are committed to a fundamental reset for the Windrush generation. I hope that the Minister will outline clearly what steps the Government are taking to bring about that reset. Unfortunately, it does not seem from the current immigration legislation going through this House as if lessons have been learned from Windrush. One thing the Mother of the House mentioned in her recent lecture is that we should be careful not to romanticise the issues of the Windrush generation, because the scandal continues.

Windrush Day is great, but justice would be better. The Windrush monument is great, but justice would be even better. The funding being given to community organisations—it is not much, but it is some—to push these issues is great, but in comparison to the compensation that should be paid, it is not enough, and again, justice would be better. While it is nice that the grants and bits of support are going ahead and that we talk about the Windrush generation more, the Home Office must not think that that is a substitute for the justice that the Windrush generation have continually been denied. The Home Office must not think that we do not notice that far too many have died before regularising their status and before receiving a penny of justice. It has not gone unnoticed, and it must be resolved.

The Windrush generation deserve nothing short of our respect and gratitude for the role they have played in British society. I hope that the Government will begin to lay the groundwork to demonstrate that, and not just with pomp and platitudes but with the justice that they have been denied for far too long.

8.44 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in the debate and to mark Windrush Day 2025. It is a day of reflection, recognition and pride. In Huddersfield, we are proud of our rich, diverse communities, shaped in no small part by those who came here as part of the Windrush generation and their descendants. Families made their homes in our town and have worked in our hospitals, on our buses, and in our textile mills and factories. They have helped to build not only our local economy but the very fabric of our communities, and established a number of dominoes clubs in the town, too. They include many people from Carriacou in Grenada—we have one of the largest diasporas outside Grenada—as well as communities from Jamaica and St Lucia. Their contributions continue to shape the cultural and civic life of Huddersfield today.

Windrush Day gives us a chance to honour that legacy, but it must also remain a call to action, especially when so many of those who gave so much continue to be denied justice. For this year's commemorations in Huddersfield, there will be a powerful new documentary series by Kirklees Local TV as part of its groundbreaking Windrush wise words project. The documentary captures the stories of 16 Caribbean descendants, preserving their lived experiences for future generations and shining a light on the contributions and challenges faced by our Windrush communities and their descendants.

Events like the Deighton carnival provide an incredible local celebration of African Caribbean culture and continue to showcase the vibrancy, pride and legacy of our communities in Huddersfield. Venn Street was once home to legendary sound systems that put Huddersfield at the heart of the UK's reggae scene in the 1980s. Gregory Isaacs, Jimmy Cliff and Desmond Dekker all played at Venn Street. More often than not, artists would come to Huddersfield direct from Jamaica, though some might do one show in Birmingham or London.

It is vital that we celebrate those stories, but we must also confront the ongoing injustices that many still face. I previously raised in the House the case of a constituent who has been struggling to access the Windrush compensation scheme. Like many, he did not have access to support or legal aid. The process can be complicated, confusing and deeply frustrating for those seeking justice. Sadly, his experience is not unique. Across the country, many eligible individuals still do not know that they can apply, and others are deterred by the scheme's complexity. Some are navigating ill health or grief but are expected to work through layers of bureaucracy to get the redress that they are owed. I welcome the Minister's response to my question in the Chamber, and the subsequent assistance offered to my constituent. I know that she is committed to getting this right.

The Labour Government have made it clear that the treatment of the Windrush generation was a profound injustice. We must do everything in our power to ensure that everyone affected is treated with dignity and can access the support and compensation they deserve.

Deirdre Costigan: I have learned a lot about my hon. Friend's constituency from her speech. She mentions the difficulties that victims of the Windrush scandal have had in accessing support and getting the compensation that they deserve; in fact, many of them have been afraid to go to the authorities, because it is those same authorities

that treated them that way in the first place. Does she welcome the £1.5 million that the new Labour Government have put into the advocacy support group, which will help smaller, local advocacy groups and community groups to assist people in accessing the compensation that they deserve?

Harpreet Uppal: I do welcome that. I was about to turn to the subject funding outreach in places like Huddersfield; that funding will be important. We must ensure that local organisations can play their part, because they know best who to reach out to, but they must have institutional support. We must also embed cultural change in the Home Office, so that these injustices never happen again.

The Windrush generation did not just arrive in Britain; they helped to shape it. They made our NHS possible. They raised their families in our towns and cities, and they contributed to the growth of our economy. They have contributed so much to Huddersfield, the town I live in. They have endured discrimination and hardship, yet they have stood proud, contributing with dignity and determination. As we mark Windrush Day this year, let us move beyond words. Let us match our tributes with action, and ensure that justice is delivered, not delayed.

8.49 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for her powerful introduction to the debate. She referenced areas of her constituency that I know like the back of my hand, because they are where I grew up. Growing up in Brixton, there were things that I recognised from an early age. I recognised that the place was special and unique. I recognised that in the midst of all the chaos, it seemed to work well. I recognised that it embraced so many people from so many different communities. I think about people with my heritage, from Nigeria, mixing and interacting with the Irish, Portuguese, West Indian, Spanish, Latin American and white community. All those different communities are mixing in the melting pot that we know and love as Brixton.

It was really important, and such a testament, to see Windrush Square unveiled in the heart of Brixton. It is a place that gives so many people a sense of belonging and somewhere to commemorate and celebrate our vital Windrush community. Sunday's Windrush Day is another chance for us to celebrate and recognise the contributions of the Windrush generation to our communities, and to the whole of our country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) just said.

Last year, I had the honour of welcoming the now Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary to the Windrush celebrations in Oval in my constituency, not too far from here. At that event, my hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood, and for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy)—my other constituency neighbour—and I met the pioneers of the Windrush generation who had built the communities that I grew up in around Brixton. These communities gave us the strength and resilience to face challenges, and a belief that we could make change when we worked together.

Windrush Day is a source of pride in the communities that have been built through that hard work and determination.

As much as Windrush Day is a celebration, we must not lose sight of the challenges that this generation have gone through. Too often, these communities have been built in the hard fire of adversity, and nothing represents that more than the Windrush scandal. It saw many members of the Windrush generation, people who had been in this country for decades, being denied the most basic rights. This led to people losing their home and their job, and even being denied medical treatment. Can you imagine the scandal? Some of them must have known that their grandmother or grandfather had worked in those same hospitals. At least 83 people ended up being wrongly deported from this country that they called home.

Disgracefully, as we have heard, many of those who were victims of the scandal are still waiting to receive compensation. *The Independent* reported last year that at least 50 people had died waiting for compensation. Following this Windrush debate, the Government must work to speed up the compensation scheme, as I know my hon. Friend the Minister is doing. They must reach out to people who understandably do not feel comfortable engaging with the Government and the Home Office. I urge the Government to ensure that the Windrush victims have the right legal support, so that they feel able to get the money that they deserve.

The Windrush scandal did not have its roots in the 2010s. It started in the discrimination and racism that the Windrush generation experienced when they first arrived in the UK. It started when some of them arrived by train at Waterloo station in my constituency. The station is home to the national Windrush monument, which was unveiled on 22 June 2022 by Prince William and Catherine. The statue depicts a man, a woman and a young child, with their suitcases, in their Sunday best. That is what the Windrush generation did: they dressed up in their Sunday best to come to this country to help serve it. The statue was designed by Basil Watson. I urge Members who have not visited it to do so. On the side of the statue there is a poem by Professor Laura Serrant entitled “You called...and we came”, reliving that call to action—the call to duty that many of the Windrush generation rightly answered.

I want to mention the Mary Seacole statue. I think back to early June 2017, when I was pacing up and down the maternity ward of St Thomas' hospital, trying to get my son to come out. He was almost two weeks overdue. Looking down from the eighth floor and seeing that statue of Mary Seacole, I thought about the many women from the Windrush generation who had committed so many hard years to working for our NHS. Through the 12-year Mary Seacole appeal, members of the community raised vital funds to ensure that the statue was erected. It was formally opened by another great pioneer and child of the Windrush: Baroness Floella Benjamin, who sits in the other place.

Another statue in my constituency is the “Bronze Woman” at Stockwell war memorial, just by the roundabout. According to records, it is the first statue depicting a black woman. It was erected in 2008, and I had the honour of attending the unveiling, as a councillor. It depicts a woman holding a child in the air. It shows the power of the Windrush, which runs through my constituency and many others.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

As hon. Members have highlighted, we cannot again make the same mistakes that happened during the Windrush scandal. While we have made progress, we know that racism has not completely disappeared from our society. We need to ask ourselves how it can be right that we still see health and race inequalities in our NHS, and how it can be right that some of our black and minority ethnic communities continue to live in bad-quality accommodation. We must not treat the Windrush scandal in isolation, and we must not, as a Government, make the same decisions in our policymaking that led to the Windrush scandal in the first place.

I urge the Government to be extremely careful when they carry out their review of citizenship later this year. We must not put arbitrary barriers in the way of those arriving in our country. We must not say to people who work day in, day out, as our nurses and our carers—jobs that essentially keep this country going—that they have less of a right to become a citizen. Doing that will entrench further inequalities in our country. It will deny people who pay taxes and help run our public services a say in how those services are run. That cannot be the aim of this Government, and we must never introduce hostile policies like those that led to the Windrush scandal in the first place.

8.56 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for opening this timely debate—she made a fantastic speech—and hon. Friends for their contributions.

I want to touch on the story that Windrush tells of this country. Stories are important; the stories we tell ourselves define us as a country. It is right that we celebrate the Windrush generation and their contribution, but as other speakers have said, there is a dark side to this story. I do not want to be too negative, but I want to touch on some of that dark side, because it is important and instructive, given where we find ourselves, as a country and a world. I would not be standing here today as a black Member of Parliament if one of my ancestors in Africa had not been abducted and put on a slave ship. For generations after that, my ancestors were beaten and made to work in the most terrible conditions to make money for someone in this country, or for their slave master in the Caribbean. Yet because of those ancestors, I stand here today. History is complicated—I think we can agree on that—but that does not mean that we should not try to unpick it.

Looking around at my colleagues, I must say that it is politically fashionable in some quarters to say that many of us are recipients of DEI—diversity, equality and inclusion policies—that we have been gifted our places, and that anyone who comes from the black community, is a woman or has tendencies or sexualities that are not seen as the norm has been gifted their position. Anyone who understands the Labour party selection process will know that is not the case. In fact, many of us faced a double whammy—we are both working class and black. It takes a lot to get into this place, and yet we are here, and we are not going anywhere.

I remember back in 2021, when the Conservatives, who were here on the Government Benches, under Boris Johnson, produced the disgraceful race report.

I think they want to forget that. I would be interested to hear what the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), thinks about that report now. It said that structural racism does not exist, it is a figment of our collective imagination, we have effectively been dreaming about it for 400 years, and there is no link between empire, slavery and the racism that stretches from that all the way to the Windrush scandal and beyond.

Indeed, that notion of outsiders—of foreigners—figures in much of our immigration debate to this very day. What is racism? It is a hierarchy of worth. We see it all around the world in conflicts: “If you are from this part of the world with this ethnicity, your worth is this much, but if that is your ethnicity, your worth is that much and you can take that much suffering. And if you’re up here, you don’t need to suffer; you’re part of the elite.” That is what racism is: a hierarchy of suffering. We cannot forget that it is real and allow people to tell us that our history is something in which only good things happened, where things were shiny and nice, and that we had an empire to help and develop the rest of the world.

I remember when I was going on the ITV breakfast programme, and I had to have a chat with the producer beforehand. He said, “Clive, you do realise that the railways in India have helped India to get into the 21st century and to industrialise? The British built those railways.” I replied, “You know, you’re right, but that is why it’s so complicated. Do you think for a second that the British built the railways in India for the benefit of the Indians?” The answer is no; they built them to extract vast wealth from India, and it just so happens that the Indians can now use that railway network to industrialise and make themselves richer. History is complicated.

I will finish with this. There is a movement around the world; in Germany, in Europe and, dare I say it, in the United States, whose President believes that a genocide is happening in South Africa—really, he believes that, and he is coming here for a state visit. All around the world, there is an attack on history—on good history. Good history is complicated; it tells a complicated story about this country and its past. I have served this country knowing full well its history in empire, knowing full well its history in slavery. I have served it because I love this country, warts and all. I do not need to tell myself a story about this country being perfect in the past and only doing things for the good. I love it, warts and all, because it has given me and my family, friends and community so many opportunities.

My dad was welcomed to this country by my mother’s English family. The trade union movement welcomed him. Our history is complex. The Labour party is complex. The country is complex. History is complex. Let us never forget that, as we go forwards. We must understand that history is complex for a reason because—and this moves me—we are all human beings, and human beings are complex themselves. That is why our history is complex and that is what we need to understand. As we move forward, talk about Windrush, celebrate Windrush Day, and pass legislation in this place about black people, about immigration and about asylum seekers, let us remember our complex history and try to do better in the future.

9.3 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis). History is written by the person holding the pen. That does not necessarily mean that it is the history of what happened at the time; it is told through a specific lens. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for instigating this important debate on Windrush.

My Brent East constituency is one of the most diverse constituencies in Europe. On that point, as this is the first time I have spoken in the Chamber today, I send my condolences to everyone affected by the plane crash in India, as many of my constituents have been. Ultimately, what affects one, affects us all.

The Windrush ship brought people from Jamaica, Trinidad, St Lucia, Grenada and Barbados. As my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) said, many served in the British armed forces in world war two, so they were owed something by their mother country.

I will talk a bit about my mum. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) talked about people coming over in their Sunday best. If we look at those pictures, we can see how crisp and sharp their suits were, with shirts that were sparkling white. They were proud—so proud. We had our playing out clothes, our school clothes, and our church clothes, and never the three did meet. We were taught an inherent sense of pride in ourselves. We were not allowed to eat on the street, because that would give the impression that we did not have food at home. We were not allowed to carry clothes in a plastic bag, because they called that a scandal bag in Jamaica, so we had to have a proper cloth bag. We were taught so much.

We washed every day, which might seem like a weird thing to say now, but my parents would tell me that they had only washed once a week because they had to go to a wash house. We had to wash every single day. We also washed our meat and our chicken before we seasoned it—and the seasoning was more than salt and pepper; salt and pepper were an accompaniment. What was brought from the Caribbean is more than some people appreciate, because it is now taken for granted.

When we went to other West Indian people's homes, we would find lots of things in common, like hand crocheted doilies on the chairs and on the table. My mum used to crochet little ducks and dip them in dye so they had little red beaks. It was so inventive. Nowadays, we would pay a fortune for that skill. All our clothes were bespoke; I would be embarrassed that my mum made my clothes, but now I would love my mum to make my clothes to measure. Now I have grown up, I realise that the things that we were taught to be almost ashamed of when we came here were actually very special—very unique and grand.

The reason we would find the same picture frame in West Indian people's homes is that there was only one photographer who would take pictures of black people and frame them. Pictures of weddings kind of looked the same then, because there was only one place that would do that for the West Indian community. That is how West Indian people were treated in a place that they called the motherland.

The Windrush scandal was about not just the loss of employment, the loss of access to benefits, homelessness and the loss of access to housing, or the loss of access to healthcare and education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) said, the system was deliberately structured to make sure that black people did not progress by labelling them as educationally subnormal—to stop their ability to work and earn. It stopped people buying their house or sending their child to college, which a lot of West Indian people had done.

The reason only 2,000 people have claimed is that there is a lot of shame that comes with that; the West Indian community is a very proud community. That is why we have to instil Labour values from a Labour Government in how we readdress what has happened to the Windrush generation. It has been an absolute scandal. Around 50,000-plus people have been affected by this issue, and some will die. Some have died, and some will die before they see justice. We must speed up progress.

The scheme was not a light-touch design, as the then Government said it was. It was something like 45 pages, and although they said that people did not need a lawyer, they did because it was so complex. I am ashamed that not one Back-Bench Member of His Majesty's Opposition has come to this debate. This is not a niche debate; this is a debate about hundreds of thousands of people who came to this country to rebuild it, who were invited here, and Opposition Members have not even had the decency to come here and contribute—and they are the cause of the scandal and injustice.

I will end as I began. Martin Luther King said that what affects one affects us all, because that is the interrelated structure of society. We are all intertwined in life's journey, and as racism is increasing in some parts of the country and people are trying to divide us, I hope that we remember—on Jo Cox day—that we have more in common.

9.10 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends for their speeches and stories from their constituents. They have been incredibly insightful as well as heartbreaking, but that is exactly why we are here. I am sincerely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for giving us the opportunity to bring the House together to honour the Windrush generation, and those whose courage, resilience, and extraordinary contribution helped rebuild post-war Britain. Let us be clear: they answered a call. They worked hard and grafted, and they helped to shape the very fabric of the country we know today.

We see examples of that generation's legacy in Wolverhampton, embodied in the life and work of so many people, like Professor Mel Chevannes—an inspirational role model who, when elected in 1981 as the city's first African-Caribbean councillor, went on to chair the social services committee and later became the first African-Caribbean chair of the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust. Her leadership, her service, and her example not only opened doors but shattered glass ceilings. This weekend, Wolverhampton will pay a lasting tribute to Professor Chevannes with the unveiling of a bronze bust—a permanent reminder of the power of representation and the enduring contribution of the Windrush generation to our public life.

[Mrs Sureena Brackenridge]

Today is not only about celebration; it is also about justice, because for too many the Windrush story includes real pain. The Windrush scandal inflicted deep harm on people who had every right to live here—people who built their lives here and served our communities, but were betrayed by a system that refused to see their humanity. We saw that pain in the story of the late Paulette Wilson—a Wolverhampton resident, and a cook who once worked in Parliament, in this very House. Paulette came to Britain as a child and spent more than 50 years here, but in 2015 she received a letter declaring her an illegal immigrant. She was made homeless, her benefits were stopped, and in 2017 she was detained and sent to Heathrow for deportation to a country she had not seen in half a century.

With the swift action of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), who was Paulette's MP at that time, working alongside the Refugee and Migrant Centre in Wolverhampton, and with Paulette's strong determination, she fought back and she won. She was granted leave to remain. But more than that: she chose to speak out, becoming a voice for so many others who had suffered in silence. Her courage helped expose the systematic injustice at the heart of the Windrush scandal and force change. In 2021, a plaque was proudly placed at the Wolverhampton Heritage Centre, once the office where Enoch Powell wrote his divisive "rivers of blood" speech but now a thriving symbol of African-Caribbean heritage and real community spirit.

I welcome the fact that this Labour Government are forging ahead to deliver justice, launching a £1.5 million advocacy fund, re-establishing the Windrush unit, significantly reducing the time taken to allocate claims, and beginning the recruitment of a Windrush commissioner to ensure victims' voices remain at the heart of Government policy. Windrush should not just be a chapter in our history; it has to be a call for action to challenge us to build a country grounded in fairness, shaped by justice and defined by a true sense of belonging for all. I commend the courage and resilience of Paulette and all our Windrush generation—the thousands of others who faced this rogue injustice—and hope that such atrocities can never happen again.

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

9.15 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): There have been some incredibly powerful speeches this evening, and I feel really lucky to be participating in the debate. There is a lot to celebrate, but there is an awful lot to be really angry about as well.

We owe an enormous amount to the Caribbean and broader black-British community for their contributions to our society, not least the Windrush generation's key role in building the NHS, and in my own region, the black-Caribbean community's role in profoundly shaping Greater Manchester's cultural landscape and social fabric. In 1966, Louise Da-Cocodia became Manchester's first senior nursing officer, having come from Jamaica in 1955. Confronted with relentless racism in her role, she channelled

her experiences into activism, becoming a key anti-racist campaigner, and her legacy continues through the organisations she helped to establish.

In 1980, Kath Locke, a pioneering mixed-race community activist, founded the Abasindi Co-operative, a black, women-led community organisation based in the Moss Side people's centre. It offered essential services, including a drop-in centre for the elderly, a community health hub and a Saturday school to tackle educational underachievement and high youth unemployment.

In 1991, the NIA centre, now the Playhouse theatre in Hulme, opened as the first large-scale arts venue in Europe dedicated to African and Caribbean culture. Its inaugural event featured none other than the legendary Nina Simone. Today, the Chuck gallery in central Manchester continues that legacy by showcasing and celebrating Afro-Caribbean and African art. It works to foster greater understanding and appreciation of Caribbean artistic perspectives.

Here in the UK, far too many people's lives are still blighted by prejudice, discrimination and inequality. Racism is still far too prevalent in our society. We all have a responsibility to recognise that reality, but also to recognise the role that we can play in challenging that injustice. I am proud that the Lib Dems are committed to fighting for racial equality, and that means unequivocally condemning racism in all its forms and tackling injustice wherever we see it.

In her opening, very powerful remarks, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) rightly laid out that the previous Government failed to deliver the justice that Windrush victims so deeply deserve. The Government dithered and delayed on implementing the recommendations of Wendy Williams' lessons-learned review. Liberal Democrats will keep pushing the Government.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Windrush generation made a huge contribution to the life and the economy of the UK, but I want to pay tribute to the Hong Kong community in my constituency of Wokingham and across the United Kingdom, who I am sure will make the same contribution to the UK. I am deeply concerned that the Government are piling uncertainty and worry on British Hongkongers through their reforms to indefinite leave to remain. These people, who are living here in Britain, already fear retribution from China. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should have their back and maintain the five-year pathway for British national overseas status holders?

Lisa Smart: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the huge contribution of Hongkongers in his constituency. I have asked the Minister before about some of the changes the Government propose to the time period for indefinite leave to remain. The Minister has answered that a consultation is under way, and I am sure that she will talk about that in her closing remarks. I feel that we need to value the contribution made by those who are new arrivals in our country, and I agree with my hon. Friend's comments.

The Liberal Democrats will keep pushing the Government to right the wrongs forced on to the Windrush generation, including by urgently implementing the lessons-learned review in full and making the compensation scheme independent of the Home Office. Like the hon.

Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), I hope very much that the Minister is in a position to update the House on the progress being made on righting those wrongs and delivering justice.

The Lib Dems have long pushed for the implementation of a comprehensive race equality strategy, which would include provisions aimed at reducing the disproportionately high and utterly shameful maternal mortality rates for black women and for eliminating racial disparities in maternal health, as other right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned this evening.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to have a point on the record, as it is very important to do so—I was talking to the Parliamentary Private Secretary beforehand, and I talked to the Minister earlier on. On behalf of Windrush people who got their status in Northern Ireland, I will say that the Windrush scheme for Northern Ireland enabled people to work and remain and to have equality with the rest of us. I put on record our thanks for that scheme, because those in Northern Ireland who came through the Windrush scheme were enabled to help our country and Northern Ireland be a better place because of the culture, history, and interaction and social action that they bring.

Lisa Smart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Each successive generation that arrives on these shores, as people have done for millennia, has added to our rich cultural and social fabric. He is absolutely right to highlight his part of the world and the impact that people have had in his community.

On the things that we should also look at, I will say that we should end the disproportionate use of stop and search. We should also look very carefully at the use of live facial recognition, which is most likely to wrongly identify black men and women.

In so many ways, we are holding this debate because of the tireless campaigning of many of the Windrush generation, not least the Liberal Democrat peer, my noble Friend Baroness Floella Benjamin. Floella's journey is emblematic of the Windrush generation. She arrived in Britain from Trinidad in 1960 at the age of 10, accompanied by three of her siblings. Her childhood was marked by persistent racism; she recalls every day as a battle where she was either ignored or subjected to verbal abuse. During a house viewing, neighbours called the police, accusing her family of stealing furniture from what would soon be their own home.

Floella, of course, was not alone. Many children of her generation endured those indignities in silence, shouldering the burden of rejection by clinging to the hope that life would one day improve. Leaving school at 16, she chartered an extraordinary path—first as an actress, then as a presenter, writer, independent producer and always a tireless advocate for the care, education and welfare of children worldwide. Today, she chairs the Windrush Commemoration Committee, which is charged with establishing a lasting tribute to the Windrush generation and its descendants. Among the Committee's notable achievements is the unveiling of the national Windrush monument at Waterloo station, which was designed by celebrated Jamaican artist Basil Watson, as mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi). The monument stands as a powerful symbol of the immense hardship

and equally immense contributions of the Windrush generation to British life. Floella's voice remains a powerful one, holding the Government to account to ensure that the Windrush generation receives the recognition and justice that it so rightly deserves.

I believe it was Floella who first proposed the idea of Windrush Day as a national celebration of the moment when Caribbean communities came to rebuild Britain in the face of adversity. It is thanks to her determination that we are able to mark this occasion and speak of it today. As well as being the giver of the best hugs in Parliament, she is a celebrated author, using her experience to educate future generations with her writing. It is right that we celebrate Floella and all the Windrush generation today.

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

9.24 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I thank all the Members who have made contributions to today's debate. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for bringing the debate before the House, giving Members a chance to speak about their and their constituents' experiences of, and with, the Windrush generation.

As noted by the then Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, in a letter to MPs, those first arrivals on the Windrush were expected to make a genuine contribution to addressing the UK's post-war labour shortages. The story of the Windrush generation that followed is both troubling and inspirational, with many accounts of exceptional resilience and the overcoming of adversity. I want to be very clear: it is important that we acknowledge when the state fails its citizens. The treatment of some Windrush citizens was an unacceptable failure that successive Governments must own. That is why the previous Conservative Government apologised unreservedly and took decisive action. It was critical that the last Government established the compensation scheme. Over £100 million was granted in compensation to those affected, with over £93 million having been paid out, and that figure continues to rise as more claims are settled under this Government.

Clive Lewis: Does the shadow Minister believe that the Windrush scandal was an aberration—a few bad apples over a few decades—or was the cause structural racism?

Harriet Cross: I think that Windrush and other scandals that have plagued our society are a stain on the UK. Whether the cause was, as the hon. Member said, a few bad apples or any other reason, the fact remains that we have to take action to address the issue that was created. We must ensure that those who were affected are compensated, that those who were affected and cannot be compensated are recognised, and that measures are put in place so that it cannot happen again. That is what I am interested in. I was not here in the last Parliament—that is not an excuse, but all I can do is my very best to ensure that injustices are not repeated in future.

As I was saying, the compensation scheme has paid over £93 million, and that figure continues to rise. We hope the Government will continue to ensure that those settlements are paid.

[*Harriet Cross*]

However, as we look forward to this year's Windrush Day, while we must reflect on and learn from past injustices, we should also reflect on and honour the contributions of this remarkable generation. The noble Baroness, Lady Benjamin, who chaired the Windrush Commemoration Committee, spoke in a parliamentary debate about the importance of celebrating the positive aspects of Windrush Day. While for some, that name will forever be associated with scandal, I welcome the efforts of communities and members of the Windrush generation to reclaim it in a positive light. Many campaigners want the term "Windrush" to represent, not the scandal, but the vast and very many contributions made to the UK by this generation. As His Majesty the King noted when meeting members of the community on the 75th anniversary of the ship's arrival, this was an "indomitable generation". He said:

"History is, thankfully and finally, beginning to accord a rightful place to those men and women of the Windrush generation."

A critical element of that recognition is commemoration, and—as we have heard—we should be grateful for the work of Basil Watson, whose magnificent national Windrush monument stands as a powerful tribute to the community. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) reflected, its location at Waterloo means that thousands of people pass it every day, a constant reminder to those departing or arriving at the station. When the decision was made to locate that monument at Waterloo, officials said that the decision was taken because it was where thousands of Windrush pioneers first arrived in London before starting new lives across the UK. For many members of the Windrush generation, Waterloo was not the end of a journey, but the beginning of a new life in this country and of the many contributions that they would go on to make. A former Minister at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government captured the essence of the monument:

"Basil Watson's sculpture perfectly captures the spirit of Windrush. In it we see the strength, hope and expectation of those who arrived with little and yet gave so much."

Of course, that statue—while symbolic—is only one part of the broader support provided.

As Members will recall, in 2020 the previous Government launched a fund to support community-led initiatives celebrating Windrush Day. That funding was intended to enable projects across England to commemorate the Windrush generation and their descendants. It formed part of a wider effort to recognise the Windrush generation's lasting contribution to British society, and I am pleased to see that the funding continues in 2025, with 30 projects supported under the current grant scheme. I understand that the Government have dedicated £4.25 million in funding towards honouring the Windrush legacy.

In addition, while the Government have a vital role to play, the 75th anniversary also saw a wide range of private contributions, from events and exhibitions to documentaries, articles and much more.

Jim Shannon: It should also be recognised that drama and TV have a way of enriching the Windrush story. I think of probably my favourite programme—it is perhaps the hon. Lady's favourite programme—"Call the Midwife", which shows the drama of the Windrush scheme through

the people in that programme, what they endured and what they have given to society. Does she recognise that drama and TV also can tell the story of Windrush in a great way?

Harriet Cross: I thank the hon. Member for that. Television, drama and even radio and other non-visual means can show the story in a lot better light than anyone making a contribution at this Dispatch Box or in this Chamber. Seeing these things in real life, in colour and out in the streets is the way to bring them to life and to make sure that we recognise every day how the community is completely entwined in our society. The 80th anniversary in a few years' time will be another opportunity to commemorate the enduring impact of this generation and to encourage further works from those in the creative industry who play such a vital role in shaping the public consciousness.

Although today has been chosen as an appropriate moment to hold this debate in advance of Windrush Day on 22 June, commemorations need not be limited to anniversaries or milestones. I am confident that those involved will continue to highlight and educate others about the vital role that individuals played, their resilience and their ability to overcome adversity.

More broadly, today allows us to reflect on the Windrush generation's contributions to our institutions, industries and, importantly, our communities. It is worth remembering that HMT Empire Windrush was transporting dozens of Caribbean passengers who had served as RAF airmen—many returning from leave and others rejoining the service. Many more from this generation and their descendants would go on to serve our country in our armed forces. That is in addition to the countless individuals of the Windrush generation who helped build and sustain the NHS, particularly when post-war UK had an acute workforce shortage. That is not to mention the enormous contributions across so many other fields, including science, education, social work, business and countless others.

I acknowledge the Government's ongoing work to address the injustices that occurred in the Home Office. There are still claims to be resolved and payments to be made, and challenges remain in overcoming the consequences of past errors. We cannot change the past, but we can ensure that the schemes established by the previous Government continue to deliver for every eligible person. I welcome the fact that Patrick Vernon and Baroness Benjamin and others campaigned for a Windrush Day. It has given us all the opportunity to focus on the stories of those who came to this country and contributed so much, sharing how they came to Britain, how they were shaped by it and how they have helped shape it in turn. That is vital. As such, I thank Members for sharing their experiences and those of their constituents in the debate.

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

9.33 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate and all Members who have spoken in an incredibly powerful and moving discussion. That includes my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan),

for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal), for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and for Brent East (Dawn Butler). I also thank the shadow spokespeople, who made powerful contributions.

I will try to refer later in my speech to a number of the points that have been raised, but let me first thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for her stories about Professor Chevannes and Paulette Wilson, which, like so many stories told during the debate, were very powerful. I also want to acknowledge Basil Watson's wonderful sculpture, and the story that it tells to all who come and go through Waterloo station. When my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East spoke about her mother, I think we all recognised a little bit of her mother in all our mothers, and I am sure that her pride in her mother would have been reflected very much in her mother's pride in her and her contributions.

This Sunday marks 77 years since the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury. Along with the thousands of others who came to the United Kingdom from the Caribbean and countries across the Commonwealth in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, they became known as the Windrush generation. They and their children and grandchildren have enriched our society in myriad ways, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude. On Windrush Day, we celebrate them and their extraordinary achievements and contribution to our economy, communities, society and culture; but we also acknowledge the appalling and humiliating treatment to which many members of the Windrush generation were subjected owing to the actions of past Governments.

Let me say, clearly and without equivocation, that the Home Office Windrush scandal was a travesty that caused untold pain and suffering. There has been much talk about righting the wrongs, but words alone are not enough, and this Government are backing up our promises with action. We promised a reset when we were in opposition, and since the general election we have sought to strengthen engagement with victims, their families, communities and stakeholder organisations. I have regularly met many organisations, including the Windrush National Organisation—I pay tribute to Bishop Desmond Jadoo, and I was honoured to join a very powerful vigil with some of my hon. Friends in April—and Windrush Defenders Legal.

From London to Manchester and from Cardiff to Edinburgh, I have heard victims describe how their lives were turned upside down, about the trauma they went through, and about the impact that the scandal is still having on their lives. As we have sought to embed a culture of listening and learning throughout the Department, we have worked to improve training and standards, as well as publishing the report "The Historical Roots of the Windrush Scandal" last September. I am clear about the fact that the lessons we learn should inform our ways of working across Government.

In April, the Home Secretary and I were honoured to host the Windrush Cymru Elders for a special screening in the Home Office, with Professor Uzo Iwobi and Race Council Cymru, of the BAFTA-nominated film "Windrush Cymru @ 75". Last week we were proud to host the first day of the National Windrush Museum's annual summit,

led by Dr Les Johnson and Denize Ledeatte—a powerful summit addressing the theme of "reframing Windrush and justice for a new Britain". We will very soon announce the appointment of a new independent Windrush commissioner, underlining this Government's unwavering determination to ensure that the voices of the Windrush generations are heard, their experiences are acknowledged, and proper compensation is delivered.

We are committed to improving the Windrush compensation scheme to ensure that those to whom compensation is due receive the support that they deserve quickly. In opposition, we frequently heard that the application process was too complicated, with insufficient support for those wishing to make a claim.

The Government are determined to ensure that the victims of the Home Office Windrush scandal are heard, that justice is sped up, and that the compensation scheme is run efficiently and effectively. We have already made changes to the casework processes, reducing waiting times for the allocation of claims from four months to under six weeks. In April, we launched a £1.5 million advocacy support fund to provide dedicated help from trusted community organisations when victims apply for compensation. However, we recognise that there is much more to be done, which is why Ministers are continuing to engage with community groups on improvements to the compensation scheme, and we will ask the Windrush commissioner to recommend any further changes that they believe are required.

I want to address two points that were made in the debate. The first is about people who unfortunately passed away after submitting a claim—we are aware of about 64 claimants. In these very difficult circumstances, the teams continue to work closely with their appointed representative, who is usually a member of the family, to ensure that claims continue and are concluded as quickly as possible. We prioritise those claims where we are notified that individuals are suffering from critical or life-limiting illnesses, and officials are reviewing the current exclusion in the rules on compensation for private and occupational pensions. We are working at pace to consider options for how we can compensate for these losses, and working closely with the Government Actuary's Department to support this critical work.

The Windrush story has resonance for us all, and for communities across the country. I am pleased to tell the House that this Government have supported this year's commemorations through the Windrush Day grant scheme, which is chaired by Paulette Simpson and works with my noble Friend in the other place, the Minister for Faith and Communities. We are funding projects to celebrate and commemorate the Windrush, and to educate people about it. We are funding the National Windrush Museum to collect and preserve precious assets for future generations, and as a great educational resource for schools, researchers and the wider public.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) talked about the Government giving a little bit of money for this and that. I am really pleased to hear about the Windrush Museum. Will the Minister consider setting up an emancipation educational trust, so that we can have a building where we can talk not only about the injustice of Windrush, but about the injustice of people being enslaved?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments, and I am very happy to talk about these issues further. She will know that the Migration Museum documents history through some very powerful exhibitions.

It is so important that Windrush Day events are happening across the country, with community festivals, live music, workshops, talks, films and so much more, and I am looking forward to marking Windrush Day this weekend—both with the Caribbean & African Health Network in Manchester and at the Big Caribbean Lunch in Brixton, where I hope to join my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) in Windrush Square. I pay tribute to the work of Ros Griffiths and the Friends of Windrush Square, based in my hon. Friend's constituency.

In this debate and those in recent years, we have heard the powerful and vivid accounts of people's experiences since the 1940s, including on the 75th anniversary, on which His Majesty the King described those who stepped off the Empire Windrush at Tilbury in 1948 as "pioneers", which is exactly what they were. Through their hard work, sacrifice, togetherness and unbreakable spirit, they endured against a backdrop of racism and discrimination that we know existed at the time. But more than that, they thrived. On the railways, roads and construction sites, in our armed forces, factories and fledgling NHS, and in so many other sectors, they helped Britain get back on its feet. They helped rebuild this country, its infrastructure and our public services.

However, Windrush is not merely a prosaic story of service rendered at a time of national need; it is so much more than that. It is a story of a community that became indelibly etched into the very fabric of our social tapestry, and a story of art, music, literature, language and cultural enrichment. Put simply, it is the story of British life being changed for the better.

To wrap up, I again thank all Members who have spoken. I also pay tribute to those who have been mentioned in the debate, including Baroness Benjamin and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who, in this House and the other, have arguably done more than any others to advance the Windrush cause and highlight its importance to our national identity.

This debate has been a powerful and poignant reminder of the countless ways that this country has been strengthened by the Windrush generation and their descendants, and the enormous debt of gratitude that we owe them. Their contributions span every facet of our society. Put simply, Britain would not be Britain

without them, and under this Government, they will always get the respect, thanks and support that they deserve.

9.45 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. We have heard from many different areas of our country—from Yorkshire, Merseyside, Manchester, East Anglia and the west midlands—and we have of course had great representation from north and especially south London. We have had powerful contributions paying tribute, reflecting thoughtfully on the complexity of our history, and speaking about the injustices that the Windrush generation have endured.

Although this has been a very consensual debate, it was disappointing that there was so little recognition from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), of the faults of the Windrush compensation scheme. For many of my constituents, engaging with the scheme has truly been a nightmare, because the threshold of proof was so high and the process so complicated. I thank the Minister again for her commitment to engaging with Windrush campaigners, and to putting right the wrongs of the past.

Finally, I wish everyone who is celebrating this weekend a joyful and meaningful celebration that acknowledges and celebrates the Windrush generation, gives strength to our communities, and creates friendship, acceptance and togetherness, making less space for racism and injustice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) mentioned our dear friend Jo Cox, who was murdered by a right-wing racist nine years ago today, and whose voice we still miss in this place. I end with Jo's words: we

"have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

If we can live out that truth, we can continue to make the progress that our communities need to see.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Windrush Day 2025.

Business without Debate

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Stephen Flynn be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Dave Doogan be added.—(*Chris Elmore, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Animal Experiments: Medical Research

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

9.48 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Before I start, I must declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on phasing out animal experiments in medical research. This issue is very important to me, and to many of my constituents who contact me about this matter. I recognise that there are many views on this topic, on both sides of this debate, but it is clear that the scientific evidence for ending these procedures becomes stronger by the day. I am also a member of the Labour Animal Welfare Society, and I must also declare that interest.

Many people may not be aware that five animals are used in research every minute of every day in the UK. Non-technical summaries of animal experiment licences granted between January and March 2025 show that over 2 million animals were approved for use across 125 projects, including 120 beagles, and there was a further licence for invasive brain surgery on monkeys. Many species are used, including dogs, cats, rats, horses, mice, zebra, fish and chickens. Many may be surprised by that list, but the simple message is that animal experiments are failing patients, and I will say a bit more about that later.

I recently led a petition debate in Westminster Hall on immediately banning the use of dogs in scientific and regulatory procedures. This petition now has over 240,000 signatures, which I think is a great demonstration of public opinion on this issue. During that debate, I quoted from a debate in the other place in 1927 on the Protection of Dogs Bill, in which it was stated that experiments on dogs might be discontinued, yet a century later, we are still here debating this issue.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I recently met researchers at Glasgow University who are working to develop animal-free research methods. They told me that one challenge they face is a lack of dedicated funding. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to transition to more humane testing, the Government must consider making more research funding available?

Irene Campbell: I agree with my hon. Friend. Moving towards animal-free research will take some time, which is why we refer to “phasing out”. The funding structures, particularly relating to academic research, have to shift. I thank her for her intervention.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate, and for leading the Petitions Committee debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon. I spoke to her beforehand. Does she recognise that there have been world-leading innovations in anti-tumour necrosis factor treatment for arthritis, and that has had a life-changing impact across the world on those with auto-immune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, Crohn’s and colitis? That would not have been possible without limited research on animals. Research on animals must be considered as an option, given that people with those diseases now at least have the opportunity for a better life due to the medications perfected because of it.

Irene Campbell: As I said, this is about phasing out animal experiments in research. I hope that the example of scientific experimentation the hon. Gentleman has given would be possible without animal research in years to come.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): The use of animals in research raises serious questions about animal welfare, particularly in procedures that cause pain, distress or even death. Does my hon. Friend agree that advances in technology are making the transition away from animal testing more feasible? In vitro techniques using human cells and tissues, computer modelling, and organ-on-a-chip technologies provide promising human-relevant alternatives. These methods can offer faster, more cost-effective and more ethically sound results than traditional animal tests.

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with everything my hon. Friend said.

It is important to note that only 14% of the UK public feel it is acceptable to use dogs for medical research. With that in mind, banning the use of dogs in medical research could be our first step towards fully phasing out research on animals. We should be encouraged to follow in the footsteps of other countries, such as the USA, which has recently published a road map, with the aim of making animal testing the exception, rather than the norm, for pre-clinical safety toxicity testing over the next three to five years.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the USA committing to a road map. I believe the EU has also done so, and is looking to phase out animal testing entirely through its road map, which is due to be published in 2026. Does she agree that the UK Government could commit to something similar—a road map that gives activists and others confidence in our direction of travel?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with my hon. Friend.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Like her, I am a member of the Labour Animal Welfare Society. Will she pay tribute to the work of Animal Free Research UK, which has done a lot of work on this issue, and the campaign on Herbie’s law, which is a proposed framework that would set a deadline of 2035 for phasing out animal experiments in medical research in the UK, and ensure support for scientists making the transition?

Irene Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and fully agree with everything he has said. I will speak about those matters a bit later.

To achieve those aims, we must consider several things. There needs to be a serious shift in funding towards non-animal methods. The all-party parliamentary group on human-relevant science estimated that human-relevant, non-animal method funding

“represents between 0.2% and 0.6% of total biomedical research funding in the UK and ~0.02% of the total public expenditure...on R&D.”

That needs to shift considerably. The cosmetics brand Lush is one of the groups working to fill this funding gap, with prize funds that support initiatives to end or

[Irene Campbell]

replace animal testing. Recent winners range from organ-on-a-chip technologies that emulate the human liver, developments in in-silico models to predict cellular processes at a molecular level, and a research group improving multi-material bioprinting platforms for creating 3D human organ-on-a-chip models. These non-animal methods can be far more relevant and accurate to human bodies, compared with testing on other species.

Given the success of the cosmetic industry phase-out, this proven approach could be replicated and provide a legislative blueprint for the next steps in the medical sector. In March 2013, a complete marketing ban on all endpoints for animal testing on cosmetics was introduced; on the day of the ban's introduction in 2013, the European Commission confirmed that between 2007 and 2011, a total of €238 million was invested in research into alternatives to animal testing in the EU, reflecting major investment envisaged for use well beyond the cosmetics industry.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that funding for computer modelling and artificial intelligence opportunities are vital for this sector, especially as we look to reduce cruelty in animal testing?

Irene Campbell: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

It is worth questioning the quality of care for animals used in animal experiments. Answers to written parliamentary questions indicate that only one licence application has been rejected over the past seven years, indicating that licences to conduct animal experiments are rarely refused. Applicants are also allowed to adjust and resubmit licence applications to enable them to be granted; for the past four years, applications had a mean number of 2.55 iterations before they were granted.

According to Animal Free Research, a group that supports scientists to transition from animal-based to human-specific medical research and provides expertise in this area, 154,904 animals were involved in breaches of animal use licence conditions in 2023. Breaches included non-compliance, adverse welfare outcomes, failure to provide adequate care and failure to provide food and water, in some cases for up to six days.

An estimated 92% of drugs fail in human clinical trials even though they have passed pre-clinical tests, including animal tests. We already know that our bodies are very different to those of other species and that animals are not a reliable testing method—a simple example is the number of foods that are poisonous to animals but not to humans, such as chocolate, which is poisonous to dogs.

One example of that failure is the case of sepsis, a condition that kills 48,000 people in the UK every year. Researchers rely on testing on mice, yet hundreds of drugs that have passed tests on mice have gone on to fail in human trials, demonstrating the unsurprising fact that sepsis in humans is different to sepsis in mice. Researchers from Stanford and Harvard have shown that the genetic responses to inflammation in mice are profoundly different from those in humans, so why do we continue to undertake this horrific testing? I could describe the process of inducing sepsis in mice—I had

actually written it out for this debate—but it is extremely distressing, and many would find it very upsetting. I suggest that any Member interested in finding out what defines a severe animal experiment should look it up. It is, indeed, truly horrific.

Many other disease models have a history of poor translatability in humans, such as sepsis, as we have just heard, or type 2 diabetes, which could be prime candidates for phasing in more human-relevant models. An example from many years ago is thalidomide, which was tested and tested on mice, and caused no problems whatsoever; however, when taken by pregnant women, many babies were born without limbs, and with other problems. When that drug was tested on mice, it had no impact whatsoever on the baby mice when they were born. To use diabetes as an example, rodents differ from humans on every tier of glucose regulation, yet they are still used in experiments rather than relevant human-based methods.

The Labour manifesto commits the Government to partnering with scientists, industry and civil society to phase out animals in medical testing. Science is—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Irene Campbell: Science is showing us that non-animal methods are effective, more relevant and more accurate to the human body. Innovative technologies known as new-approach methodologies can effectively and safely replace animal experiments. To achieve this, there is a critical need for a robust timetable to be introduced. I look forward to hearing the Minister's update on the road map that will get us there.

10.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening this important debate, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. We appreciate that the use of animals in medical research stirs the strong emotional instincts of many people across the UK, including many colleagues here. The day when we can finally bring an end to animal testing cannot come soon enough. Sadly, however, that day is not here yet.

Phasing out animal testing has to be done in lockstep with the development of safe, accurate and validated alternatives. The reality is that the technology is not yet advanced enough for alternative methods to completely replace the use of animals. Consequently, the carefully regulated use of animals remains necessary to protect humans and the wider environment. Animal testing continues to be required by international agreements, which all global medicines regulators follow, including the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

Such testing is regulated through the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, known as ASPA. The Act specifies that animals can only be used in science for specific, limited purposes where there are no alternatives, where the number of animals used is the minimum needed to

achieve the scientific benefit, and where the potential harm to the animals is limited to the absolute minimum. This is known as the three Rs: replacement, reduction and refinement.

The system also includes a three-tier system of licensing that licenses each establishment, project and individual involved in performing regulated procedures involving animals. New technologies including AI, as referred to by colleagues, do offer potentially revolutionary ways to create alternative technologies. That is why our manifesto commits us to partnering with scientists, industry and civil society as we work towards the phasing out of animal testing. As the first step, we will publish a strategy later this year laying out how the Government will support the development, validation and uptake of alternative methods, and officials are working on this as we speak. The strategy will set out how we will create a research and innovation system that replaces animals with alternative methods wherever possible and that places the UK at the forefront of international efforts to drive this agenda. I am proud to say that the UK is already world-leading in the development of alternative methods, and we are keen to utilise this technology as much as possible.

James Naish: Does the Minister know whether there will be timelines for that strategy? Are there likely to be dates and milestones that we are working towards, or just a generic description of the direction of travel?

Feryal Clark: The road map will set out how we can get to a place where we can phase out animal testing. I cannot set out dates and what the road map will include, but a huge amount of investment is going into many of the projects that have been mentioned—hopefully that will all be included in the road map. As colleagues have said, where other nations are developing new ways to phase out animal testing, we will look into those and see

where we can replicate them. We are closely following developments in Europe and the US, and we work closely with both the Food and Drug Administration and our European colleagues on this matter.

Currently, the Government support the development and dissemination of the three Rs through UK Research and Innovation. That is primarily achieved through funding of the NC3Rs, which works nationally and internationally to drive the uptake of alternative technologies and to ensure that advances are reflected in policy, practice and regulation on animal testing. Since its launch in 2004, it has committed over £100 million through its research, innovation and early career awards to provide new three Rs approaches for scientists in academia and industry to use.

That is only part of our support. Many UKRI programmes, including research on organoids, cell behaviour and AI, may eventually lead to the development of non-animal testing methods, but they are not categorised as such because they are basic research at the moment. The Government have also provided more than £6 million of funding for seven centres of excellence for regulatory science and innovation to help drive advancement in healthcare. The in-silico CERSI, led by the University of Manchester, aims to support the use of computational techniques to test and develop medical products.

To be clear, we want to replace the use of animals in scientific procedures with alternatives where we can, but for now the carefully regulated use of animals in scientific research remains necessary if we are to protect humans and the wider environment. I thank hon. Members once again for their insightful contributions to the debate. I look forward to us working together going forward.

Question put and agreed to.

10.7 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 16 June 2025

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

Farmed Animals: Cages and Crates

4.30 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 706302 relating to the use of cages and crates for farmed animals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. The petition is titled:

“End the use of cages and crates for all farmed animals”,

and it was created by Dame Joanna Lumley. It has reached over 105,000 signatures, and it states:

“We think the UK Government must ban all cages for laying hens as soon as possible. We think it should also ban the use of all cage and crates for all farmed animals including: farrowing crates for sows...individual calf pens...cages for other birds, including partridges, pheasants and quail...Every year in the UK, millions of farmed animals experience huge suffering confined in cages. From millions of laying hens unable to express their natural behaviours to mother pigs nursing their piglets confined in narrow crates, to calves, quail and game birds.”

Surely we cannot allow this to continue.

When polled, most people are against cages for farmed animals, and this debate provides an opportunity to highlight the seriousness of the issue and encourage a more rapid solution and approach to phasing cages out. For example, it must be viewed as positive that we have reached a figure of 80% for free-range chickens, and I will say more about that later.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): It does not seem very long since we were last here talking about eggs and chickens, although I imagine it would feel much longer if we were stuck in a cage only the size of an A4 piece of paper. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to learn lessons from other countries, including Austria and Luxembourg, because our hens need as good and better standards?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with my hon. Friend, and I will cover that later in the debate. I must declare an interest: I hosted a drop-in event on farrowing crates earlier this month with Humane World for Animals UK. There was great interest in that event, and I am delighted to say that the turnout among Members was high.

The event raised awareness of the conditions in which sows are kept on some British pig farms. We had on display a replica life-size crate with a life-size animated pig to bring that to life, and to let people see how small the farrowing crate and confinement conditions are. These crates are barred, metal and often barren, and their cramped and unhygienic conditions can lead to disease and the overuse of antibiotics. A poll by Humane World for Animals found that about 73% of people in the UK had either never heard of farrowing crates or did not know very much about them. Hopefully, today's debate will change that.

About 200,000 sows every year spend nearly a quarter of their lives in these farrowing stalls, which are so small that they cannot even turn around, nestle their piglets or express natural behaviours, such as rooting or nest-building. The crates prevent the sow from getting away from the piglets when they start biting her teats, so the piglets' teeth are often ground down or clipped, which seems a very cruel practice.

The piglets are then removed when they are three to four weeks old, compared with how it would be in the wild, where a sow would feed piglets for up to 11 to 13 weeks. After a couple of weeks, the sow is inseminated again. Sows are likely to have two litters a year of 10 to 12 piglets and a breeding lifespan of three years before they are sold for slaughter, which is really quite miserable.

On a positive note, though, free farrowing systems exist, where sows are not confined during farrowing and lactation. These can allow the expression of nest-building behaviour, as well as free movement. Such systems make up about 40% of the industry. Group systems of zero confinement allow those expressions and free movement, and they can increase sows' social interactions.

Although it is suggested that zero-confinement systems can increase crushing incidents, research has indicated that there is little difference in piglet mortality between those housed in loose farrowing systems and those in farrowing crates. The number of piglets crushed was higher in loose farrowing, but the number of piglets dying from other causes was higher in crates, so the mortality of piglets is related to other factors, such as size at birth, age of sow and season. One study from Denmark demonstrated that the factors that contributed to pre-weaning death in piglets were: being born into a litter with one or more stillborn litter mates; the number of litters farrowed by the sow; and possibly the time of the year.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The hon. Lady declared one interest, and I will quickly declare two. First, I am a patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, which has campaigned passionately on this issue for many years. Secondly, my—indeed, our—great friend Sir David Amess felt very passionately about this, and the farrowing crates issue was very close to his heart. Twice over, if I dare put it like that, does she agree that this outdated practice must be banned?

Irene Campbell: I could not agree more, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for reminding me to declare my interest as a member of the Labour Animal Welfare Society.

In Scotland, 84% of people have said that they think that farrowing crates should be banned immediately or in the next five years. Additionally, more than half of Scots said that they were willing to pay more for pork that was not produced using farrowing crates. That is something to bear in mind. Although the previous Government stated in 2019 that farrowing crates should be banned, consultation never took place on phasing them out. This debate is an opportunity to get that discussion, and hopefully consultation, under way.

It is a positive step that there is consensus from various organisations that farrowing crates should be banned, even if differing timelines are suggested. The British Veterinary Association is in favour of banning

[Irene Campbell]

farrowing crates. It found that 75% of vets are concerned about the impact of farrowing crates on the welfare of pigs, with 36% of those vets saying that they were very concerned. The BVA is now calling for a gradual phasing out of the crates over 15 years and a transition to a system that favours the health of both the sow and the piglets. It recommended that Government producers and retailers should implement an awareness campaign for consumers and share best practice, thus demonstrating that there must be scope to ensure better and more accurate labelling of products. I will say more about that later.

In preparing for this debate, meetings were held with the National Pig Association, the National Farmers Union, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Compassion in World Farming and the petitioner, Dame Joanna Lumley. Although I am pleased that the National Pig Association agrees that we need to transition to flexible farrowing systems, it wishes to do so over 20 years. It is good to see that there is agreement on the phasing out of this practice. The RSPCA's pig experts found that a transition should take no longer than 10 years, and furthermore, Dr Alice Brough, a former pig industry vet, said

"We banned gestation crates in 1999; we have had 26 years to prepare for this obvious follow-on."

With that consensus, surely there must be scope to agree a shorter and speedier timeline.

I also met with the NFU to discuss its views on enriched cages for laying hens, which, disappointingly, it still supports. It is hugely positive that the vast majority of hens are not kept in cages, but we cannot forget the 23% of eggs that are still laid by hens in cages. We know that the transition is doable and practical, and we must get a timeline in place to see an end to this practice.

In 2022, polling found that 94% of the public oppose the use of enriched cages for hens. These cages replaced battery cages, which were banned when the UK adopted the relevant EU Council directive in 2012. However, enriched colony cages have only 9% more usable space per bird than the previous battery cages, and they are hardly bigger than an A4 piece of paper. Every year in the UK, a shocking 8 million layer hens spend their lives in cages. As with pigs, many of their natural behaviours are restricted by these cages. The hens cannot flap their wings, perch or dust bathe, and that can cause frustration, bone weakness and osteoporosis. How enriched are these cages if confinement is so extreme?

It is important to note another key issue related to chicken farming: hatch and dispatch. In the UK, 86 male chicks are killed every minute; that is 45 million baby chicks a year. However, this cruel practice is today unnecessary, as countries such as France and Germany have already mandated the use of in-ovo sexing technology, which determines the sex of a chick before they can feel pain. Within in-ovo sexing, eggs can be discarded before they have to hatch. It is estimated that implementing such technology would add less than one penny to the cost of each egg. Surely, the UK must adopt that system without delay.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about an additional 1p per egg, but does she agree that some sort of financial incentive or

financial reason would be an important factor in increasing the state's ability to phase out cages and crates? Otherwise, we are not going to see this happen en masse.

Irene Campbell: I agree, and I will later mention that there has to be such support.

Groups of pheasant and pairs of partridges are also kept in breeding cages—again, offering each bird little more room than the size of a sheet of A4 paper. The birds suffer from stress, breeding-related injuries and death. There is no legislation on how birds should be treated apart from 2009 guidance from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. That must surely be urgently reviewed.

Many quail are still kept in battery cage systems or overcrowded barns, which raise their stress levels and make them aggressive. They can fly upwards very quickly to get away from danger, so the limited space leads them to injure themselves by hitting their heads. However, there are alternatives, such as barns with more space and better natural conditions.

At farms that are RSPCA assured—the UK's only higher welfare farm assurance and food labelling scheme—cages are not allowed. Laying hens are kept on free range farms or in large barns, where they are free to roam, and sows are loose housed, either indoors with more space or outdoors in paddocks with access to shelter. Such higher welfare standards are increasing in market share and popularity. For example, major retailers such as McDonald's now use only 100% RSPCA-assured pork and free range eggs, thus demonstrating that restrictive crates and cages are not the only options for our farms or retailers.

It is definitely time for the UK to catch up with the animal welfare standards of other countries. We call ourselves a nation of animal lovers, but are we really? People may be surprised to hear that the UK is now ranked 9th in Europe in terms of the percentage of cage-free animals, and a number of other European countries have already banned or are phasing out farrowing crates and enriched cages. For example, farrowing crates are now banned in Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, and enriched cages, as we heard earlier, are banned in Austria, Luxembourg and Switzerland, and will be banned in Germany from 2025, the Czech Republic from 2027 and Slovakia from 2030. France has banned the installation of new enriched cages, and the EU Commission has confirmed that it intends to phase out cages across the EU.

Loose farrowing systems have mainly been used in Switzerland since 1997, and studies there have again found that piglet loss in such systems was due mostly to sow-related characteristics rather than the farrowing pen. The reason that loose farrowing systems are not used in other countries is the fear of piglets being crushed by the sow, yet the research showed that the system did not increase pig mortality due to crushing.

On 17 February, the Government responded to this petition by saying that the use of cages and close confinement systems was being considered "very carefully" and that they are supporting the transition to free-range laying hens through grants. They reiterated the requirements relating to calves confined for rearing and fattening, as well as guidance on meeting welfare standards for game birds. The Government's response also detailed the

effect that ending the use of farrowing crates would have on trade, which was much discussed in the debate earlier this month, particularly in relation to phasing out low-welfare imports from the UK's trading partners.

When looking at legislation related to this issue, it is important that we consider mandatory labelling to inform customers of the welfare of the animals they choose to eat. In addition, we need to ensure equivalence in animal welfare standards for imported products, in order to support our British farmers to adhere to higher standards. It is important that farmers are supported to make the transitions discussed today. We must urgently phase out low animal welfare imports that do not meet our own animal welfare standards, and British farmers must not be at a disadvantage.

In the response to the debate on animal welfare standards in farming earlier this month, the Minister confirmed that the topic of close confinement systems for farm animals was receiving careful attention and that he was well aware of the long-running campaigns on caged animals. I look forward to hearing from the Minister again today, as well as from other hon. Members.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

4.44 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for her opening remarks. I want to declare an additional interest as, for three and a half years prior to last July, I was an employee of the National Pig Association, and my cousin is a pig farmer. I would like to refute a couple of points from the hon. Lady's opening remarks, in particular that Britain is not a world leader in animal welfare—it very much is. We can pick other examples from around the world as, when we talk about trade deals, we often say that we would not want to import meat from those countries, because they simply do not meet our standards. We should not do ourselves down. There will always be countries that have a higher bar in certain areas than we do, but overall the UK does a particularly good job on animal welfare across the board.

Let me move on to address the system of farrowing crates, and why they exist. Of course, it is not because farmers have some desire to be cruel to the animals. I appreciate that people's perception when looking at a pig in a crate is, "Gosh, does it live in that confined space?" Of course, it does not; the crate is used for a limited period around the time that the sow gives birth, and there is good reason for it. Around the time they give birth, sows often become extremely aggressive not just to their piglets, but to farmers. Being able to confine them protects piglets from crushing and mauling and allows farmers to get into the crate to look after the piglets and to administer any treatments to them or the sow in a safe environment. If anyone questions the veracity of how aggressive a sow can be around that time, I am delighted to arrange the opportunity for them to get in a pen with an aggressive sow and to see whether that changes their perspective.

I also question some of the statistics. On the point about there being no differences in mortality across the systems, a totally unrestricted pen system is likely to lead to around million more piglet deaths in this country a year than a confined system. However, there is a point to be made about the system we use today and whether it can be improved. Obviously, all farmers want to minimise the time for which a sow is restrained, which happens for safety reasons only.

The move to more flexible farrowing systems that would still allow farmers to get in there and restrain the sow to ensure safety has already been adopted by the industry. In his shadow role, the Minister was always very understanding of the farming point of view and he engaged closely with industry. It is right that the industry is now moving towards much better systems of limiting sow confinement, without the Government legislating. Flexible farrowing is now available in 8% of the indoor pig industry—that is, 5,000 pens. There are another 55,000 to go, but that will take time.

The point about transition is interesting, because we cannot just say, "Tomorrow we need to move from this system to this system." These are fixtures, fittings and buildings. A lot of the buildings will need to be rebuilt completely, which will require planning permission and vast cost. We need to work with farmers to ask what the realistic timescale is, so that we do not leave people high and dry or put them out of business. We need to make sure that they have the resources and time to move to a better, higher welfare system. I think we can all get behind that. It is better that the Government work with farmers and do not just do stuff to them.

There is often a debate and lack of understanding about indoor versus outdoor pig farming. It would seem rather aspirational to have all our pigs outdoors, and to have 100% of the UK pig industry work like that. That is impossible, as we are at the maximum amount of land we can use for outdoor pigs. Outdoor pig farmers operate a different model from arable farmers; they tend to rent the land for two to three years, and move on. They have very much a symbiotic relationship with other farmers, particularly around the East Anglia area where there is the right type of soil for it. Indoor pig farming is much better suited to other parts of the country, such as my constituency of Bridlington and The Wolds, where there is high-grade, arable land. Pigs produce slurry, a natural source of fertiliser, and, of course, we get excellent pork and bacon from them.

The petition wants a ban. If the industry continues to move in the right direction, a ban does not necessarily need to be implemented. I would give a warning from history. In 1999, the Tony Blair Government unilaterally banned sow stalls overnight with no transition or compensation. It was a similar situation, because the stalls were fixtures and fittings of the buildings, and 50% of the British pig industry went bust because those farms simply could not afford to transition. We have to be mindful of that in anything we do here when creating legislation that impacts businesses, farming or any other.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Like many people in the Chamber, I am wearing a couple of hats. I am the son of a farmer—I declare that interest—but also a member of the Labour Animal Welfare Society. I welcome the hon. Member's insights as someone with experience of the industry. Farmers have contacted me. My grandad,

[James Naish]

who was a vet, was attacked by a sow. He went into hospital for several months and never really recovered from the incident, so the hon. Member is absolutely right that sows can be very dangerous. To come back to the point he has already made, does he agree that it is essential that farmers are engaged in this conversation alongside animal welfare activists so that we can agree the right path forward? Everybody wants to get there, but the transition is essential.

Charlie Dewhirst: Absolutely. It is important that everybody works together, whether that means the pressure groups, the farmers or the Government.

Sometimes, the two extremes of the debate need to understand each other. These things often seem simpler than they are. We do things on a farm for good reason, and often it might be for better welfare when people might not perceive it in that way. Another great example of the overall perception of pig farming is outdoor versus indoor, whereas indoor is far better for the environment. There is a big problem with the environmental impact of outdoor pig farming, which is often forgotten because we talk about welfare, and welfare clashes with environmental impact. That all comes together and means that we have to make balanced decisions about how we support farmers across the country.

To conclude, we need to make sure that we bring the farming community along with us in this conversation, whether it is about pigs, poultry or anything else that we are discussing. Let us not do stuff to them, but work with them. Let us work out a plan that ensures that we can achieve what we want to in terms of better animal welfare, but not at the expense of British farming, British food security and British jobs and without ending up replacing our own great British produce with imports produced to lower standards than we would expect.

4.52 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for securing this important debate.

The UK is often said to be a nation of animal lovers. Judging by my constituency inbox, Mansfield is very much a constituency of animal lovers. Since becoming the Member for Mansfield, I have received hundreds of emails on a wide range of animal welfare issues, including ending the import of foie gras products, the fur trade and, of course, ending the use of cages and crates for farmed animals.

My constituent Lynne from Ladybrook recently wrote to say that she was worried that caged farm animals were

“unable to express their natural behaviours and experiencing an unimaginable amount of suffering.”

Angela, another constituent from Mansfield, who asked me to speak today, said in an email in the lead-up to this debate that she was concerned that some farmed animals were

“kept in cramped, often dirty cages, barely leaving them room to move, to spread their wings and stretch their legs.”

Philip, another Mansfield constituent, said in his correspondence that according to a recent survey undertaken by the RSPCA,

“84% of the British public oppose the use of cages for laying hens and 78% of people oppose the use of farrowing crates.”

Clearly, many of my constituents want to ensure that we have the highest welfare standards in our farms, and I know that farmers often share that view and do not want their livestock to suffer. We all want to know that the food we are eating has not been produced on the back of pain and suffering.

Last summer, I stood on a manifesto that promised that we would improve animal welfare, ban trail hunting and the import of hunting trophies, end puppy smuggling and farming, end the use of snare traps, and work with scientists and industry to reduce the use of animal testing. I am proud that I did so, and I know other Labour Members and the Minister feel the same way. I very much hope that the Government's update to the animal welfare strategy, which I understand is due to be published later this year, will make progress towards delivering our manifesto promises, and that Ministers include the issues that we are debating today within it. Legislation to improve the lives of animals has formed a vital part of the legacy of past Labour Governments, and I hope this Labour Government will be no different.

4.55 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the Petitions Committee for calling this important debate and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing it.

The call to end the cage age of animal farming is clear. It comes not just from Parliament and politicians but from the public, nowhere more so than in my constituency. More people have signed the petition to end the use of cages and crates for farmed animals in South Devon than in any other constituency in the country. That is a powerful message from a rural farming community, which is demanding a future built on compassion, not cruelty. I thank the 513 people from South Devon who signed the petition.

I urge the Government to keep their promise and finally take action to end the cage age of animal farming, not through vague pledges or delayed consultations but with a clear strategy delivered within this Parliament. Farrowing crates and other cruel confinement practices belong to the past. They cause immense suffering and deny animals, including the thousands of birds kept in cages for so-called sport, basic freedoms and dignity. In 2025, that is simply unacceptable.

The Liberal Democrats have a long-standing record of standing up for animals. We have consistently supported stronger penalties for animal cruelty and higher welfare standards in farming. In government, we put in place a ban on battery cages for laying hens. I would like to see that ban extended to all cages but, as others have rightly said, that must be done carefully and in consultation with farmers and producers.

For too long, we have been pushing the Government to launch a consultation into the use of farrowing crates for pigs, and to end the use of cages for farm animals. Our farmers are key to delivering that future. We know they care deeply about animal welfare, but they have

been badly let down: betrayed by trade deals that undercut our high welfare standards, failed by poorly designed and delayed subsidy schemes, and denied the workforce and funding they need to thrive. To make these changes to caged animal farming, we must give farmers the support they need to transition.

Let us talk about that support, because the numbers are frankly outrageous. The Government are spending £67.5 billion on defence, or more than 5% of total public spending, while the entire DEFRA budget languishes at just £7.4 billion—barely 0.6%. Farming itself receives just £2.4 billion, or a meagre 0.2% of the national budget. To put that in perspective, all DEFRA spending—not just for farming but for the environment, food and rural affairs—adds up to just 11% of what we spend on defence. Food security is part of our national security, but how can we claim to prioritise food security, rural livelihoods or animal welfare with numbers like that? Farming takes the largest share of DEFRA's budget, but it is nearly one third of a shockingly small pie. Meanwhile, the programmes meant to support the future of farming, improve animal welfare and restore our natural environment, including the sustainable farming incentive, countryside stewardship and landscape recovery, have been hit with a £100 million cut—cuts in the middle of a climate crisis, cuts while farmers struggle to meet the higher standards that we are demanding with fewer resources, cuts when public demand for ethical farming has never been stronger.

The Liberal Democrats stand with our farmers and our animals. We are calling for an extra £1 billion in the farming budget to support higher welfare standards, proper training and workforce investment. We will keep fighting to ensure no food can be imported or sold in the UK if it is produced in a way that would be illegal here.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her excellent speech. Does she agree that lots of British farmers, like many in my North Cornwall constituency, are trying to move away from confined systems such as crates, but that until the Government insist on applying UK animal welfare standards to imported food, they will be undercut by cheaper, lower-welfare imports?

Caroline Voaden: It is key that if we are going to demand higher standards here, we must apply the same standards to food that we import.

If the Minister truly believes that food security is national security, that needs to be backed up with real investment—not empty slogans or cuts on a spreadsheet, but real support for our farmers. I ask him to listen to communities such as those in South Devon, which are demanding that we act. We banned battery cages in 2012; now it is time to finish the job. Let this be the Parliament that truly ends the cage age.

5 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

The debate has attracted a lot of interest in my South West Norfolk constituency, where we care passionately about the environment, climate and animal welfare. As has been observed, our area has plenty of chickens and pigs—they are all around us in my constituency; frankly, they are our neighbours and we are acutely aware of their welfare—so it is no wonder that so many residents have been in touch with me over the last year.

Every year in the UK, over 7 million farmed animals are confined to cages for all or part of their lives. Twenty per cent of the UK's eggs are produced in those cages and, as has been observed, battery cages and enriched battery cages, in which hens have space the size of an A4 sheet of paper, remain legal. In farrowing crates, sows are unable to turn around, nestle their piglets or express natural roosting or nest-building behaviours. These restrictions lead to severe welfare problems for sows and piglets. It is important to recognise that many of these crates and cages prevent key natural behaviours.

Fortunately, all UK supermarkets have either already stopped selling eggs from caged hens or committed to do so by the end of 2025. However, it is estimated that once those commitments are realised, around 10% of the UK's hens will remain in cages. That is 10% too many.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): The RSPCA's assured scheme now accounts for 55% of the UK's laying hens and 25% of its pigs. Does my hon. Friend agree that that demonstrates that there is increasing public support for higher welfare meat and eggs, even if the cost is slightly higher as a result?

Terry Jermy: I entirely agree. It is through the good work of organisations like the RSPCA that we can increase awareness of those improved standards.

As I have mentioned in this Chamber recently, and as was reported in *The Guardian* last week, through freedom of information requests I have found that industrial farms broke environmental regulations, including those relating to animal welfare, nearly 7,000 times in the last 10 years. For example, a farm was found to be stocking more than 400,000 animals, instead of the permitted 357,000. The permitted amounts are already very high, so any increase over and above them will cause further distress for animals. Given the numbers involved, I worry about routine overcrowding and a lack of regulation.

It is important to consider the implications of that intensity for disease. A National Audit Office report on animal resilience published this month revealed that there are serious gaps in the UK's ability to respond to major outbreaks of animal diseases, including bird flu and foot and mouth, which have cost farmers and the Government millions of pounds. We must recognise that human health and animal health are linked.

We need to have a serious conversation about what sort of farming we want to pursue. As the Minister will know, I grew up in Norfolk, I am from Norfolk and I visit farms routinely. Farmers are under increasing pressure from a whole range of factors: disease, profitability, climate change, drought and more. Most farmers I know in South West Norfolk care passionately about their animals and want to do all they can to improve animal welfare, but, as has been highlighted, they need support with that transition. Fundamentally, this issue comes down to fairness—fairness in finances, and in labelling too. In a recent debate, some really interesting

[Terry Jermy]

points were made about labelling, and how fairness is at the heart of it, so that the public can make informed choices.

The NFU estimates that it would cost between £5,000 and £8,000 to replace each of the 60,000 conventional farrowing crates that are currently in use across the UK. That transition must be supported by the market and some financial provision or incentive, either through infrastructure grants or via the supply chain, to make it viable for producers and to ensure that it does not put businesses out of pig production. It is crucial that the transition is staged and well supported by the Government and, where relevant, devolved Governments, to support our farming communities.

While I have the opportunity to do so, I pay tribute to the various animal welfare organisations campaigning and raising awareness of these issues, which is so important. They include the RSPCA, which has been mentioned, but also World Animal Protection, Compassion in World Farming and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

5.5 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this important debate.

The Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, said:

“Whoever is kind to the creatures of God, he is kind to himself.”

Caring for animals is not just an ethical issue in Islam; it is an act of worship to God. Mahatma Gandhi said:

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

The way we treat farmed animals is not only our responsibility, but a reflection of our values and what we stand for in this country.

Unfortunately, right now, the reflection I see is distorted, because despite all the proud talk about Britain’s leadership on animal welfare, millions of animals are still confined in cages and crates that violate the most basic standards of dignity and care. I rise in support of the petition, not just because of what it asks us to do—to ban cages for laying hens, farrowing crates for sows and individual pens for calves—but because of what it represents: a call for us to honour our moral duty to animals that feed us and often clothe us, and for which we consider ourselves caretakers.

That call is echoed by my constituents in Dewsbury and Batley, who are deeply disturbed that, despite UK legislation that protects animals, practices such as the use of farrowing crates, enriched cages and calf pens remain legal in the UK. They are legal, but they are increasingly indefensible. Just because something is legal does not always mean it is right. Many highlight that after watching documentaries or seeing images, they are horrified by how our food industry treats animals throughout their lifetime, simply to make it easier to farm their produce.

Recent footage from a Devon pig farm exposed by campaigners and reported by *The Guardian* shows sows trapped in crates so tightly that they cannot turn around, care properly for their piglets or even lie down in comfort.

In that practice, the pig is reduced to a machine, treated as an object for the benefit of the food industry. That is a moral failing. Let us be clear: the farrowing crate is not an unfortunate glitch in a mostly humane system; it is the system itself, and it is built on a trade-off we no longer need to accept. We prioritise production over compassion, but public support is strong and nearly 75% of vets are concerned about the welfare impact of farrowing crates. What are we waiting for?

Charlie Dewhirst: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is very encouraging that the industry is already making great strides to move away from the traditional crating system to new flexible systems, and that we have already seen 8% change to those systems in the last couple of years?

Iqbal Mohamed: I completely agree. I do not oppose farmers’ critical work to provide food for our country. I hope that the Government will push to speed up the transition by supporting the 8% of farmers who have already implemented new systems and supporting the other 92% to make the transition.

As the petition highlights, this issue affects not just pigs, but birds and calves. One of the most shocking facts I came across while researching it is that hens are confined to cages that give them little more space than the size of an A4 sheet of paper. Imagine that! The RSPCA calls those cages “unacceptably restrictive” and companies like Waitrose, Sainsbury’s and McDonald’s have committed to change. If private businesses can do it, why have the Government not? Other countries are ahead of us; even in Scotland, a consultation on cages in farming practice has been launched. We must follow them.

This is not just about discomfort; it is about denying animals the chance to express their natural behaviours—to peck, stretch, dust bathe or nest. It is about mothers being unable to care for their young and calves being kept alone, unable to bond or play. These are not just welfare issues; they are issues of dignity. They are about whether we accept a food system built on the routine suppression of life’s most basic instincts—even if it is an animal’s life.

James Naish: Everything the hon. Member says is absolutely valid, but for a farmer with 200 acres of land, which cost £10,000 per acre, who therefore has to use some of the practices he described, it is practically very difficult to suddenly end all those practices by acquiring 50 or 100 extra acres to provide the required space. I am interested in his reflections on how, from the commercial perspective of a farmer, all those objectives can be achieved.

Iqbal Mohamed: It is a very difficult challenge, but, as has been mentioned, food produced elsewhere that is allowed to be imported needs to meet the standards that we follow in the UK. Cost cannot be a reason to compromise on the welfare of animals. I am keen to hear from the Minister how the Government will help farmers.

Steve Yemm: I wonder whether the hon. Member might also reflect on our farming competitors, in particular countries like Norway, Sweden and Switzerland and, to some extent, Germany, Austria and New Zealand, which have banned such practices in their pig industries, and the extent to which that means there can be a viable business model under a reformed system.

Iqbal Mohamed: I think we should look at good practice elsewhere and at how other countries have transitioned away from these practices. I am not having a go at farmers at all, but I hope the Government will expedite their manifesto commitment to look at animal welfare and help farmers transition to a more humane system.

Farm animals do not just feed us; they live their entire lives under farmers' care—our care. I am sure we can all agree that care must mean more than simply the absence of cruelty, but even that we do not have. We cannot argue that it is a radical or long process, because alternatives are popping up and farms are taking initiative to move away from these practices without waiting for legislation.

Although it is embarrassing that we are not leading the way, we can catch up and set a new standard for all, which would be met with little pushback as long as we had the appropriate Government support for our farmers. This debate must be the beginning of addressing intensive farming practices that strip animals of dignity in service of profit and drawing a line between industry and responsibility. If we want to be a country that preaches welfare, let us prove it: ban the cages and give animals a life that reflects the respect they deserve, not just as a means to an end, but as living beings entrusted to our care. This is not radical; it is responsible, it is compassion and it is necessary.

5.13 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Mr Mundell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on leading this important debate.

The Labour Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to introduce the most comprehensive animal welfare programme in a generation; I am pleased that we are already making significant headway on that. It was animal welfare that first politicised me as a child. One of the reasons why I joined the Labour party was the previous Labour Government's partial ban on fox hunting. I look forward to finishing the job in this Parliament.

My colleagues and I take the welfare of animals very seriously. The United Kingdom currently has some of the highest food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards for food production in the world, but we can and must go further. I am sure all Members present share similar concerns for animals trapped in cages. Sentient animals such as cows, sheep, pigs and chickens all have the capacity to feel emotion, ranging from happiness and joy to fear, pain and distress. It is stress inducing for animals not to engage in natural behaviours or to be unable to benefit from the landscapes across the country to which they are accustomed. Being trapped in cages that restrict animals' movement and freedom prevents them from engaging in their natural behaviour. Not only are cramped cages emotionally distressing, but they cause clear physical discomfort and a greater likelihood of illness, disease and reduced lifespan.

The United Kingdom was the first country in the world to introduce an animal protection law—the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act 1822—and has subsequently stated that animals are sentient beings that deserve the highest standards of animal welfare protection. However,

the previous Administration did not do enough on the issue. Instead, they broke promises regarding animal welfare, made U-turns and signed trade deals that allowed in lower-quality products that did not meet health and welfare standards by omitting any mention of imports having to uphold this country's welfare standards for animal products. They quietly dropped the consultation on hen and pig cages and abandoned plans for mandatory welfare labelling.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): The hon. Gentleman raises the incredibly important issue of imports. Every pig or chicken farmer I speak to in West Dorset fully supports a transition, but they all raise the prospect of how we avoid driving up production costs and so increasing the cost to consumers and making imports look more attractive.

Joe Morris: We need proper, targeted support that involves genuine conversations, and listening and engaging respectfully with those communities, as well as a trade policy that stands up to those imports. I was delighted that the Business and Trade Secretary announced trade deals that genuinely protect the interests of the agricultural sector. I do not believe that would have happened under the previous Government, when farmers were far too often put on the chopping block. I went out to farms throughout the general election campaign and have been out to them since; particularly in the sheep farming sector in my part of the world, farmers are sick of being sold down the river.

So far, we have encouraged a move away from colony hen cages to free-range production through grants to laying hen and pullet farmers in England. Colony cages are already being replaced with non-cage systems that directly prioritise the welfare of hens. The Government are supporting major supermarkets in their pledge to stop selling eggs from chickens kept in colony cages by the end of 2025. While the previous Administration saw eggs from caged production reach 44% of the market in 2018, this Government saw that proportion reduce to 20% at the end of last year.

In addition, 50% of the national sow-breeding herd are giving birth in outdoor units—we have heard some of the arguments in favour of indoor production. While the move to more outdoor units is a step in the right direction, it is imperative that we constantly investigate how to improve animal welfare standards. As the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) said, that must be part of a genuine conversation between industry, campaigning groups and the Government. The work to promote animal welfare is never fully complete; we will hopefully have the debate in the years to come, and it will never fully be laid to rest.

I pay tribute to the farmers in my constituency, who strive for the highest animal welfare standards and look after their environment. They need our support in terms of both international trade and respectful, positive engagement with the Government.

I am a Member of Parliament for a constituency that borders Scotland, so it will be unsurprising that I mention the Scottish Government's recent consultation on ending the use of animal cages. I am glad to see that all steps are being taken to reduce the confinement of farm animals, and the consultation will make significant headway in fulfilling the animal welfare agenda.

[Joe Morris]

I am pleased that the Government are carefully considering the use of cages and crates, and I thank all Members for engaging in this debate and sharing a commitment to protecting the welfare of animals. This is an opportunity for us to truly lead the way in protecting the welfare of animals and supporting humane farming methods. I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to achieving the most ambitious animal welfare programme in a generation; I urge further consideration of the use of animal cages for farmed animals.

5.19 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this important debate, and I thank the 322 petitioners in Glastonbury and Somerton.

As a nation, we value high animal welfare standards. The public care about animal welfare—84% of shoppers consider it when buying their food. The UK has helped to lead the way, banning veal crates for calves 16 years before the EU and banning sow stalls 14 years before the EU's partial ban. The Liberal Democrats in government fought to improve poultry welfare standards by implementing an all-out ban on caged hens. Moving towards a cage and crate-free future is not just good for our farmed livestock: it is crucial if we are to ensure a trusted, sustainable and resilient farming future. Despite huge progress, we still have some way to go. Some 20% of UK eggs are from hens that live in enriched cages, while farrowing crates are still legal and used for up to 50% of sows in the UK.

As the support for the petition shows, the public want to end the cage age. Polling highlights the strength of feeling, with 94% of people in agreement that cages for laying hens are unacceptable and 96% believing the same for farrowing crates. Taking the necessary steps to reduce and eliminate usage is both popular and the right thing to do, and we should implement change as soon as possible, alongside a robust transition that works with farmers to support them to raise welfare standards in pig and poultry production.

The Government promised to have the highest rise in animal welfare standards in a generation, and just last month the revised animal health and welfare pathway stated that a transition out of cages is a priority. However, we have yet to see concrete action in that direction. I urge the Minister to commit today to bringing that work forward.

At our spring conference, the Liberal Democrats passed a new motion calling for a national strategy to end the cage age. We have also urged the Government to launch a consultation on the use of farrowing crates, which the previous Conservative Government failed to do despite their promises. That is not really a surprise, given that they failed to act on the 2018 Stacey review on farm regulation, and in 2023 they scrapped the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. It is time that we put our ambitions back on track. The Liberal Democrats would introduce a comprehensive animal welfare Bill, because we must not fall behind our European neighbours. This action must be taken in conjunction with a strong trade policy that ensures that our farmers are not undercut.

Glastonbury and Somerton is home to many farmers who take pride in upholding the highest standards. Lizzie and Rob Walrond, who run Glebe farm, are a shining example. On their 90 acres, they run an organic, outdoor herd of Saddleback sows, free-range laying hens and a flock of mule ewes, with much of their produce sold direct to customers through their fantastic Pitney Farm Shop and Café. Silverthorne shop in Milborne Wick is a free-range farm, with 15,000 hens all free to roam naturally on its 32 acres, and the eggs—as I can testify—are absolutely fantastic. Of course, there are many others, including Gilcombe farm, near Bruton; the Slow Farming Company in Castle Cary; Upton Bridge farm in Long Sutton; and the Kimber family, who run a farm in Charlton Musgrove.

Those businesses are under threat. If we do not ensure that trade policy is in line with domestic welfare practices, it could allow the market to be flooded with cheaper products that are likely to be reared to lower standards, punishing UK farmers for doing the right thing and maintaining high welfare standards. It is happening already: at a time when farmers are under unprecedented pressure, it is worrying that cheaper chicken and beef from Australia, Poland and Uruguay is increasingly seen on UK supermarket shelves in what seems to be a glaring and hypocritical betrayal of British farmers and misleading to the consumer.

There is not just a moral case to be made for moving away from crates and cages, but a sustainable and financial one. Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy set out the need for a sustainable food system, and I urge the Government's new food strategy to ensure that animal welfare is part of that. In addition, supporting nature-friendly farming is critical to achieving the Government's environmental standards. The special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2019 estimated that 8.5% of global greenhouse gas comes from animal agriculture.

Intensive rearing methods, such as those that rely on cages and crates, can create excess agricultural run-off that ends up in our rivers, while reliance on antibiotics to treat the spread of disease, in part due to intensive methods, can be harmful to animal and human health. Instead, nature-friendly, extensive and traditional farming methods enhance nature while providing quality food for our tables.

Encouraging innovative modern farming systems is critical to growing and rearing the enormous amount of food required to feed us all, but does Government policy support the transition? Worryingly, research shows that intensive systems have ballooned, particularly in the pig and poultry sectors. There has been a 13% increase in factory farms over the last five years, with 22 million animals in mega-farms in the UK. Such units are designed purely for maximum production and profit. I am concerned that the family farm tax and the reduction in nature-friendly farming incentives will only increase the number further, as smaller farms are forced to sell up and are gobbled up by bigger units while the remaining family farms are forced to intensify to remain profitable. The upcoming farming profitability review should investigate that.

We stand at a crucial point for reshaping the future of farming in the UK, and we must take actions to secure a sustainable future. The Liberal Democrats want to support farms by reversing the family farm tax and investing an extra £1 billion into the farming budget. We would

provide training, support and financial incentives for farmers to deliver world-leading animal welfare standards. We also believe that a comprehensive workflow review is needed to ensure that all parts of the food supply chain are resilient, including vets and local abattoirs, about which I have spoken before in this place.

Ultimately, ending the use of cages and crates is not only the right thing to do but part of a movement that would achieve the UK's goals while securing the future of farming in the UK. It is better for our animals, better for people and better for the planet.

5.26 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) introduced this important debate so well. As a nation of animal lovers, we rightly seek the highest welfare standards. We were the first country to create animal protection law, in 1822, and the first country to set up an animal welfare charity, in 1824. I was proud to be elected as the Member of Parliament for Bournemouth East on a manifesto that pledged the most ambitious advancement of animal welfare in a generation.

Today, I reaffirm my commitment to my constituents in Bournemouth East, because the compassion that we show for animals represents who we are as a people. Animal welfare is extremely important. We know that cages and crates cause huge suffering for farm animals. We need action now to end the use of cages and crates for farmed animals because our constituents demand it. I know this issue is of significant interest and importance to my constituents because 190 of them signed the petition and my mailbox has been inundated by constituents getting in touch about this issue. Whether from Hilary on Carbery Avenue, Alison on Windham Road, or Angela on Chigwell Road, there is a call for action. The public in Bournemouth East want us to go further and faster.

It is good news that Ministers are working closely with the farm sector to deliver high standards for food production, animal welfare and environmental concerns. It is good news that when it comes to laying hens we are moving away from the use of enriched colony cages to free-range and barn production, and that Government grants to farmers are supporting that work. We need an urgent and full move away from cages. As we have just heard, 8 million laying hens are unable to flap their wings because they are confined in such small, intolerable spaces.

It is also good news that major supermarkets have pledged to stop selling shell eggs from hens kept in colony cages by the end of this year. That shift will happily quicken the move away from colony cages, with free-range eggs now accounting for over two thirds of the market, but we must go further and faster. Indeed, we may have to: the UK agreed in May to link to EU farm standards, so if the EU brings in a cage ban, the UK would have to reciprocate. We should be mindful of that, as we are already seeing moves in that direction in France and Germany, and the European Commission is interested in that policy area.

Like colleagues who have spoken before me, I am proud to be a Labour Member of Parliament because the last Labour Government provided the most comprehensive reform of animal welfare laws and policies in over a

century. I am proud, too, of the Labour manifesto commitments that we made on animal welfare, including proposals to ban trail hunting, end puppy smuggling and puppy farming, ban the use of snare traps, ban the import of animals with fashion mutilations and cropped ears and ban scientific testing on dogs; we had a debate on that subject a few short weeks ago in which the will of MPs of all parties was extraordinarily clear. We also committed to a ban on the import of hunting trophies, which is particularly timely because 2 July will mark a decade since the killing of Cecil the lion. I hope that the House will focus on the issue with renewed sharpness.

I am pleased to see the Government pledge to ratify the high seas treaty, a landmark agreement that will protect marine life in international waters, covering almost two thirds of the ocean, including sharks, whales and sea turtles, which are currently vulnerable to unsustainable and illegal fishing and other extractive industries. This Government are already supporting animals and marine life, are committed to supporting animals over the course of this Parliament, and are building on the work of the last Labour Government in protecting animals. I want to stand alongside our Labour Government with their commitment to introduce their ambitious programme for animal welfare, because all our constituents are calling on us to do better and to do it faster.

5.31 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading the debate; I heard her speak at the Humane World for Animals event, so I know her passion for the subject.

The petitions that we debate in this place always draw a great deal of attention, but there cannot be many that have the same level of awareness and passionate support as this one. Consistent polling shows that three quarters of the British public oppose the use of cages for hens, and two thirds oppose the use of farrowing crates. The petition is therefore clearly in the mainstream of public opinion. However, the reality is that consumers all too often cannot act on their values without the tools to do so, which is why labelling is so valuable to give consumers a choice.

I imagine that hon. Members may be growing used to seeing me in Westminster Hall debates on topics like this. This is the third debate on animal welfare that I and many other Members have attended in the last fortnight, so to curb the risk of sounding like a broken record, I will try my best not to retread old ground. I will speak to the prolonged suffering that cage and crate systems cause, preventing animals from carrying out basic natural behaviours such as dust bathing, rooting, grooming and even turning around. The result is stress, frustration and sometimes injury for the animals.

The animal health and welfare pathway acknowledged those challenges, identifying the need to transition away from so-called enriched cages. Labelling is a crucial method of doing so by ensuring that farmers invest in higher welfare and the changes are visible and rewarded, so we can show the public that we are in line with their values. If we are serious about welfare washing—outsourcing cruelty to other countries—we must empower consumers to choose products that meaningfully reflect their values.

[*Josh Newbury*]

Presently, farmers who move to higher welfare, cage-free systems receive little recognition at the point of sale. Labels such as “free range” vary significantly in their meaning, and in some cases are misleading for consumers. A robust method of production labelling would inform consumers clearly about how an animal was reared—battery cage, enriched cage, free range or organic. It would allow consumers to choose to support farmers who are rearing to higher welfare standards. It would reward farmers who are making costly transitions to higher welfare systems, helping to sustain rural livelihoods while staying competitive.

Every supermarket shelf should carry clear, visible information. Where did that bacon come from? Was that sow crate-free? Did that chicken live in a cage? Right now, consumers might be paying more under the assumption that they are supporting higher British welfare standards, but they cannot see whether those standards involve cages. Transparency is the friend of both the farmer and the shopper, and labelling is the bridge to achieving that.

To be clear, this is not about shaming farmers. Quite the opposite: it is about empowering them. The transition to cage-free systems has been supported by this Government, via grants for laying hen and pullet farmers, and by the major supermarkets that have promised to selling shell eggs from caged hens by the end of this year. Some are going further and are ending the use of processed eggs, too. Free-range eggs now account for 69% of the total egg throughput in the UK which shows, as the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) rightly said, that we are very far ahead of many other nations on high-welfare farming.

Sadly, however, those measures alone will not shift the dial quickly enough, particularly on meat products, as without a comprehensive labelling system, consumers cannot identify and choose higher welfare products. Without their demand, and the necessary investment from retailers, farmers lack the ability to transition in a way that ensures that their businesses are not damaged by the process.

Charlie Dewhirst: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed the issue at length on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Does he agree that we have to be careful to ensure that labelling is clear and does not disadvantage British farmers? It is very likely that we will be unable to label imported products in the same way, so there is a danger that the consumer, who might not understand the complexity, may choose an imported product over a domestic product.

Josh Newbury: I absolutely agree and am always happy to take interventions from hon. Members with greater expertise than mine. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to bear that in mind. We also need to appreciate that it will probably be more difficult to verify the standards of imported products; it is much simpler for people to get around any system that we put in place. We must bear that in mind so that—to go back to the point about welfare washing—consumers do not end up buying products that appear to be of a higher welfare standard, but are not.

Animal welfare need not come at the cost of British farming. With the right transitional support, we can lift the whole sector. It is important that we spell out how that transitional support would work and how quickly it could come about. On farrowing crates, according to the National Pig Association, it could cost around £4,000 per sow to convert an existing building and up to £8,000 per sow to build a new structure. Those figures do not include planning permission, which, as we know, does not come free. We also need to acknowledge that higher welfare animal products carry additional costs for farmers, which have to be passed on to consumers. That is not a reason not to raise standards, because the desire to do so is not limited to higher socioeconomic groups.

A separate issue is the time that such conversions would take. Given the complex planning and permitting requirements, and constraints in the supply chain, it is estimated that it could take at least 15 years to transition all farrowing systems to higher welfare alternatives. The Government are reforming the planning sector to speed that up, but we still need to acknowledge those barriers and work with farmers. We can reward good practice, reduce suffering and ensure that our farms are known not just for productivity, but for principled production. If the science is clear, the public are supportive and the market is adapting and willing to go further if supported, what are we waiting for?

I thank the petitioners. This is our chance to end the cage age, to deliver real transparency and to reward those farmers who are already doing the right thing. By giving consumers the tools to make informed ethical choices, we can build a food system that reflects the compassion of the British public and upholds the standards that we all believe in.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call the Lib Dem spokesman.

5.37 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing the petition, and I thank all the petitioners who have turned up to watch the debate. The people of Winchester are certainly passionate about the subject; I have received a lot of heartfelt emails about it. As a veterinary surgeon, I have always believed that how we treat animals reflects our values as a society, and as someone who grew up on a farm and who now represents very rural areas in Winchester such as those around the Meon valley, I understand the deep connection between animal welfare, food production, conservation and the livelihood of farming families.

We should first acknowledge the reality that UK farmers operate to some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. That is not to say that they cannot and should not be improved where possible; we want to make progress. When we talk about ending the use of farrowing crates, we must also talk, as many Members have done, about supporting farmers to transition away from them. Any change must be practical as well as ethical. The hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) gave us a valuable insight, pointing out that many pig farmers struggled after a sudden change was brought in back in—was it 2000?

Charlie Dewhirst: It was 1999.

Dr Chambers: It was a long time ago, and it devastated the industry.

Farrowing crates are used to reduce piglet mortality by preventing crushing. It is a serious concern that no responsible farmer would take lightly. As the NFU has rightly pointed out, we need a science-led, managed approach to phasing out their use that gives farmers the time, investment and confidence to transition to higher welfare systems such as free farrowing pens.

That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to develop a comprehensive national strategy to end the use of farrowing crates—one that is built in full consultation with farmers, vets, welfare scientists and industry stakeholders. That strategy must come with clear funding commitments, practical guidance and research and development support to trial alternatives that work in the UK's diverse farming environments. One of the five freedoms, which I mentioned earlier, is the freedom to express natural behaviours. That remains a vital benchmark for animal welfare, but we must ensure that the sows and piglets are kept physically safe as well as psychologically enriched.

When I was 11 years old, I brought 13 pigs home from market. My dad was not too happy about that: we were a sheep farm, and I turned up with these piglets. They turned into pets, really—we used to play football with them. We had a great time with them. Their behaviour was completely different from that of the pigs on the intensive farms on which I had to spend time as a veterinary student a few years later. They all had their own personality.

We have discussed intensive chicken farming, and we have mentioned battery hens, which are still seen in some parts of the world. Pigs are hugely intelligent and require a lot of enrichment, and although people acknowledge that chickens are not as intelligent—there is no doubt about that—the level of intelligence does not change the capacity to suffer or feel pain. At the moment, in broiler farming, chickens are selectively bred to grow so quickly that their legs do not develop quickly enough and they start to develop sores, infections or even broken limbs because of the rate at which they are growing. Those chickens feel pain and distress as much as any pig or other more intelligent animal.

I summed up at our party conference this year. We are calling for new policies for farming in general, investing in training and peer-to-peer farming learning networks, better access to apprenticeships in agriculture and animal welfare, and a proper workforce plan to ensure that there are enough vets, farm workers and abattoir staff across the supply chain. However, those steps alone will not be enough if we allow lower welfare imports to flood British shelves. The previous Government's trade deals undercut UK farmers with Australia and directly undermined the standards that we ask them to uphold. We urge the Government to ensure that any trade agreements require imported food to meet UK standards and ban the sale of food that would be illegal to produce here. That is really important, because there are plenty of imported egg and dried custard products that could be produced by battery hens.

It is not only vets and farmers who are proud of our high animal welfare standards, but the British public. We should not compromise those standards. There are farming systems around the world that not only are worse for the environment and for animal welfare, but

do not have the same judicious use of antibiotics. That is driving antibiotic resistance, which is creating a public health crisis. Already, 1 million people around the world die because of antibiotic-resistant infections every year. That will get worse unless as a global community we take serious action on antimicrobial resistance.

Charlie Dewhirst: It is worth noting that the pig industry in the UK has reduced antibiotic usage by 69% since 2015. That is an industry initiative and should be applauded.

Dr Chambers: I absolutely applaud that. That is a very important intervention. The Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance has reported that since 2015, overall antibiotic use in livestock has been reduced by 59%. That is a huge reduction and is very much industry-led. In the UK, farmers are not permitted to treat unless there is a diagnosis of an illness and an appropriate antibiotic, whereas in other countries antibiotics are essentially given as a substitute for low hygiene standards and to act as growth promoters.

The previous Conservative Government promised the biggest boost to animal welfare in a generation, but they scrapped the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, failed to act on the 2018 Stacey review and abandoned their own pledge to consult on ending the use of cages for farmed animals. I believe that we should work towards ending the use of farrowing crates, but we cannot do so overnight. We must do it in partnership with farmers, not at their expense. We must be honest with the public, fair to producers and ambitious for animal welfare.

I will finish by quoting probably the most famous veterinary surgeon of all, James Herriot:

"If having a soul means being able to feel love and loyalty and gratitude, then animals are better off than a lot of humans."

5.45 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on leading this debate.

I declare a strong professional and personal interest in animal health and welfare as a veterinary surgeon and a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. We have heard some very thought-provoking and wide-ranging speeches today. I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, from whom I always enjoy hearing. She is an incredibly powerful and passionate champion of animal welfare. More strength to her elbow—keep going.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) brought his expertise in the porcine sector and talked about the key safety issues, especially in relation to pig husbandry techniques. We heard from the hon. Members for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) and for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), and the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) spoke about the importance of biosecurity, which is pivotal in his part of the world, as it is across the entire United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) spoke powerfully about the moral and ethical aspects of our duty of care to animals under our care. We heard wide-ranging speeches from across

[*Dr Neil Hudson*]

the country, including from the hon. Members for Hexham (Joe Morris), for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) and for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes). The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), a powerful advocate for animal welfare, made some very thoughtful comments about the principles of labelling.

The speeches culminated in the presentation from my friend and veterinary colleague the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers). Full credit to him for quoting James Herriot—I must remember to do that next time.

Like all petition debates, we are having this debate because more than 100,000 people across the country signed the petition. As it stands today, more than 105,000 people have signed this petition, including 182 in my constituency of Epping Forest, and many others have written to me on this issue. I thank them all for allowing us to debate this important animal and bird welfare issue. It is important to have this opportunity to hold the new Government to account on their plans to improve animal welfare.

As Members are no doubt aware, the UK has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and I am proud that our country has shown global leadership in that regard. I am very proud of the previous Conservative Government's achievements in improving animal welfare, such as banning the export of live animals, including cattle, sheep, pigs and horses for fattening or slaughter, with the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024, and increasing the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years with the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021. Pivotal, we enshrined animal sentience, which we have heard a lot about today, in UK law with the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, thereby establishing the very important Animal Sentience Committee, which ensures that any new legislation pays due regard to animal welfare.

We should be incredibly proud that, in the United Kingdom, we have brilliant farmers who farm to the highest animal welfare standards. As I have said many times before, we can be a beacon to the rest of the world in that regard. I again pay tribute to our farmers, growers and producers who help to feed the nation and nurture our precious environment.

However, it is right that we continue to raise the bar, and I welcome this opportunity to discuss further the use of cages and crates for farmed animals. The Opposition have made it clear—I did so just this month, on 3 June, during a debate on animal welfare standards in farming—that we support banning cages or close confinement systems where clear scientific evidence demonstrates that they are detrimental to animal and bird health and welfare. That is in keeping with much of the UK's existing legislation on the use of cages and crates, including: the ban on keeping calves in veal crates, introduced in 1990; the ban on keeping sows in close confinement stalls, introduced in 1999; and the ban on the use of battery cages for laying hens, introduced in 2012. Under the previous Conservative Government, Ministers were clear that it was their ambition for farrowing crates no longer to be used for sows. Indeed, the new pig welfare code clearly states:

“The aim is for farrowing crates to no longer be necessary and for any new system to protect the welfare of the sow, as well as her piglets.”

On poultry, it is also welcome that the market has been very influential in moving away from using cages for laying hens, and instead working towards alternative systems, including free range and barn. It is greatly welcome that this has also been driven by retailers acknowledging their role in raising welfare standards, with the transition to non-cage egg production being accelerated in recent years by major supermarkets committing to ending, by 2025, the sale of shell eggs from hens kept in colony cages, with some supermarkets also extending that commitment to products containing liquid or powdered egg.

About 75% of British eggs come from free-range, barn and organic production systems, which is a clear testament to the improved picture of bird welfare that we have seen in recent years. In particular, it is a testament to all those across the supply chains, from farmers to retailers, who have acted in the interests of bird and animal welfare. I very much acknowledge that today.

Further work with farmers—I stress “with” rather than “to” farmers—has been a key take-home message from today's debate. Further work is still needed with farmers, supermarkets and other retailers to ensure that the figure increases in the years to come, and I hope the Government can commit to that today.

To return to the porcine sector, the Government have been asked whether they have plans to support free farrowing systems or to launch a consultation on the use of farrowing crates for pigs. The Minister has previously confirmed that the Government are “considering very carefully” the use of cages and other close confinement systems for farmed animals, including farrowing crates, and I am sure we will hear more about how he is considering things closely. It is essential that we make good progress towards a system that both works commercially and ensures the welfare of the sow and her piglets. Tragically, as we have heard, sows can lie on their piglets and crush them unintentionally. We must ensure that any new approach safeguards both the mother and her young.

Farrowing crates used for sows and piglets have been raised as a particular area of focus by the RSPCA and other organisations, such as the British Veterinary Association, the National Pig Association, the NFU, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, FOUR PAWS, and Compassion in World Farming. I note that the British Veterinary Association has called for the phasing out of farrowing crates, saying that the Government should provide a 15-year transition period by which all new builds cannot contain farrowing crates except where already agreed, to be followed by a shift from a crate system to alternative methods, such as adaptive farrowing accommodation or free farrowing systems, as soon as possible. I hope the Minister can provide further clarity on how the Government intend to approach this issue, and I am sure he will do that today.

In the revision of the animal health and welfare pathway in March, the Government stated that a “transition out of cages” was one of their priorities, and that they are “exploring potential reforms” in this area. That raises questions, which I hope the Minister will answer, about the Government's process in looking at this area. First, can he confirm whether any future decision on the use of cages and crates will be put to an evidence-based consultation?

Likewise, on process, can the Minister confirm that, in any future decisions, the Government will consider a plan that takes into account the needs of the industry, and the impact of any moves? The National Pig Association and the building suppliers forum concur with the British Veterinary Association that at least 15 years would be required to move from conventional farrowing to flexible or free farrowing, and it is noted that there are significant costs to replacing practices that would be banned.

If the Government plan any reforms, will they work with industry to make sure they are affordable, practical, effective and, at their heart, promote animal and bird welfare? It is essential that we make swift progress towards systems that ensure the welfare of animals and birds, and that work pragmatically and viably for the sector.

While the UK can be proud of our domestic track record on animal welfare, we must not lose sight of the global scale of animal welfare issues. The previous Conservative Government made it clear that the UK's high standards were a red line in trade negotiations, and that there must be no compromise on environmental protection, animal welfare or food standards. That is why, although we may not have got everything right on these issues, the free trade agreements signed by the previous Government with countries such as Australia and New Zealand included important dedicated chapters on animal welfare—the first of their kind in any such trade deals. It is also why, when she was Trade Secretary, the Leader of the Opposition stood up for our animal welfare standards during trade negotiations with Canada, stepping back from talks to ensure that there were no concessions on our red line of banning the importation of hormone-treated beef.

Whether Labour or the Conservatives are in government, we must continue to uphold animal welfare standards in trade deals. It is not simply a case of upholding high animal welfare and ensuring that food is safe to eat; it is about ensuring that our hard-working farmers are not unfairly undercut by other countries where standards may be lower. Our high standards must not be put at risk as this Government seek to negotiate new trade deals, specifically the bans on hormone-treated beef, ractopamine-treated pork, bovine somatotropin dairy, chlorine-washed chicken products, and the use of antibiotics as growth promoters—practices that are illegal in this country.

I have said this many times before, and I will say it again, as a Member of Parliament and as a veterinary surgeon: keeping firm on these standards makes it clear beyond all doubt that we as a nation are committed to animal welfare. Other countries will then know that, should they wish to trade with us, they must meet our standards and our values. That now extends to using cages and crates for imported animal products. Despite the UK having legislated to end the practice long ago, many countries, including the United States, still allow the use of sow stalls. Can the Minister assure us that no animal products will be imported to the UK where sow stalls have been used?

Just last Thursday, on 12 June, the Government finally provided their response to the previous Conservative Government's "fairer food labelling" consultation, no doubt due to repeated prompting from His Majesty's

Opposition in recent days, weeks and months. In their somewhat sparse response, the Government stated that they

"will consider the potential role of method of production labelling reform as part of the UK Government's development of an overarching approach to animal welfare and the wider food strategy."

I look forward to the Minister elaborating on that somewhat economical response to a major consultation.

First, greater clarity for sectors affected by any change would be very much welcome. As such, will the Government outline a timeline for when they expect to be able to publish their new strategy on animal welfare, and for any legislative changes in the area of labelling?

Secondly, can the Government clarify why, despite the closing of the consultation in May 2024, they were able to respond only last week? Even accounting for election to office in July, it has still taken 11 months for those who took the time to contribute to the consultation to receive that somewhat limited response. Will the Minister therefore assure the public that this is not an indication of any lack of interest in this area from the Government? Labelling will help with many facets of the debate, allowing UK consumers to make informed decisions about the food they purchase, as they will be able to see the provenance of the food and how it was produced.

I have raised this with him many times, but can the Minister further clarify how he will address the loophole that still exists in Government buying standards in public procurement, allowing public bodies to deviate from high animal welfare standards on the grounds of cost? On the procurement point, we cannot be a beacon of animal welfare for countries around the world if we do not have our own house in order. I would greatly appreciate an answer to that point, as I have asked the Minister about it a few times.

It is vital that we uphold our rigorous standards on animal welfare and retain the UK's status as a world leader on animal welfare issues. I urge the Government to treat the matter with the seriousness and urgency it deserves, and not to allow any backsliding on existing legislation as they seek to secure new trade deals with the United States and other countries.

To have high animal welfare standards, we need healthy animals. For that, we need strong biosecurity. I have repeatedly called on the Government to urgently redevelop the headquarters of the Animal and Plant Health Agency in Weybridge, Surrey. The APHA is critical in protecting against devastating diseases—such as foot and mouth disease, seen this year in Germany, Hungary and Slovakia, and African swine fever—advancing up the continent of Europe. The Minister knows that I will keep pushing the Government on this matter.

In the spending review last week, the Chancellor did not mention DEFRA, animal health or farming once in her statement, nor was there any mention of reversing the catastrophic family farm tax. There was no mention of the APHA project in the spending review—in either the statement or the blue book. Will the Government finish the work that the Conservatives started when we committed £1.2 billion to redevelop the HQ? Labour keep reannouncing a pot of £208 million, which is a familiar figure to the Minister. It is a start, but when will

[Dr Neil Hudson]

they commit the further £1.4 billion for this infrastructure, for the sake of British farming, food production and national security?

I thank all Members for their contributions to this debate. I thank our fantastic farmers, who keep food on our tables. It is clear that there is much interest across the House in this issue, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughtful response.

6.2 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I join others in thanking the Petitions Committee, and in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for not only introducing the debate but bringing her usual thoughtfulness and passion to the subject. I also join others in thanking all who signed the petition, which meant that we were able to debate this important issue.

This is the third consecutive week that we have debated farm animal welfare issues, and that brings home just how much both the public and this House value how animals are treated. We are genuinely a nation of animal lovers. We are also a nation that needs to eat, so I thank all who are involved in the farming process and the food production sector, who help to keep us fed.

The issue of confinement and the use of cages in farming is a long-standing subject that has been brought to Members' attention several times over recent years, and it is a topic that has consistently come across my desk since I became a Minister. As a nation, we are rightly proud of high welfare standards. On confinement, veal crates for calves were banned in 1990, sow stalls for pigs were banned in 1999 and barren battery cages for laying hens were banned in 2012.

I will reiterate what I said in the debate on animal welfare standards in farming on 3 June. We are determined to build on and maintain our world-leading record on animal health and welfare, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that animals receive the care, respect and protection that they rightly deserve, in whatever farming system they are kept.

In addition to this e-petition, there have been a number of campaigns urging the Government to publish consultations on banning the use of enriched colony cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for pigs. I assure my hon. Friend that I am keen to act and certainly do not want to fall behind the EU countries that have already banned, or are in the process of banning, cages and crates. I am acutely aware that these are complex issues that need careful consideration, particularly with regard to food security and trade. I want to work closely with the sectors and bring them with us to improve animal welfare standards together while maintaining a thriving, sustainable and competitive industry.

The petition calls for a ban on cages for laying hens as soon as possible. Enriched colony cages are a significant welfare improvement on barren battery cages as they are required to have nest boxes, litters and perches, but they do not fully provide for the birds' physical and behavioural needs. The colony cage system restricts the

hen's choice, preventing her from running, flapping her wings, dust bathing or foraging, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) has said in detailing the concerns raised by his constituents.

The UK laying hens sector has already made significant progress in moving away from enriched colony cages. The transition has been supported by the major supermarkets, which pledged in 2016 to stop selling shell eggs from caged hens by the end of 2025, with some retailers extending that pledge to products containing liquid or processed egg. I am pleased to say that the percentage of eggs from enriched colony cage systems continues to fall. The current level is just 18% of the total UK throughput in the first quarter of 2025, with free-range eggs now accounting for 70% of the total.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) detailed, the retailer pledge in response to consumer demand is to be welcomed, but not all supermarkets have committed to cage-free. I am afraid that real-world considerations around affordability for consumers are clearly at the fore in some of those decisions. Although the retailer pledge is significant, it does not raise welfare standards across the whole laying hen industry. While the retail element is the largest part of the market at 65%, the food service and egg processing elements are not insignificant, and they represent 18% and 17% of the market respectively. The focus needs to be on addressing the welfare of laying hens producing eggs for retailers that have not signed the pledge, and for the food service and egg processing markets.

To help the sector, the Government are providing financial assistance to laying hen and pullet farmers in England with flocks of 1,000 birds or more, with £22.5 million of allocated grant funding via the animal health and welfare pathway to refurbish or replace existing housing, including for those who are looking to make the transition from enriched colony cages to high welfare non-cage systems.

I turn to the pig sector. We already have a significant outdoor pig sector, as we have heard, with 50% of the national sow breeding herd giving birth freely on outdoor units with no confinement. But 50% of breeding sows are kept indoors, with approximately 42% of them confined in farrowing crates for around five days before they are due to give birth and until the piglets are weaned at approximately 28 days of age.

When the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, now known as the Animal Welfare Committee, reviewed the welfare of pigs in farrowing crates, it recommended that "in considering which farrowing system to adopt or support, farmers, the pig industry as a whole and other stakeholders such as retailers should consider the welfare of both sows and piglets, and be aware that they are not necessarily benefitted by the same things."

A range of hon. Members have made that point. The committee's considerations included sow comfort and freedom to nest build; nest-building material being made available in the period before and after farrowing; the avoidance of sow injuries from interaction with the floor, pen, furniture or piglets; floor design being given more priority in the design of farrowing accommodation; the protection of piglet welfare, including prevention of injury or death; and an environment in which they can thrive, along with the promotion of hygiene and avoidance of disease in both sows and piglets.

There is consensus that farrowing crates restrict a sow's movement, preventing her from turning around and performing normal behaviours such as nest building, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) has pointed out. Animal welfare non-governmental organisations such as the RSPCA and Compassion in World Farming have campaigned for a long time for the Government to ban farrowing crates. I am also well aware that the British Veterinary Association and the Pig Veterinary Society have recently called for a gradual phase-out of farrowing crates, and for them to be replaced with a system that maximises sow and piglet welfare and ensures human safety. I welcome those organisations' contribution to the ongoing debate. The National Pig Association has recognised that the direction of travel is moving away from farrowing crates, and it has done a lot of work in that area. Indeed, some producers have already made a move towards alternative farrowing systems.

As mentioned by the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst), who spoke as usual with great knowledge and sensitivity about these issues, industry estimates that around 8% of the British indoor pig herd are now flexibly farrowed, where the sow can be confined on a temporary basis and for a limited period to protect her piglets in those crucial early days of their lives. Flexible farrowing, also termed temporary crating or adaptive farrowing, is where the sow is confined without the ability to turn around on only a temporary basis—for a few days around farrowing in the initial suckling phase—before movable restraining bars are opened to give the sow the space to turn around.

The other alternative to farrowing crates is a move directly to free farrowing systems, where there is no confinement of the sow when in farrowing and lactation accommodation, allowing the sow to freely turn around and have the opportunity to more fully perform nest-building activities. A significant part of our consideration around alternative systems is the evidence around sow and piglet welfare and stockperson welfare, and I was very struck by the point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) about the dangers facing stockpeople.

We recognise that moving away from farrowing crates requires a fundamental change for producers and, as we have heard, significant investment. On that note, it is encouraging to see the investment commitment some retailers have made to improve the farrowing experience for pigs.

The shadow Minister asked how we would go forward on this. As the Government bring forward proposals, we will subject them to a full consultation. We absolutely recognise that the industry will need time to adapt. Farrowing accommodation will need to be considerably adapted, and potentially rebuilt and extended to allow for a larger pen footprint, and that will clearly impose significant costs on the indoor pig sector. It will also require communities to recognise that the planning system will have to accommodate changes to allow better welfare, so we need to get specifications right. Training will also be essential for stockpeople to adapt to a brand new system and ensure both human and pig welfare.

Members have mentioned trade, and I am mindful of what happened in 1999 when the UK unilaterally banned sow stalls. Although it was the right thing to do in animal welfare terms, it did, as has been said, contribute

to a reported 40% decline in the pig breeding herd in the following decade, sadly opening the door to more pig meat imports from countries still using sow stalls. It is therefore essential that we carefully evaluate the implications of potential cage and crate bans on trade. We need to carefully consider the potential for unintentionally replacing UK production with lower welfare production overseas.

We know that the European Commission is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) mentioned, considering proposals to ban cages and crates. It has said that the first legislative proposals on cage reforms will be announced in 2026. We do not yet know what phase-out periods it will propose or how long it will take it to get agreement among member states. We are acutely aware of and concerned about imports produced using methods that are not permitted in the UK, and I can reassure the shadow Minister that we will use our trade strategy to promote the highest food production standards and protect farmers from being undercut by low welfare and low standards in trade deals.

Charlie Dewhurst: Is it the Minister's ambition to align as closely as possible with the European Union's plans to phase out cages, and farrowing crates in particular, given the symbiotic trading relationship—especially on products such as pig meat—between the EU and the UK, so that we do not have a similar situation to that involving sow stalls in 1999, where we ban something that the European Union is still using?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Clearly, having made the observation about what happened in 1999, we do not want to return to that situation.

Let me turn to labelling. Considerable work has been done recently to consider the merits of method of production labelling. That, too, was raised by the hon. Member for Epping Forest, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), who has talked about it repeatedly in this place.

As we have heard, last year the previous Government undertook a consultation seeking views on proposals to improve and extend existing mandatory method of production labelling. I am pleased to say that, as the hon. Member for Epping Forest noticed, we have now published the Government's response, which is available on gov.uk.

In looking at that, we recognised the strong support of members of the public and many other stakeholders for the provision of clearer information for consumers on the welfare standards of their food. We also heard and understood the views expressed on the detail of the consultation proposals by the many interested parties who responded. I assure the hon. Gentleman and other Members that we are carefully considering the potential role of reform of method of production labelling as part of the Government's wider animal welfare and food strategies. As he will have appreciated, the Prime Minister has announced that we will announce an animal welfare strategy by the end of the year.

Finally, I turn to game birds. Approximately 40 million of them—30 million to 35 million pheasants and 5 million to 10 million partridges—are estimated to be released each year in Great Britain. Game birds bred and reared for sporting purposes are not subject to the same legislative

[Daniel Zeichner]

requirements on welfare as farmed poultry, because they are not regarded as farmed animals. They are, however, protected by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which makes it an offence to cause any animal under the control of humans unnecessary suffering, or to fail to provide for the welfare needs of the animal.

DEFRA's statutory code of practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes provides keepers with guidance on how to meet the welfare needs of their game birds, as required by the Animal Welfare Act. The code recommends that barren cages for breeding pheasants and small barren cages for breeding partridges should not be used, and that any system should be appropriately enriched.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for opening this debate, and I reassure Members that the issue of confinement is one that I take seriously. The Government were elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans in a generation to improve animal welfare, and that is exactly what we will do. The Department has initiated a series of meetings with key stakeholders as part of the development of an overarching approach to animal welfare. As I said, the Prime Minister committed to publishing an animal welfare strategy later this year. That is exactly what we will do, and I look forward to being able to outline more detail in due course.

6.17 pm

Irene Campbell: Our Labour Government were elected with a manifesto that promised to improve animal welfare. I am encouraged by what the Minister just said.

The previous new Labour Government made some of the most ambitious and groundbreaking animal welfare improvements that the UK had ever seen. The “New Life

for Animals” manifesto led to the EU-wide ban on battery cages, the ban on hunting foxes with hounds, the Animal Welfare Act, the ban on cosmetic testing on animals and the ban on fur farming.

Next year will be the 20th anniversary of our historic Animal Welfare Act of 2006 and yet, since the UK left the EU, we have been downgraded in World Animal Protection's animal protection index. It is time to strengthen our animal welfare standards and to make the UK a leader in animal welfare once again. I ask that our Labour Government start the consultation on cages for hens and farrowing crates for sows. How we treat our animals reflects our values as a society, and it is time to take action now.

More consistent and descriptive labelling on method of production should be introduced to enable people to consider fully how the product that they are buying has been produced. That should apply to all products, especially non-UK products. It is only fair to our British farmers that this is done.

Finally, I thank Dame Joanna Lumley and Compassion in World Farming for starting this petition. I congratulate Dame Joanna on gathering more than 105,000 signatures. I also thank the Petitions Committee and staff for their hard work, as always, in co-ordinating our debates. I also thank all the groups I met before this debate, including the National Pig Association, the NFU and the RSPCA.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 706302 relating to the use of cages and crates for farmed animals.

6.19 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Monday 16 June 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Companies House: Public Measures 2025-26

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I have set Companies House the following measures for the year 2025 to 2026:

82% of customers are satisfied with Companies House.

All incoming calls into our contact centre wait for no longer than five minutes in the call queues, on average.

Digital services are available for a minimum of 99.5% of the time.

Deliver 4% efficiency, in comparison to 2024-25.

We will use our new powers to enforce the registrars' objectives by taking action in relation to 150,000 companies.

Implement compulsory identity verification for all new directors and people of significant control and begin the transition period for existing directors and PSCs during the second half of the financial year. We will publish quarterly performance information, commencing from the mandatory period on both the number and the percentage of appointments that comply with identity verification.

[HCWS701]

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 16 June 2025

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WRITTEN STATEMENT

Monday 16 June 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	1WS
Companies House: Public Measures 2025-26	1WS

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**not later than
Monday 23 June 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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